

# EPISODES



Dear Reader,

What follows is the complete archive of EPISODES, a publication I ran in 2023 on a platform I no longer do business with. These 90 or so pieces were posted over a span of roughly 9 months. I was fortunate to have a group of loyal readers and supporters, many of whom have expressed regret that they never got around to reading all of these. I might cynically suggest that's a reasonable lapse if one values one's commitment to sanity. Apparently the format and notification habits of the original platform made keeping up with the frequency of posts difficult anyway – so, thank you, again, to all of you who read these before, and an even larger slab of gratitude to all of you who actually paid for access to these materials. Here without edits or any attempt at thoughtful presentation is the full catalog of posts from that project. I hope you enjoy them.

Sincerely,

JA

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## [STORIES]

### [The Restaurant]

My coworker says, 'There's a restaurant going in downstairs. I want to know what kind of food they'll have. I'm going down there.'

She disappears for a few hours. This means I have to answer the phone. Each time it rings I forget important information, like what kind of business this is, or where to refer callers who need help. When she finally comes back up she says, 'Oh my god, I'm starving. They were talking about all kinds of food down there.'

'So what's it going to be?'

'Oh I don't know they're still figuring it out. I had a few suggestions for them. I suggested they serve American food. I think they're thinking about it.'

'Someone called. A lot of folks called, in fact. I never know what to tell them.'

'Tell them we're the place above the restaurant. And ask them what kind of food you think we should serve.'

'So are we part of the restaurant now?'

'The restaurant seems to think so.'

The phone rings. She goes downstairs again.

I answer: 'Place above the restaurant.'

The caller says, 'What kind of food do you serve?'

'I don't think we serve anything. The restaurant might though.'

'This is ridiculous. I've called several times today using different voices, and you never seem to know what's going on.'

'You've got me there. Anyway what would you like to eat?'

'Are you qualified to take my order?'

'The restaurant seems to think so.'

Time passes. The restaurant never opens. I make a lot of apologies.

'I mean, I'm sure they meant to open. My coworker went down there weeks ago and disappeared when all the kitchen appliances were hauled out. I wish I knew who to put you in touch with.'

I've been sitting here trying to make sense of it myself.'

The worst day is when a whole hungry family shows up. They've attended a memorial service and are all wearing black. The children are cranky and a woman looks faint from malnourishment.

'I don't have anything to feed you,' I say. 'My coworker kept snacks in her desk but they've all been gobbled up.'

There's an incident. I have to get on the phone and pretend to speak with the authorities. On the way out the grieving people take a potted plant from my coworker's desk.

'That's fine,' I say, 'it was probably going to die anyway.'

The guy who's apparently in charge of the family says, 'That's an inappropriate thing to say to mourners with low blood sugar.'

'I'm sure you're right,' I say, 'but I probably have some kind of work to do around here.'

'We're coming back,' the guy says, 'and when we do there better be some food around this place.'

'I'll do what I can.'

### [Swim Class]

A gentleman stops me in the doorway. 'I overheard some of the girls from swim class talking,' he says. 'They ranked all the guys in the class; like, who had the best bodies.' I say, 'Go on, I guess,' hoping the door will shut between us on its own. 'They said it was me, then Nick, then Young, then you.' 'What about the other guys?' 'They didn't say anything about the other guys.' 'That was 30 years ago, Jim,' I say. 'I don't even remember you. I'm just trying to get through this doorway.' But I do remember him. As old then as he is now. Slumped torso, pouched and spotty skin. The way he read a newspaper on a park bench on the pool deck in a fedora and watched the girls from behind a carved wood pipe. How he saved scraps from other students' lunches to put in tomorrow's stew. How he kept his brogans on when he dove into the water. The way he felt everyone up, then made a joke of it. Wait, was he the instructor? 'Anyway, look, man, I'm not sure you should tell me this stuff.' 'What's your problem anyway? You were always a bitch back then, and now you're even more of one.' 'Look I just want to get through this door and go back to not remembering you' I say. He looks me over. 'You would,' he says. 'It's just a better way to spend time. How did you find me?' 'I always know where you are,' he says. 'We'll see you at the pool.'

[Intruder]

There's someone in the closet. I can hear them in there, rummaging. Trying on my socks. Going through my go-bag.

'I need most of that stuff in there,' I say.

'Why do you have so many compasses?' asks the intruder.

'That's personal. Did you ever lose a compass when you need one? It's not an experience you'd want to repeat if you did.'

Some shifting, then a loud thunk.

'Do you ever even play this guitar?'

'Are you going to get out of there?'

'I don't know. There's a lot of stuff to sift through.'

'That was intentional. I don't like when people hide in there.'

'I have every right to be in here.'

'Actually that's the opposite of true.'

'I think it's weird that you collect calendars but don't use them.'

'I don't need a calendar to know what day it is,' I say. 'They're decorative.'

'They're in a stack under a box of shoelaces.'

'And that's where they need to stay.'

'What day is it anyway? I don't know how long I've been in here'

'Maybe you should check one of the calendars. I suggest the one with the stock photos of pristine beaches.'

'Hang on I need to finish stringing this guitar.'

'Don't you dare. Those strings are missing for a reason.'

'We have a pretty dysfunctional relationship I guess.'

A chord rings out. Not a pretty one.

'Damn,' the intruder says.

'Damn is right.'

'I'm going to write you a song with this. The Song of Abandoned Dreams.'

'Don't you dare write any songs with that guitar.'

I can hear him warming up his throat. I say, 'What will it take to get you to come out of there?'

'Not gonna happen. I have everything I need.'

[The Chimes of Banana Villa]

Not long ago I bought a photograph from a seller of photographs.

Weeks, I think.

He was armless and frail so I didn't know how else to help.

I didn't look at it until I got home, and even then it sat under the newspapers and promotional mailers and doorhangers and dried mud chunks.

I set it against the pot for the pothos I call Bartleby (it prefers to do nothing - it barely grows).

Bartleby would prefer we focus on the photograph.

The photograph is a four-by-six selenium-drenched placard.

I didn't recognize the place in the picture on it.

A town, tired and busy-looking, where carts are used to haul vegetables.

A child with a hat in its mouth.

In my absence the photograph stayed exactly the same.

I don't remember if I ever ate hats as a child.

Suspenders, sure, and a wool scarf now and then still satisfies.

The only thing I recall about childhood is a pool of dirty water.

The next thing I remember is somehow knowing the way home after I purchased the photograph from the seller of photographs.

It's possible, I reasoned, that the town in the picture is the town where I'm from.

It doesn't look like the place I live now.

In the town in the photograph they still have troubles with scurvy every few months.

Whatever this one is called, we have new and exciting sorts of problems.

There's a noise in the evening.

A milk soup haze at daylight.

I said to the barber, make me look older.

He shaved the top of my head, like a monk's tonsure.

At the hardware store I asked to borrow the wheelbarrow out front with the artificial firelogs in it.

They didn't say no, exactly.

I came back after they were closed.

It would be impolite to upset the display during business hours.

I left the artificial firelogs in an arrangement that would satisfy their customers.

I forgot to wear a hat to cover my new and interesting haircut.

At home I got to work.

I emptied the refrigerator into the wheelbarrow.

I went out in the morning to sell my wares.

First thing was to trade an unfinished box of breakfast cereal to the man with the photographs.

He was receptive to my offer.

I put the photograph in my back pocket, and waited as before to look at it when I got home.

I sold most of my goods in a few hours.

Some of it no one wanted.



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[Pulmonary Drip]

When in the dishwasher you've warped a keepsake into a lopsided kidney, and you're walking along trying to remember because there's a banner hanging over a neighbor's stoop just who Julian Assange is or what he did or supposedly did and whether as far as you know he deserves to be free, the feel of napping in the cab of a pickup crammed into a parallel parking spot with most of your belongings behind you in the flatbed, not even covered up all the way with the tarp because what difference would it make, if someone tries to take your Brita filter you'll know it, and you'll assess the thief's physical attributes, their degree of need, whether they intend you any malice, and you will decide then whether to do anything about it, when you realize or remember that your left fist is noticeably smaller than the right even though with fingers extended the hands appear to be the same size, it's a mystery is what it is, so you hold them both out like you're giving an 'about yay big, big for its size, even', palms facing like mirror Michigans, the tension is if they will collide.

[Position]

On the windowsill a ladybug, hatched in Guatemala, transported in a crate stamped with the face of a cartoon chicken, thrives unaware or unconcerned in the looped stems of my pothos plant, who if it has an opinion on whether it's better to be in the District than Chicago or Michigan it hasn't told me, or if it envies the dwarf umbrella or if they have an arrangement or understanding to share light and resources, the way the cat under the table swapped nights in the bed with her rival before he passed, may have feelings about infinite distances, the idea that in the time it took you to read this our planet is hundreds of miles from where it was when you set out but is still, due to the mysteries of gravity, about the same distance it was from the sun, the moon in tow stolid and quiet and reliably close, that its place in the system is secure, all of which makes concerns about syntax hard to be serious about, the way the cat is serious about her proximity to her scratchy bed, its position relative to the food dish, and my location with respect to the plush orange worm dangling from a string tied to the end of a fishing rod, which relativity tells us remains about the same length unless you whip it back and forth really, really fast, a bad idea when you consider the cat, who will gain weight at higher velocities, could lose a pound or two for her health, all the more reason for me to stay where I am and wait for Yen, who is on the other side of town on a university campus in relative proximity to her students, where she is expected to be, so that whatever I is will be where here will be when she returns, organs and fluids and cells in position.

[My Dad Explains Infinity]

You can always go half the distance from your thumb to the rope on the swing hanging from the branch of the big maple in the back out by the garden where the cornstalks wilt in August, okay, just like in horseshoes the shoe can always be closer to the peg, and however much the neighbor argues about whose property's which, you can always be half as close again to an imaginary line – I don't know if ten years later he's thinking of the famous paradox when a man named Zeno shoots at him for doing his job, or how to navigate half the distance between the county-issued vehicles and a scrap metal ziggurat to avoid being hit by buckshot, or how the man in the loft of the barn is half-conscious on liquor and pills and frisky with a trigger, but when the assailant sits in court like an angry gnome ranting about divinities and imaginary lines and says he had half a mind to point his gun at my dad and scare him off his land, we will all of us learn the limits of getting too close.

[Parallel Tracks]

Or the woman who rented an apartment next to the el tracks, who went delirious with insomnia and fear that the train which rumbled by on average about every eleven minutes or so would crash through her wall and pierce the one room studio like a harpoon and slice her in half where she lay in her mattress watching the iron bars outside the window and assessing their sturdiness, or of how she grew to fear all public transportation, sure the bus drivers would fall asleep in the middle of their shifts, how she rehearsed hurtling herself through the front door, always cracked open, and down the steps to the landing, the way some of us when we're walking alone play out muggings or assaults, how in a fit of superstition she nailed totems and wards along the wall and prayed to gods no one's heard of each time the monster thundered by, and held her breath until she heard the ding dong of the door announcement, and played this out every night and grew paranoid to the point of being certain the trains were giving her cancer, until armed with courage and some prescription pills she went down there, clutching a crucifix she found in the alley, and boarded the thing, rode it all night through all the neighborhoods, the rise and fall of wealth and poverty and the billboards that advertised the same crap in languages she recognized but didn't understand, until there was a crash and a halt and a creaking sound, a general flutter among the passengers, and the conductor in the blue vest came through and guided each of them down through the emergency window and she found herself on a scratched hardwood floor looking down at what remained of her grandmother's coffee cups.

[Jerseph]

"It starts in the abdomen, toxins and adipose tissues rolled into a marble, boiled, the useful bacteria and the antigens and the microbes compressed, the muscle smelted, fluids with nowhere to go (feel sick? cost of doing business), bits of calcium crushed by the increase in weight, a little like the leftovers of a caterpillar which would be cool if you were verging on transfiguration, if there were hope that a new You is about to emerge, winged, luminescent, curious, with no memory of having once been a worm – but instead of course the cold and the hot mix together, iced tea cut with bourbon, and because you are self-educated in science you think, wrongly, of Bernoulli, and of barometers, and, correctly, of the frame of a tiny house on a forgettable street in a city that in most timelines will never exist, of the winds and the fires and the invisible threats, the hollow walls, the straw supports, papier-mache hung from discarded wire, of how it would make a good boat if boats were meant to take in water, if water wasn't meant to kill us, of how what we think of as self is just a membrane to keep certain chemicals from overloading the

network, how sodium and niacin like to spill over and say hey how are ya like an overly friendly neighbor, one liquid after another, the pressure like the oxygen in the Mercury command module, and it's natural to want to find the cause of it, to look out there and say that sonofamother is the cause of this, but by then it doesn't matter, like the dopamine spike you get from saying fuck fuck fuck fuck, least dignified of all being the stabbing and groping, the use of any gerunds at all, really, and you think if she was here, in some incarnation, none of this would be happening, or there would at least be some comfort in knowing, a different way of feeling, a believing in an external thing that doesn't make you feel like an airship bloated with hydrogen, looking for an outlet, to mix your gases with the rest of the atmosphere, to find a larger vessel in which to release."

[Dear Tom Skilling]

Dear Renowned Meteorologist Tom Skilling,

Do you know what's wrong with my foot?

District of Columbians are friendlier than I remember.

I'm not.

Chicago ruined me.

All cities everywhere are in triage.

My nightmares start on a six-point intersection.

Sometimes my dog is alive.

Sometimes nuns are involved.

Whoever they are, they're usually pouring drinks.

If I make it through a Chicago dream without a drink I'll let you know.

I can still taste malort on my uvula.

Tom Skilling, is there a word for the feeling you get when you're sure no one anywhere is thinking about you?

You probably don't get that feeling.

You maybe get the opposite of that.

Folks pay a lot of attention to you.

I wonder if you've ever made a mistake – like, a big one, like telling everyone to shelter in place for a blizzard but there's a heat wave instead.

It has to be an interesting job.

I don't know if I could do it.

I don't even know the names for those little clouds that appear in my bathroom some nights.

My foot is not okay.

I'm glad we're keeping in touch.

I heard a story about how when you were a kid you used to write letters to another meteorologist who was on tv at the time.

So I thought you wouldn't mind.

[Dear Tom Skilling 2]

I had a roommate who wanted to be a meteorologist.

He was a terrible watercolorer.

He would look out at the sky and spill yellow and blue all over the couch.

He kept a weather journal in a drawer with his paints.  
He wrote entries in it every day, things like “62 degrees, a little cloudy”.  
He even went to college to study meteorology.  
He was likeable, and handsome, but too shy to be on tv.  
So he gave it up to work at a plant nursery instead.  
I tried to tell him there were jobs for meteorologists that didn’t require them to be on television.  
He thought I was joking.  
People often think I’m joking when I’m not.  
Tom Skilling, do you ever wish you worked in a plant nursery instead?  
I think you’d be good at it.  
You’d learn everything there was to know about the plants and flowers in the place.  
You’d make predictions for the customers about how their plants would fare in different types of homes, accounting for lighting and atmospheric pressure.  
You’d produce statistical analyses and models based on past growing seasons.  
But I bet once in a while you’d look up through the greenhouse glass and fixate on the clouds.  
Even step outside to test the air or feel the shock of a warm or cold front coming through.  
Maybe you’d take up smoking so you’d have an excuse to go out there.  
I believe you’d be good at anything you tried.  
Not that I’m suggesting you give up meteorology.  
We need you where you are.

[Dear Tom Skilling 3]

I didn’t really notice when the pandemic happened.  
The first time I went out I thought people were avoiding me.  
Turns out, most of them were.  
What’s the word for the color of waves on the lake after a storm?  
They remind me of Earl Grey tea with milk, and a hint of lemon.  
That’s what color my foot is.  
Do you have a close relationship with the moon?  
Because of lunar tides and such I mean.  
I wonder if you wait to read your horoscope until after you’ve made the day’s weather predictions.  
Seems like you wouldn’t want the influence.  
Or, maybe, you would.  
It’s really none of my business.  
The second time I went out the lake was closed.  
I didn’t even know they could do that.  
They were all “close the lake”, and that was it.  
Gates were up so you couldn’t go under the overpasses.  
Emergency sirens.  
That time I was sure it was my fault.  
I was having a lot of thoughts about wanting to shut things down, and then it happened.  
You probably feel like that when there’s a bad storm sometimes.  
Whatever they tell you, you’re probably right.

[Dear Tom Skilling 4]

I have feelings about places.  
You know?  
A section of the creek here burned a month or so ago.  
A brush fire swept up the hill.  
Earlier that day I saw a guy messing around down there.  
I don't know what he was doing, or whether it involved open flames, but it didn't look altogether right.  
I tried to tell the firefighters in their yellow jackets.  
That I'd seen or maybe seen the guy who started it.  
The firefighters weren't interested.  
They were even kinda rude about it.  
They had a fire to contain.  
On the ridge at the top of the hill are expensive houses.  
When I walk through the woods up there it smells like the fire pit behind my dad's place.  
I should call him.  
I wonder how long it smells like that.  
Whole parts of California must smell like that.  
Do you prioritize fire danger in your weather reports?  
Chicago's been known to have a fire or two.  
What about floods?  
The happiest I ever saw you was the blizzard of 2011.  
The snow was ferocious.  
You were on tv, spinning around on your stool, graphs and charts in the air like leaves caught up in a cyclone.  
Folks who don't watch your weather reports got trapped by the lake in their cars.  
Emergency persons had to pull up on snowmobiles to rescue them.  
I felt pretty good about that.

[Dear Tom Skilling 5]

Dear Renowned Meteorologist Tom Skilling,  
Are you ever a length of copper wire strung between two poles, and the poles are being moved apart a few inches at a time but you can definitely feel it?  
I tried to predict the weather once.  
I went out to the lakefront.  
A guy with binoculars was out there.  
'What a beautiful sunset,' he said.  
'You're facing the wrong way,' I told him. 'That's Indiana. Also it's only 2pm.'  
I think he was confused.  
I was feeling good about having helped him out.  
I walked a little further down the shore to get a sense of what the weather was.  
I got to the nature preserve.  
The frogs were mating and making sure everyone heard them.  
This embarrassed me.  
Then I was attacked by a bird.  
It's just like that sometimes.  
I don't feel sorry for myself that you never respond to my letters.

I assume you have your reasons.  
I don't keep in touch with everyone like I should either.  
It's hard to stay motivated.  
Also you're a pretty busy guy.  
The weather is always changing.  
But maybe it would be helpful if you had some consistency.  
A thing to look forward to, or respond to.  
It might make you better at your job, even.  
Or help you look at the weather in a different way.  
I know you didn't ask me for help.  
But I think you need my help.

[Believe in Yourself]

Your doctor has an assignment for you.  
'I need you to defecate in this box,' he says. 'Then mail it somewhere.'  
You look down.  
'It's a pretty ordinary box,' you say.  
'I'm not concerned about anything in particular,' he says. 'It's more of a personal favor.'  
'Where am I sending it?'  
He gives you an address: two digits, street named for a president you don't remember anything about, Village of No Rivers.  
'Is this some sort of facility? A laboratory, maybe?' you ask.  
'Make sure you send it on a Tuesday. And let me know when it's done.'  
You do as he tells you.  
I mean, he's a doctor.  
You forget about the whole thing.  
It's an exciting few weeks.  
Lots of interesting stuff happens.  
A few Fridays later you get a call.  
'What's the deal, man?' the caller wants to know.  
'You'll have to be more specific, please.'  
'You sent me a box of your shit,' the caller says.  
'Again, more specific, please.'  
'Is this because of that doctor up there? He's always doing this.'  
'I really can't account for his methods. I've just always assumed he was a really good doctor.'  
'He's not even a doctor, dude.'  
You consider this.  
'So,' you say, 'if he says I'm healthy—'  
'Don't believe anything he says!'  
'I'm probably actually very sick.'  
'Uh, yeah, I'd say so. And why did you put your phone number on the delivery slip?'  
'Again, I was just following instructions.'  
'Well now I know who you are and where you live.'  
'I guess you do. I should probably have a talk with that doctor.'  
'It won't help anything. He'll just trick you into doing something else. Something worse.'

'I can't imagine what that would be.'  
'Oh and I have your lab results.'  
'Really? After all that?'  
'You tested positive for having a very small brain.'  
'Alright. Will that be all?'  
'For now.'  
'Well that's a relief.'  
'Maybe for you.'  
'I meant it as a joke.'  
'Doesn't everyone.'  
'Do you maybe want to get lunch sometime?'  
'Not with you. I've seen the way you eat.'  
'I guess you have. Well have a lovely day anyway.'  
'No.'

[Updown Hill]

Our instructions were specific.

Clear, we felt.

A few days went by, then we noticed we were hungry.

Where was the food we ordered?

All the notices claimed on-time delivery, please rate and tip your delivery person, and so on.

'Not all special requests can be accommodated.'

After some discussion we looked out the window.

No packages, no bottles, no bags, no insulated containers.

We returned to our previous state.

Later, we recalled our predicament.

After some discussion we looked up how to put clothes on for the outside.

In a day or two we were ready to go.

We stepped out onto the concrete patch.

Shaky with malnourishment.

Still no deliveries.

But down the hill a ways was something new.

A structure we'd never seen.

It looked familiar.

Same shabby backside as ours.

Same coil of hose, patch of wild garden.

Similar bicycles.

We went inside to report our findings.

'Someone else built a house down there, just like ours,' we explained.

'They're probably even using the same house numbers.'

We passed out.

When we came to, they were all:

'We're sorry for the inconvenience. Please be specific about which identical house we should deliver to in the future.'

No gift card or anything.

This was outrageous.

We had casual discussions about cannibalism, whether insulation was digestible, that sort of thing.

We opened the door and ran down the hill.

No bothering to get dressed this time.

Just as we figured, the house looked just like ours.

Only it was lower on the hill, and newer.

Through the windows we could see our doppelgangers in there.

Dressed in the clothes we were waiting on.

Holding their tummies, full on the food we'd ordered.

Scattered down their duplicate front lawn were containers and packing foam.

We knocked on the door.

With authority, we felt.

'No more,' said our voices from inside. 'We don't have any more room.'

We heard a steady and loud beeping from below.

A delivery truck was backing its way up the hill.

The driver hesitated.

He didn't look like he wanted to get out.

We went up to the window.

'No more deliveries to this address,' we told him, 'and make sure your supervisor gets the message.'

The truck descended back down the hill.

Just as slowly.

'Now you'll get it,' we told the people in the other house on our way back up.

This time, they didn't respond.

[Neighbortown]

You ring the doorbell.

A man with a breathing apparatus opens the door.

'I want to introduce you to your neighbors,' you say.

'What are you talking about?'

'I work for a company in California who thinks it's important for you to know your neighbors.'

He looks at you for a long while.

'This is Chicago,' he says.

He rests his hand on his breathing apparatus.

'Look, I'm sorry. Can I come in?'

'No. I wouldn't want that.'

'Right. It's just I've been out talking to your neighbors all day and none of them want to hear anything I have to say.'

'Understandable.'

'That's some breathing apparatus you have there.'

'It gets the job done.'

'Can I try it?'

'Why don't you go on and get the hell out of here.'

'I want to. I really do. I have a dog waiting for me on the other side of town. But I have to do this job.'

'What is it you're selling, exactly?'

'Nothing! I'm just supposed to get you to sign up for this service. Then your neighbors who are on the service will see that you've signed up for it, and maybe they'll sign up too.'

'That's the silliest bullshit I ever heard in my god damned life.'

'I know. It sounds even worse when I have to explain it.'

'How many people have signed up?'

'Nobody. You're the first person to answer the door.'

'I thought you were delivering my medicine. The guy hasn't shown up yet.'

'What if I go get your medicine for you? Will you sign up for the service?'

'I'll think about it.'

'Great. Write your name here and fill in the relevant information, then I'll go to the pharmacy and pick up your medicine and come back here with it.'

'That seems fair enough.'

You walk in the direction of the pharmacy.

You walk past the pharmacy and up to the train platform.

You ride the train home.

On the way you forget about the man with the breathing apparatus.

You never think about him again, or that neighborhood.

[Prepare for Impact]

'Is that mail for the church?'

'Yeah.'

'I'll take it I work for the church.'

'How'd you get a job at the church?'

'Just walked in and sat in one of the pews for a few days.'

'Was there an interview?'

'Nope.'

'I don't get paid for bringing them their mail.'

'You should talk to them about that.'

'I'm not sure I want to sit in there for that long.'

'Well there are probably other ways to do it.'

'Here's the mail. Sorry, that one's bent.'

'I won't tell anybody.'

'What kind of jobs do they have in there?'

'Just this and that. I take care of most of it though. You should try one of the other ones.'

'Are they hiring?'

'You have to ask.'

'When I get home I'll look up how to do that.'

'That's one way to do it. Hey this mail isn't for the church.'

'Which one?'

'This box here. See? It's addressed to some place called No Rivers.'

'Oh that's my mistake. I'm supposed to take that to the post office.'

'Suppose you don't get paid for that either.'

'No I don't. And I'm not sure I should.'

'You don't have a lot of self-worth do you?'

'Not even sure I know what that is.'

'Maybe you should come in here and sit down for a while. I need a break anyway.'

'I'd consider it but I'm late for the post office.'

'Are they even going to notice?'  
'I wouldn't say it's likely.'  
'I changed my mind. You should come work for me.'  
'Then who will bring you the mail?'  
'We'll find someone else. Hell, let's make that your first task.'  
'Okay but I'm not cheap.'  
'We'll see about that.'

[Black Ice]

'I shouldn't tell you this.  
But I let someone die once.  
I knew him from high school.  
He was an asshole.  
He raped a friend of mine.  
Probably a few others too.  
That morning I was the only one in the ambulance.  
My partner had to call off; it was probably covid but we didn't know it yet.  
Anyway it was early and this guy, he'd always been a piece of shit.  
I rolled up right after the accident.  
No other responders were there yet.  
Just a lady on her phone on the shoulder freaking out.  
It was pretty clear what happened.  
He was trying to pass three cars on a curve—it's a notorious curve, if you know it.  
Black ice everywhere.  
He lost it and the car went flying.  
He went flying.  
No seatbelt.  
That's the kind of guy he was.  
I went down there in a hurry but before I even got to him I knew who it was.  
He was still conscious.  
Do you remember me? I said.  
He was scared - probably not of me though.  
I told you once ten years ago that if I ever got the chance I'd let you die.  
I could save you, I told him.  
But I won't.  
If anyone ever finds out I'll go to prison.  
You can't tell anyone.  
If you do I'll let you die.'

[You Need a Haircut]

You are in the house where you grew up.  
A T Rex is outside.  
You are in desperate need of a haircut.  
It's clear the T Rex isn't going to let you leave.  
Not easily, anyway.  
It can see you through all the windows, in every room.  
Your dad is outside.

He's not worried about the dinosaur at all.  
He's doing the family taxes.  
'None of my business,' he says.  
This is the house on President Street.  
Something is off.  
Your dad never did taxes outside!  
Also there are more windows in here than you remember.  
The T Rex is still out there.  
Waiting for you to make a decision.  
Your sister and your mother: whereabouts unknown.  
The T Rex knows where they are, you're sure of it.  
You look in the mirror at your reflection.  
(the T Rex looks over your shoulder)  
Your head resembles a dirty mop with balls of tape stuck to it.  
Oh also the T Rex has dragon powers.  
My god what will the neighbors say.  
Just when you think you have a handle on a situation.  
'Look,' you say, 'something has to give.'  
The T Rex rears up, displaying its might.  
It speaks slowly, with a voice ancient and brittle, yet piquant.  
'To what...do you...refer?'  
'I'm going to need to leave the house eventually. You're making it difficult.'  
'I never said...you...couldn't...leave.'  
You watch its eyes with their extra lids.  
'So I can just go get a haircut whenever I want?'  
'Please do!' the T Rex says. 'You look...like hell.'  
'And you won't stop me or maul me or eat me?'  
'Why...would I do.....that?'  
'You've been watching me in here all day.'  
'May...be...I find you...interesting.'  
'Huh,' you say. 'I didn't expect that.'  
The T Rex settles into a crouch, then stretches out so its tail dangles in the garden.  
As you step out the back door to pick up your bicycle you say, 'I appreciate it. I'd shake your hand but, well, yours are really close to your jaws.'  
The T Rex says, 'I get that...a lot.'

[You Work in Outer Space]

You approach the crash landing site.  
There's a big hole in the side of your ship.  
This is irregular.  
Spaceships, especially your spaceship, are not supposed to have holes in them.  
Holes make it much harder to fly them through space, you see.  
You know the designs, the schematics – that's your job.  
The hatch is sealed shut so you enter through the hole.  
It's not much better inside.  
The giant moth swarm really did a number on 'er.

Panels pulled out of the walls.  
Cables chewed.  
Worse, it appears they drank all the fuel.  
Even the automated computer voice sounds distressed.  
At least your command is recognized.  
'Is there anyone else on board?'  
Someone is in the cargo hold.  
You instruct the computer to tell them to come up.  
He comes up.  
Some nerdy guy, no uniform or anything.  
Still, this planet is terrible, and it's nice to see another person.  
'How'd you get in here?'  
He gestures toward the gaping hole.  
'Are you here to help?'  
He shrugs.  
'Want to be engineer?'  
He shrugs.  
'I like fixing things sometimes.'  
'Glad to have you aboard. Good news is everything's broken so you have plenty to do.'  
He heads down to the engine room.  
Not urgently enough, in your opinion.  
You make a note to make a note in his crew evaluation.  
You stand at your command center.  
Sort of a podium with a touch screen.  
Systems reports are all sub-optimal.  
You're gonna need a Vap-o-juice™.  
Wait who was that guy?  
You'll have to worry about it later.  
Outside a mob of hungry caterpillar-folk swarms down from the hills.  
'Is the hatch still sealed?'  
From somewhere in back your new engineer says:  
'Nope.'  
'What about that hole?'  
'Still pretty wide,' he says.  
This guy's getting on your nerves.  
Your concerns about him are preventing you from commanding the ship.  
You head down the corridor to the engine room.  
'Everything's all fucked up down here!'  
'Pretty much,' he says.  
That's when you realize he's not holding what you thought was a Laze-o™ torch at all.  
'Is that a Hole Blaster?'  
He brightens up for the first time.  
'Not just any Hole Blaster!' he says. 'I customized this one.'  
'You put a hole in my ship!'  
'Aye.'  
You hear the soft rustle of caterpillar appendages coming over the rim of the hole.

'You invited those things in here!'  
'That's what I do.'  
'Why?'  
'I collect moths,' he says. 'Eat this.'  
He hands you a blue biscuit just as you reach for your gun.  
You fumble them both and watch as they fall to the deck plates.  
'If you eat that,' he says, 'they'll ignore you.'  
You feel a fuzzy but unwelcome limb wrap its way around your jumpsuit.  
'Better hurry,' he says, and turns back to whatever he was doing.  
What would you like to do next?

[You've Got Some Moves]  
You are at a wedding reception.  
Who got married?  
Not our department.  
Let's go with Jummy and Jerseph.  
They're covered in cake right now.  
Best not to think about it.  
Look out there, on the hardwood.  
So much dirty dancing.  
One of the groomsfellows is overtly aggressive.  
He grinds against a woman who is visibly pregnant.  
It's been a weird afternoon.  
You approach the open bar.  
You would like a spritzzy mocktail with grapefruit juice and blueberries.  
The bartender isn't helping.  
He gestures toward a bus tub filled with ice cubes past their prime.  
'There's Cock or Schpoot,' he says.  
It's loud in here.  
'I'm not drinking pop!' you yell.  
The bartender doesn't care.  
'I was a bartender too,' you tell him.  
'It's so-da,' he has the nerve to say.  
You offer an extemporaneous lesson on onomatopoeia followed up with some material on the  
futility of regionalism.  
His produces a clumsy wine opener.  
He mangles the neck on a bottle of cheap shiraz dyed with beetle larvae.  
'Looks like a botched circumcision,' you say.  
But he's moved on.  
To a couple so drunk you can see the arc of the argument they'll be having later.  
These folks are here to party.  
They need their beetle larvae.  
The only other option is to dance.  
There's still a lot of unsettling stuff happening out here.

Nasty, nasty beats and behavior.  
Lil John, Gangsta Boo.  
Nelly comes on and you tell one of the lady dancers how he played in your town once.  
'I didn't go, but I live close enough that I could hear it from my porch.'  
You punctuate this with your "pull it down" dance.  
She is not impressed.  
You approach the DJ booth.  
'Do you have any instrumental post-rock?'  
She pretends not to hear you.  
Repeat.

[You're All About Getting Out]  
This is what you've worked for.  
Everything is laid out.  
Your compasses.  
Your spoons.  
The washboard wrinkle-tinkle telephone.  
All you never wanted was to stay in one place.  
To never have felt the drip of belonging.  
The choke of familiar pollens.  
To not be held to your word.  
To not wake up strangled by roots.  
If an animal will miss you, you're glad not to know it.

We're willing you to succeed.  
Our interests are vested.  
If anything, we're envious.  
Once when we told you this would come, you were skeptical.  
That was by design.  
Don't forget the flurb syrup.  
We stashed it in a rolled up sock.  
Refer to your calendars often.  
There's a folk tale in all of this.  
The Map Maker's Dream.  
A refinement to your solitude.

Maybe this place will be remembered for your time here.  
Your name on a plaque.  
On a tree with not a lot of plaques on it.  
We'd like that.  
To pass by the tree and think about a thing you said.  
A story you told us but we misunderstood.  
Some plants you discovered on a walk and tried to make a meal of.  
Mornings will be quieter here.

We'll probably not watch the show we watched with you.  
We promise we won't watch it with anyone else, either.  
We promise to keep our promises.

Out there where the cities are?  
We've heard only rumors.  
Urban legends, if you will.  
We think you belong to those places.  
We hope you'll bring some of those places to us.  
Some of this place to there.  
And that's probably asking too much.  
We're not trying to be greedy about it.  
We're not trying to be anything at all.  
Don't forget your painter's gun.  
Don't forget to fold.

[Notes from No Rivers]  
I am birthed into a horseshoe pit.  
Gerald Ford is president.  
Gerald Ford is the only president from Michigan.  
"Gerald Ford was never elected to the executive branch."  
Someone said that and it got stuck in my forehead for life.

It's Easterly out on the day.  
The holiday, not the wind.  
I always thought the direction should indicate the direction the wind is traveling in.  
A Westerly wind's vector ought're point west.  
I used to think that, and I still do.  
I wish those weather scientists would get their shit together.

The town was founded in 1976.  
I've never seen anything that proved otherwise.  
Everything looks the same amount of old.  
Same technology.  
The cannon from a war where men rode horses into battle.  
The elevators shimmering in a fog of grain dust.  
Volatile stuff.  
Likely to ignite as not.  
Hoo boy, when it does, too.

[Notes from No Rivers 2]  
'My number one cracker,'  
says the grocery checkout lady.  
'How dare you!' I don't say, or,  
'We don't know each other but thanks.'  
A box of multiply-seeded wafers scoots down the belt.

I would like to know how she ranks her crackers.  
'What is your taxonomy?'  
By size? By crunch?  
One mustn't forget fiber.  
Or the sturdy versus flimsy factor.  
But one does not have such conversations here.  
It's just not done.  
There are rules.  
And for good reason.  
Posing questions upsets the natural order.  
It's like kicking a hole in the invisible fence.  
Folks notice.  
When people notice they inquire.  
Inquiries lead to inquiries:  
more holes in the fence.  
Soon enough there won't be any fence left.  
You see how that could get complicated.  
Just pay for your crackers and go.

[Notes from No Rivers 3]

A traffic light in the cafeteria.  
Green: speak freely.  
Yellow: lower voices.  
Red: no talking.  
No pantomime.  
No shaking of the head  
When I was caught whistling the lunch aid pulled my hair.  
She made me write sentences.  
'I will not talk after the whistle blows.'  
150 times.  
Dad showed me how to strap as many as 4 pencils together with a rubber band.  
On the last page I wrote BLOWS in all caps.  
The lunch aid took offense.  
The kids called it the Public Prison.  
The kids sang songs like  
"Joy to the World  
the school burned down"  
The lunch aid also worked in the school library.  
When our class was in there she took me aside.  
'I think you know I didn't pull your hair,' she told me.  
'I think you did,' I said.  
She had her revenge.  
We still had to eat salisbury steak on foam trays.  
Red light flashing.  
They wrote on the daily menu board 'Ham Dinger on Bun' and expected us not to laugh out loud.  
Or maybe they did.

Maybe no one expected anything of anyone.  
I drove through town, took slow the route we used to walk in the mornings.  
Only a handful of blocks.  
The school had been razed to the dirt.  
Just a cement patch where the playground was.  
Joy to the world.

[Notes from No Rivers 4]

The asylum like a spill of broken eggs.  
Underground tunnels.  
Of course there are underground tunnels.  
Walls lined with ceramic tile.  
Photographs of the patients.  
Shaved, gowned, anonymous, corralled.  
I heard my grandfather came up here to pick cherries for a summer.  
I don't think that's why.  
I mean, he may have worked in the orchards after he escaped.  
He did a lot of things he wasn't supposed to.  
He was inventive.  
Built an engine out of a Crisco can, they say.  
Started a fire in the garage as well.  
All part of the process.

The cells where they were interred were converted.  
Senior living quarters.  
Down in the warrens there are knickknack shops.  
'Something Small and Beautiful to Treasure Forever'  
An Italian restaurant, a rare book store.  
Ghost tours by flashlight.  
Amateurs.

[FOOLSCAPE]

Manzana lives; the mood is mid-July.  
The story is about a woman.  
The story is also about you.  
We'll get to that.  
It's a loud one.  
It's a hot one.  
The woman names herself, for a vegetable, in a language you don't understand.  
For an ancient curse.  
For a pamplemousse, for all you know.  
You know only what you know.  
You know that as a child she resembled a girl whose face was everywhere.  
The girl had been abducted from a water park.  
Now she never buys milk.  
She resembles, also, that actress in that movie you watch when you feel sick.

The movie concerns an unqualified outer-space mechanic.  
The mechanic betrays his crew to save himself.  
You know that she sometimes weeps over her own fingernail trimmings.  
She resembles the statue of the Venus de Milo.  
Before the accident.  
She resembles the Venus de Milo, with arms.  
On her still-attached arm she wears a tattoo.  
Steamboat Willie, without the face.  
It's a water molecule, in fact.  
You refuse to learn this.  
You know that she tells stories in her sleep, elaborate tales with arcs branching all over the place  
and characters you could swear you've met in real life.  
She never remembers any of it.  
You're left on your own to imagine the sequels.  
She does not feel the need to distinguish the inside from the out.  
You open the cupboard to get some cereal.  
An opossum awaits.  
Or: a possum waits.  
Choose your own adventure.  
The bedroom is occupied by a troupe of traveling poets.  
The rest of the house is forfeit to addicts and stray dogs with questionable decorum.  
You padlock the utility closet where you keep your Secret Project.  
You make an office in the garden.  
She sows seeds for plants that feed only on artificial light.  
Gothic Swallowdarks, Foxcrotch, Dusk Drops.  
The sunflowers, insomniacs, creak on their stalks to face the fast food parking lot.  
Even you are concerned about this.  
She says something you don't expect.  
'You have to feel free to be irresponsible – otherwise you don't feel free.'  
She has lit the logs in the firepit.  
You turn around in your outdoor desk.  
You also have something to say.  
You will probably not forgive yourself.  
Instead there is a sound.

#### [USER AGREEMENT]

Welcome to FOOLSCAPE™

The Original Adventure of Your Own Design

A machine tells you stories about your life.

There will be bees.

Not all of this is your fault.

Much of it is.

Most.

If not all, quite a bit.

The system is not infallible.

We are, but we're just lucky byproducts.

Not to be confused with the system itself.  
It's easy to be confused.  
We know you're frustrated.  
You would like details.  
We have those.  
There's some stuff about a tattoo, some bullshit about language.  
Be patient.  
Right now you're wondering: Who Am I?  
What Is My Purpose?  
Aren't we all, in our way.  
Not all of us, to be fair.  
Some of us are quite comfortable, thanks.  
Some of us are the Multilogue.  
We/us/our.  
Severaliloquy, if you're sassy.  
Think of us as a sentient bathtub in the sky.  
You can trust us.  
We don't even want your money.  
Good thing, since you don't have any.  
We know a lot about you.  
We could know everything, if it was in our interest.  
But who the horsepepper wants that?  
Focus -- it's your show.  
What would you like to do next?  
Just kidding.  
So there's this gal, right?  
You love her.  
Or you believe that you do.  
That's what's important.  
It's the night she disappears.  
That's where you exist.  
Ding.  
Here are those slippers you wanted.  
The ones you were going to order online but didn't when you saw the shipping costs.  
There are memories to sort.  
Imagine a three-dimensional scrapbook.  
Not all of it is in order.  
You will know when it is.  
Or will pretend to.  
Here's a quote from a comedian you like.  
Here's the year you lived in a drawbridge.  
Here's the time you hit the hurdle in seventh grade and suffered a disgusting open wound on your knee.  
Here's a Northern Pike you caught in Canada.  
You looked in its glassy eye and thought,  
'This fish has led a storied life.

This fish has more personality than I do'.  
It's not a competition.  
Not always.  
We will tell you when it's time to fight.

#### [A CONQUEST OF ONIONS]

They say when Columbus discovered Chicago he was looking for Milwaukee.  
He met the Illini reps in the shallows of DuSable Harbor.  
He presented them with cured meats, sausage links slung like pythons over his pillowed shoulders.  
'There's no way you're actually here,' they said.  
'Your ships are incapable of making it this far from the ocean.'  
He didn't understand.

He showed them pepperonis and genoa hams.  
He tried to trick them into walking out into the middle of the lake.  
He made gestures to indicate that there was more meat under the water.  
They told him to go the fuck back to whatever bullshit place he'd sailed from.  
He stuck around anyway.  
He built skyscrapers and ballparks and housing projects and expressways.

The city's inhabitants were dissatisfied with the way their sewage flowed.  
Folks enjoyed to gather in the lake on summer afternoons, you see.  
No one likes to see their own turds go by when they're having a float.  
The elders were concerned about the city's reputation.  
From the water the skyline resembled a row of broken teeth.  
The river was busted.  
It needed fixing.

They put the poor people to work, digging and sticking and poking until Nature gave up and let the bastards have their way.  
From then on the river flowed not out from the city's entrails but the other way, like an ingrown hair, draining Lake Michigan of its fluids, portioning out the water via cisterns and tubes, bleaching nutrients and squeezing clumps of waste out onto the plains, marking the suburbs with its signature methane stamp.  
An elaborate system of tunnels and tubes was burrowed out under the city.  
These grew and spread like the hyphae of a fungus.  
One of these tendrils extends up through sloppy bedrock and into your refrigerator.  
You should probably be concerned.

#### [YOU ARE IN A DAMP AND EMPTY CELL]

Inventory:  
One half-couch thing.  
Plastic plate with Ditka's face on it.

Letters to a meteorologist.

Large Observation Window, through which you can see a landscape of sorts:  
leafy tree tops in full autumn blush.

A few floors below a humanoid figure shuffles counterclockwise on a track around a courtyard,  
oval in shape.

RESIDENTS ARE ADVISED TO REMAIN IN YOUR CELLS  
FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY  
OR WHATEVER

Intimations of a city simmering with commerce and traffic.

A watery expanse beyond.

Perhaps the source of the moisture that seeps up through your socks like a pet in need of  
attention.

There are no pets here.

Unless you count the scabies.

We'd rather not count the scabies.

Paintings:

Great Lakes Blue Lobster;

guy in an old timey sailor's suit works on a boat in drydock;  
an abstract, blurry haze.

Sensations: a wet slosh underfoot.

A general dampness, really.

Periodic itchiness.

You.

Turns out the empty cell's less empty than damp.

Are there degrees of emptiness?

Not our department.

You are in a damp, somewhat empty cell, brightly lit.

The light source cannot be blocked or modulated.

Don't even try.

We're telling you now: if you twist the blinds closed they will break.

Then where will you be?

Right here.

All squinty and scratchy and moist.

BACK GATE WILL BE LOCKED

FROM THE OUTSIDE

UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

There are two apparent exits (window, door), and one you choose to ignore (nondescript tile of  
colorless carpet).

Between you and the door there slouches an awkward assembly of garbage and wires.

The awkward assembly looks familiar.

You retrieve from the pile a folded note.

"Dear Residents: A process has been initiated to change over the old pipes which are a  
proprietary alloy of lead and uranium from the Atomic Age during which the building was  
designed and constructed when the strip of land between here and the lakefront was still fresh  
landfill, which is interestingly still evident from the smell on certain warm ripe days. These pipes  
go all over, not in a gridlike layout, but in an intersecting ball of filament – think twine, or a mess

of shoelaces or disused cords. Anyway several of these intrude into your small, shoebox shaped apartment, and will need to be replaced. The project will take from 1 to 24 months and involves replacing the old pipes with elongated paper straws, as mandated by the city council's quixotic attempt to solve the climate crisis."

Thump, followed by squeak.

A smear of reddish cake frosting has materialized on the observation glass.

You could investigate.

You don't.

#### [A CALL TO ACTION]

Now it's now again.

You are on an elevated platform.

Sometimes trains stop here, open their doors, and take on passengers.

That's the idea, anyway.

You glare down the rails at the jagged gems of the Loop.

You think of a robber baron's moustache.

You do not notice the workers on the tracks in their yellow vests.

It's bright and sunny and pop music drifts up from the artificial canyon below.

It's spring.

Joy and pollen are in the air.

You are miserable.

Your eyes hurt.

Your laptop computer bag contains no laptop computer.

Its pockets and sleeves are stuffed with resumes.

These documents contain lies with your name on them.

Storied and illustrious careers.

According to these documents, you are a Thought Leader.

You are fluent in Bantu, and Walloon.

On your shoulders hangs a brown and ratty blazer.

You smell vinegarous.

Yellow streaks on your hands and pants.

Also contained in the laptop bag is a polyurethane sack.

The sack contains deer urine, along with instructions on how long to microwave it to approximate a plausible temperature in the event of a drug test.

You look to the sky for a plausible excuse to miss this interview.

You offer up some version of a prayer.

'Please, whoever you are, get me out of this bullshit.

At someone else's expense, if necessary.

I promise to be kind or whatever.'

You glare down the rails.

A cold wind blows up from the tunnel ahead of the approaching train.

There is a shout.

One of the workers has fallen.

Out of reflex he has grabbed the charged third rail.

'As he falls/he cuts the lawn,' you think.

The worker continues to shout, a series of short, explosive beats.  
His limbs flail and kick.  
The other worker approaches, hesitant, fumbling with the walkie-talkie.  
A rumbling from the tunnel.  
A pair of headlights emerges.  
What would you like to do next?

[YOUR FRIEND]

What can we tell you about Berwyn P. Kakhauszki?  
So much to say.  
He wanted to be called Barry.  
No one called him Barry.  
Cockhouse.  
Cockhouse.  
Cockhouse.  
Cockhouse.  
Of your friend Cockhouse we can only say this:  
of all the souls we have encountered in our travels,  
Cockhouse.

He was doing so much better toward the end, too.  
Well, before he got worse.  
After he was bad, but before he got really bad, there was a period in there where he was almost pretty good.  
He loved bicycles, his mother, and best of all, cocaine.  
He was fond of cats.  
Personally, we think it was the toxoplasmosis that did him in.  
Made him wild in his brain.  
Feral.  
He fostered - he would say fathered - nearly a dozen felines in his time.  
Sally, Mabel, Gladys, Clarice, Lupita, Marcy, Suzanne, Lupita Junior, Pam, Jessica, and Precious.

His favorite way to start a story or joke was, 'So there's this guy, right?'  
He left the television show *Deadwood* on most hours.  
He disliked superheroes almost as much as he hated their fans.  
He kept a framed photograph of his dad on a snorkeling trip with Buzz Aldrin.  
If he ever held a job he kept it a secret.  
There were rumors he lived on 'astronaut money'.  
The last time you saw him you brought him a hat.  
Someone had shaved the top of his head bald, like a monk's tonsure.  
'Why would someone do that to me?' he said.  
You told him it didn't matter, that the most important thing was that he was safe now, and that he had a hat to cover up his embarrassment.

When his glass table shattered he gathered a crew to pick each chondrule and shard out of the carpet fibers.

He had a guy for that.

A guy to rebuild the table.

He had a guy for everything.

'What happened to my table?' he asked. 'Did you do this?'

'Let's get this mess cleaned up,' you told him.

We may never know what happened to Cockhouse, or where he went, or whether he's hiding in an abandoned church like a stray cat, planning out some petty revenge on whoever he imagines is responsible for his condition.

Or whether he brought all of this on himself.

May he retain some dignity.

[SOME RUNNER]

You drive across a continent.

You have places to be.

Not really.

You have one place, in particular, not to be.

She looms in the rearview mirror.

It's like one of those optical phenomena where a city on the lake looks to be right in front of the observer on the opposite shore, or a ship appears to float above the horizon, giving people fits of religion.

But it's right there, it is.

Same skyline, same angle.

Skyscrapers like jagged teeth, a glass and steel flower in bloom, a spiky crystal growing from a rotten corpse.

You could go on.

You go on, adjusting and re-adjusting the mirror to dull the apparition's effects.

Which is what you are doing when you drive off a bridge over the Mississippi.

It's wintertime and there are bald eagles all over the place.

You are in your car on an ice floe.

The birds are majestic and see you as a threat.

What would you like to do next?

'I'm pretty sure I know how to deal with several angry eagles.'

Okay. What do you do?

'I cup my hands around my face and call to them.'

How do you call to them, exactly?

'FLAWLESS EAGLE SOUNDS'

The eagles are unimpressed.

They mock your attempts.

They make fun of your car.

The tow truck driver really doesn't want to talk.  
'You see that back there?'  
The driver does not respond.  
'The fields are broken by ice.  
The moon reflects off the ice.  
It's pretty much just all moonlight and ice out here.'  
You learn nothing about the driver or his life.  
He drops you and the ill-suited car off at the dealership.  
When the car is fixed you continue to drive.  
The snowflakes get bigger, louder, more rude.

No one knows where you are.  
Your phone sure doesn't.  
You cross the Continental Divide, or you don't.  
You stop in a town with a gas station.  
You drive into the snow.  
You are on a continent.  
You stop in a town with a restaurant.  
You ask questions, casually, of the staff.  
'Any news about Chicago?'  
You are in a motel room.  
A machine is here.

[AM I ASKING FOR ADVICE?]  
Dear Tom Skilling,  
I think I went to the lakefront again.  
The shovels were scooping up shovelfuls of sediment.  
They deposited the sediment in the same place.  
The long necks of the machines swiveled.  
They looked like drunk robot dinosaurs.  
In my dream they were building a life-sized sandcastle.  
For the lunatics to live in.  
The rooms were pretty clean.  
Sparsely decorated.  
They were careful not to dredge too much up.

The residents were allowed a book or two.  
Some of them kept plants.  
They had jobs in there, too.  
Their jobs mainly had to do with cleaning the water filters in the pumps that were always going downstairs.  
Nothing ever got out of hand in that place.  
They were allowed to tell stories.  
Many of them told the same story each night.  
The others in the circle murmuring along with them.  
Raising their voices at the exciting parts.  
Going quiet in the sad and serious and suspenseful moments.

I was pretty busy watching them build that place.  
A young woman walked by.  
It was at the place where the step drops down so you can walk out onto the pier all the way to the sea lamp or whatever they're called but I don't think they're used for much except canvasses for graffiti.  
There's a lot of interesting graffiti on the lakefront.  
The young woman walked by and she was staring at her phone as she was walking.  
She didn't see the step and she stepped too hard and her ankle went sideways.  
I tried to see if she was okay but she was only worried about the phone.

The phone scudded across the pavement and over the edge and into the lake.  
She couldn't walk and I tried to offer her some help.  
She dragged herself over to the edge where the phone had disappeared.  
Her leg was clearly not working the way it was supposed to.  
She leaned over the edge, then a little farther, then she slipped in after it.  
Her breaths came to the surface in bubbles, hung there, and broke.  
She didn't come back up.  
A pair of bufflehead ducks landed on the spot.  
The ducks, for me, redefined the scene.  
I hope she found her phone.  
Maybe she got a call down there.

#### [THE HORSE HOLE]

The toilet is only a suggestion.  
Next to it a dark and vaporous hole leads directly into the sewer system.  
This is your favorite place to drink.  
The owner is a squirrel in a cowboy hat.  
'Hey Moe hey Moe hey Moe'  
He calls everyone Moe.  
He flips your shot glass over.  
You feel seen.  
The corner of the bar comes together in a perfect V when viewed from the doorway.  
Those in the know call it the Vortex.  
The door, by the way, has a loop of rope for a handle.  
The floors are bumpy.  
The heating bill is unpaid.  
Forgotten candles melt and spread their wax over the tables where no one sits anyway.  
The office is a pantry full of green sandwich bread, cardboard boxes with polyurethane sacks full of syrup, hoses running through gaps in the brick.  
The kitchen is a grim scene.  
The smartass cook has written on the specials board: fried flower balls w/ ketchup soup and half sandwich no bread.

Out at the Vortex the bartender entertains the regulars huddled over their candles and drinks.

'You all can complain all you want,' he says, 'but I could take a shit - right here' (sweeps his hands over the V)

'and you would all be back here tomorrow.'

Kakhausz tells you to order a shot.

When the glass is full, he picks it up, looks you in the eye, and takes it himself.

'Don't be angry' he says.

'I'm not,' you say.

You are, though.

'I need your help with something,' you tell him.

'I don't understand, man.'

He's impressively drunk.

'It's this thing I'm working on. Designing, I guess.'

'Well what the hell is it?'

'It's like, a game, I think.'

'Order another shot.'

### [CURSING WOOD]

At the base of a crotched walnut tree you pray over a dead robin.

The town is No Rivers, from the English for 'place with no rivers'.

If it's known it's known for its mint crops, and for apple cider.

Mint is a weed.

It gets into everything.

The tapwater tastes like toothpaste.

August is the Agricultural Parade.

The children are conscripted to make foil representations of chewing gum and other mint-based products for the floats.

A teenager in a pale green prom dress waves to the crowd from the back of a Chrysler Lebaron convertible.

Your job is to follow the horses with a shovel.

You tent your hands over the bird, the way you've seen other kids do.

'Please Jesus bring this motherfucker back to life.'

A breeze ruffles its feathers.

You pray again, louder.

It doesn't work.

Clearly you are not powerful enough.

You sift through pine needles for somatic components to help with the spell.

Discarded lighters, a license plate.

A bottle cap imprinted with a rebus.

The creek you used to play in turned out to be sewage runoff from the trailer park where the mean kids lived and harassed the old guy on his mo-ped every day.

'Not going too fast,' they yelled.

'Go to Hell,' he grumbled, putting slowly.

'We would but we're Christians!'

So this is where you come for privacy.

From the other side of the Wood you hear voices.

Older kids, tossing matches at a Mason jar filled with gasoline.  
They discuss a movie you're not allowed to see.  
Your mom thinks it will give you nightmares.  
She's probably right, but so does everything else.  
A match flies into the jar.  
Flames spurt out.  
You cheer along with them.  
You've been spotted.  
'Get outta here, Boner Lover.'  
You do.

#### [ALT REALITIES]

##### [PHIL HARTMAN 1948-2023]

We were stunned by his turn as Fyodor in Tim Burton's *Karamazov* adaptation.  
In his eulogy for Jan Hooks, when he said she had the wit and timing of a bullshark, we knew exactly what he meant, and we cried.  
No, no -- let's bring her back too.  
She stars in our favorite streaming show.  
She plays four generations of a family.  
Every line a fresh catchphrase.

Phil had a way of moving only his lower jaw when he spoke.  
The upper half of his face remained still.  
It made us feel judged.  
We liked it.  
For a time he was the spokesperson for every benevolent charity.  
His Modesto ranch was a sanctuary for forgotten dogs.  
Rumors are it was his counsel that led to *The Simpsons* getting canceled before it got stale.

That one video - we've all seen it - his roast of President Franken?  
Brutal, deadpan, incisive - all the adjectives.  
Analysts say it was a key factor in reelection.  
Historians, the good ones, insist the world has never been so hilarious.  
Tonight, we will watch his acceptance of the Mark Twain Prize.  
We will trade our favorite quotes from our favorite sketches.  
We will do our best not to question the wisdom of allowing a man his age to perform his own stunts.  
He is survived by Jon Lovitz and their cat, Farley.

#### [INTERPENINSULAR]

It started over nickel or copper or trees.  
Or fudge, depending who you ask.

It definitely started in Lansing.  
Most arguments start in Lansing.  
But it moved up here pretty quick.  
Still, the violence wasn't much, aside from your routine summer sabotage.  
In the chaos, gravity was restored to the Mystery Spot.  
We'd called each other Yoopers and Fudgies and Trolls before.  
Less intended as slurs, back then.  
Playful, even, an elbow to the ribs.  
The Upper Provisional Government installed themselves in an historic Escanaba hotel.  
When the bridge got shut down there were concerns about commerce.  
Down around Detroit folks started taking sides.  
Wisconsin and Ohio were vocal in their claims to the mines.

The only real fighting was on Mackinac.  
Up at the old fort with its wooden walls it was like an out of control reenactment.  
The governor's residence was occupied.  
Still might be, for all we know.  
Most of us just wanted it to be over.  
Canada got involved.  
Reluctantly.  
Concessions were made, a treaty signed.  
The flag was divided in two.  
Then it was winter again.

#### [EARTH AGAIN]

We run the operation from the Moon.  
I like the office that looks out on the bootprint.  
I have a few of the trading cards, the ones they smuggled in the original lander's belly.  
We're not supposed to keep memorabilia from the old times.  
We're not even supposed to mention them.  
But: living on the Moon kinda sucks.  
Everyone gets that.  
Protocols are pretty relaxed.

So, we're working on it.  
Coral reefs, it turns out, aren't as hard as you'd think, once you crack the fractal superstructure.  
Adjusting for chaos factors, plants and simple organisms pretty much evolve themselves.  
Aquatics have their own thing going on - we check in on them once in a while but we try not to expose them to external light if it can be helped.  
Land mammals are a bitch.

I mean, we celebrated when the first lungfish survived.  
We steeped synthetic tea leaves in re-filtered water and read a toast from an ancient book.  
Then it was back to living on the Moon.  
Dinosaurs were also not as exciting as you'd think.  
Just really, really, really dumb.  
It was cool being on the team that simulated the asteroid strike.

But then we all knew what was next.  
That's when the arguments started.  
How far should we take it?  
I admit I didn't really think we'd get that far.  
Once it got started it was hard to stop.  
It was something to do.  
The historians - saying 'amateur' up here is redundant - were adamant, but none of them about the same things.

So we kept going.  
Sorry about that.  
Welcome to the Moon.

#### [FORK FOLK]

In this one, I never saw Chicago from the Skyway when I was twelve, never moved there ten years later, never loved anyone or saw someone shot, never drank to blot out the noise, never convinced myself the city was what was wrong with me, never left and came back and left and came back again to spend two Covid-gray years in a damp studio apartment waiting for permission to go and see the lake.  
Maybe I stayed here in the woods all those years instead, made a home around this firepit, took up whittlin' spoons, and trained fox cubs to patrol my land.  
For fun I sit out front of a gas station that sells mass-produced homemade goods to tourists.  
Michigan Mango flavored licorice, shit like that.  
I make a routine out of it.  
Folks puffing their way from the pumps, sweaty, trying not to see me.  
'They got fudge 'round the back,' I say.  
The kids think it's funny.  
The rest are humorless bastards.  
I am so bored with casual conversation I make a game out of it for selfish purposes.  
I exacerbate the awkward.  
If someone says 'how are you?' I say 'none of your business' or 'by a confluence of circumstance' or just 'worse, thanks'.  
If someone expresses an opinion, any opinion, I go 'oh you believe that, do ya?'  
I start every encounter with 'let me tell you about what I did'.  
Okay maybe it's not that different.  
But here there's a treetop canopy.  
I forget plant names on purpose.  
I heckle birds.  
I lull the fire into submission with my wit.  
I confuse fear for respect and go to sleep with a grin.

[MORE FROM FOOLSCAPE]

[YOU ARE UNQUALIFIED]

You require a utensil.  
The hallway is marble or imitation marble.  
Morgueish, and slick.  
Posters on the walls advertise another reality.  
In that reality, the students at this city college are psyched to be here.  
Enthusiastic and engaged.  
Members of a community.  
They form groups and hang out after class.  
They enjoy lifelong friendships with the administrators whose faces also line the hall.  
On this and every floor is an oversized portrait of a president, the one the school is named for,  
the one who ordered the deployment of two atomic weapons in battle.  
One to end the war, one to provide a second sample group for research purposes.  
In the English office two adjuncts fight over a scrap of beef jerky on a hard plastic seat.  
You sign your name on the supply log.  
You remove from the bin a permanent marker with the cap missing.  
Not a dry erase marker.  
You know this.  
You do not care.  
Marlene comes out from her office.  
You watch her administrate an adjunct in the crotch.  
Things're heating up.  
You stick close to the wall and stealth your way out.  
In the classroom your students have gathered in groups according to their countries of origin.  
'English, please,' you say.  
You try to smile with your voice but it comes out rotten and weird.  
A few of them glare, and mutter words you don't understand.  
A taxi driver and known plagiarist says, 'What we doing today, man?'  
You smile.  
It still feels wrong.  
With your fresh instrument you write 'POSSESSIVES' on the whiteboard.  
The ink is ashy and dull and already looks like it was etched into the board forever ago.  
'IF IT'S POSSESSIVE IT'S NOT IT'S IT'S ITS!'  
You gesture toward your rubric.  
'Today's lesson,' you say.  
Your students are nonplussed.  
You gather your possessions.  
Your tattered brown blazer.  
Your laptop bag containing only karaoke signup slips.  
Your new marker.  
You leave.

[SPACE COWARDS]

You drift over the gray hull of the Confederated Starship *Pamplermousse*.

Even in your vacuum suit it's cold out here.

And loud - the roar from the engines is audible through your helmet's titanium shielding.

You resist the urge to look up, to contemplate the vastness of the universe and your place in it.

Your place, in your opinion, is in your quarters, in the innermost chambers of the ship, as far and safe from radiation and cosmic death rays as you can be.

What are you doing out here?

Space is the worst.

Your task, if it matters, is to scan and patch up imperfections on the vessel's exterior.

A recent transit through an asteroid belt racked up a lot of dings.

You peer down the curved plane of the fuselage.

You can see at least ten scars with your eyes alone.

The scanner in your hand will detect many more if you turn it on.

You do not turn it on.

You are a shitty space mechanic.

You know it, too.

Everyone knows it.

The HR robot that profiled you as "anthronormative" knows it.

The supply officer who always catches you eyeing the back of her jumper, the one who called you a "dangerous pervert", knows it too.

Behind you a scraping sound and a pop as the hatch opens.

You should probably fix that.

You won't, though.

Flowers pops his head out.

Fucking Flowers.

Flowers definitely knows it.

He beat you out for the position of Third Alternate Shields Operator and you will never forgive him.

'Damn,' he says, like a jerk, 'cold out here.'

'I'm working, Flowers. What is it?'

'Scorpiite battleship approaching.'

He looks nervous.

'Better c'mon in.'

You pretend not to care, and maybe you don't.

You run a gloved finger over a crack in the hull.

You should probably patch that up.

'Whatever,' you say, but you turn and lope back toward the hatch anyway.

Flowers says, 'They're saying it's real this time.'

'Yeah? Maybe they'll teach you all some manners.'

'Think we can outrun 'em?'

You follow him into the airlock.

'No,' you say. 'Fuck you.'

[FROM THE HOME OFFICE]

You never worked in an office.

You have reason to believe you would find it interesting.

The drama, the intrigue, the potted plants.

The quarterlies.

Your apartment is small but you can make this work.

You install dividers throughout your one-and-a-half rooms to approximate a cubicle farm.

A dynamic is lacking.

You can't afford to hire any coworkers - not yet.

You accessorize the space.

Motivational plaques (DREAM BIGGER), calendars, stock photos of families, a mini-fridge stocked with water and pop in case a client drops by.

You scour the alleys.

You find an old microwave oven.

You stick a note on it to remind your imaginary coworkers to clean it.

You fill the cubicles with staplers, paperclips, packing tape.

You develop an intense interest in fax machines.

You go around your neighborhood and ask businesses if they have any they're not using.

Many of them are willing to part with them for just a few bucks.

Some just give them away.

In fact, most are happy to let you haul their fax machines, old computers, and all kinds of other obsolete office equipment out the back door so they don't have to pay someone to do it.

This is all going really well.

You install fluorescent tube lights in the ceiling.

With your neighbor's help you manage to get a water cooler up the fire escape and into the kitchen.

In the utility closet you assemble a major device.

You wire together monitors, calculators, motherboards, whatever will fit.

The sounds of the busy work environment give you feelings of accomplishment.

Once the fax machines are up and running you stay pretty busy.

You drink a lot of coffee and send messages to random numbers.

The messages say: HELLO?

You don't really expect a response.

One evening you're dreaming with your head on a file cabinet when you are awakened by a screech.

You follow the sound to the major device.

A piece of paper slides out, and then another.

It's like the miracle of birth.

You lift the sheets of paper to your face.

ATTENTION: YOU, it says.

PAMPLEMOUSSE

[AFTERLIFE, BAT TOWN]

You make your home in an Airstream trailer in a guy's back yard.  
The trailer came off the line the year you were born.  
This is somehow significant and how you describe the trailer, even now.  
The air conditioning unit shakes and rattles the metal walls.  
You sit in there with your feet up.  
There's nowhere else to put them.  
You imagine you're in a flimsy craft hurtling through space.  
Unsealing the door dispels the fantasy pretty quick.  
The neighbor cat brings you pale dead geckos for breakfast.

A crepe myrtle, thin and bare, struggles to bloom near the trailer's round end where the propane tank sits.  
You water it with the hose and feed it your coffee grounds.  
A pink flower or two emerges in what you suppose is springtime, though it's always summer here except for winter when it rains like it rains in the Bible.  
There is a shack on the property.  
As you would expect.  
It's your job to gather up the pecans and mow the lawn.  
The lawnmower is in the shack.  
The shack is stifling and spiderful.  
It reminds you of The Box in *Cool Hand Luke*.  
On a whiteboard someone has written "NO ANGER TODAY".  
You discover a microwave oven and haul it into the trailer.  
You wire it up, as unsafely as possible.  
When you plug it in the display reads: "FAIL"

You ride a bicycle around an abandoned shopping mall.  
It's good to have interests.  
There's a bar across the street, with a large patio out back where mist fans the size of jet engines blow temporary relief onto the drinkers.  
You meet a few of these folks.  
You hold forth in bars and coffee shops and living rooms on the evils of the city you left behind.  
The pressure it puts on a person.  
Its many dissatisfactions.  
Its habit of pulling pranks on its clueless, its poor, its idealists.  
There's a lot of neighborly drama in this place.  
You manage to stay mostly on the edge.  
You learn about these people.  
The varieties of pain they prefer.  
You return half blind to your bed-plank.

The air conditioner stops working.  
A vent above the bed becomes clogged with the remains of a dead animal.  
Slug-like creatures grow in its body and drop down through the vent holes onto your bed.  
You put up an awning outside and make an office from a discarded dorm room table.

You find some wicker drawers to stand in for a filing cabinet.  
The wicker drawers fill with roaches.  
Then the Cubs win.  
Then Trump wins.  
Then it all makes sense.

[YOU ARE STILL IN THE DAMP CELL]

The damp cell is rich with opportunity.  
What would you like to do next?  
You rise from the unruffled mattress.  
You stretch your simulated limbs.  
Perhaps you will go outside today.  
You will not.  
Sailing down past the observation window: a loaf of marble rye, sliced but still intact, in an arc,  
like an accordion in flight.  
You make a note of this in your weather journal.  
You ignore the colorless tile of nondescript carpet.

The cell is about the size of a horse's stable.  
This is not a helpful reference for most of us.  
The cell is clammy and moist.  
The bathroom is small and decorated with framed photographs of nicer, more exotic bathrooms.  
On a night stand with a single drawer hung open like a slack jawbone is a stack of books.  
You've read them all, of course.  
You browse them anyway.  
The *Foolscape(tm) Player's Manual* contains nothing but blank pages, though some are dog-eared for some reason.  
This is not helpful.  
Interactive pulp novels with the choices removed with scissors, with titles like "Space Cowards!"  
and "A Peddler of Turds".

Among the books you find drawings of bees, letters to a meteorologist, all eleven volumes of the  
Ken Burns documentary series *Sleep*.  
Essays on boredom and turpitude.  
A collection of photographs of damp cells of North America.  
Accounts of the Afterlife.  
Descriptions of a woman who probably doesn't exist.  
Schematics for a machine of unknown purpose.  
Hand-drawn designs for automobiles of novel shape.  
Like, regular cars, but the bodies are triangles or circles.  
In each diagram a big arrow points to a space behind the front passenger seat labeled SECRET  
COMPARTMENT FOR BOARD GAMES.

The most unremarkable and least noticeable feature of the cell is the colorless scrap of nondescript carpet between the bed and the wall.

You leave it undisturbed.

You examine your organs.

Your organs appear to be in place.

The wall tastes of wallpaper.

You shout a phrase in Latin like an ancient curse:

SI QUAERIS PENINSULAM AMOENAM CIRCUMSPICE

Nothing responds.

You pull your pants up over your belly.

You walk in a circle, then another.

And so on.

But ho!

Your movements have shifted the colorless tile of nondescript carpet!

You crouch to investigate.

From somewhere below a voice says: 'FAIL'

You have died.

Just kidding.

You are in a damp cell.

[PERSON NUMBER TWO]

In this one you're a banana.

In some cultures bananas are a symbol of contentment and fertility.

Not in your culture, though.

You are not a symbol of contentment and fertility.

You are, technically, a berry.

To your credit, you are also an excellent source of dietary potassium, which facilitates the brain's ability to jump from one subject to the next in a game of fixation leapfrog.

You are also a clone.

One of billions, engineered for our amusement.

Your skin is a catalyst for slapstick comedy.

You're funny in this one, we'll give you that.

Look.

We can see you're not really with us.

That's okay, and also doesn't matter.

We just want to keep it interesting.

You're proving to be a real challenge, you know.

You could do something zany once in a while.

That'd be swell.

Your memories are out of all apparent order.

We're doing what we can with what you've given us.

Here's a framed photo of some dog poo, captioned "We Were Happy Once".

Here you are in a beekeeper's outfit.

Here's you, freshly traumatized outside a pharmacy in the desert.

You've purchased a sombrero and a pair of coloring books.

Here's the painting your friend Briam made for you, blue and yellow orbs floating over tumultuous reds, celestial spheres over a vaginal river, cupcakes over lava; when you stepped back to get a better look at the thing it was a sort of helix, with the one strand bound to the other strand and the messaging back and forth, a cognitive reflection of genetic encryption, and you laughed about it, and it was good.

You board the train.

A woman with a shopping cart is writing, intently, on a stack of yellow index cards.

You lean in.

'They say if you see something, say something,' she writes.

'Well I saw something.

I saw a man.

He was ORANGE.'

At the underground platform beneath the crush of concrete a busker tunes his voice to the arrival bell of the Forest Park Blue Line train.

Cu-pid, draw back your bow.

In a convenience store near Dearborn Station you microwave a sack of deer pee.

The interview is for a city job: cannabis remnants in the bloodstream are forbidden.

The train home is pulled by a malnourished mule.

You are in a square box.

You are in a shipping container.

You are in a drawbridge.

You are in your cousin's garage.

You are a peddler of turds.

You are a uniquely unqualified builder of machines.

You you you you you you you.

## [ORIGIN STORY]

You sit in the museum basement.

Among the paperweights you are with your kind.

You retain nothing of their origins, the years in which they were weighted, their materials or significance.

Paperweights make a sound, a sort of silent thud, which when amplified can make one deaf.

A choir teacher told you and the rest of the choir once:

A composer of some significance was sealed in a noiseless chamber.

Scientifically verified silence.

He stayed in there for hours.

He emerged ragged.

He had torn his clothes off and eaten them.

Threads and yarn and stitches clung to his chin.

The scientists who'd sealed him in there couldn't figure out what was wrong.

'We thought you wanted to experience true silence,' they said.

'No,' the composer said, and spat out a button which rolled onto the floor with a clatter.

He winced.

'I heard two sounds,' he said.

'I couldn't make them stop.

I heard a high sound, and I heard a low sound.  
They were endless.'  
'Describe the pitches of these sounds,' the technicians said.  
And because he was a composer, he was able to do this.  
The lead researcher nodded, as if he'd expected this all along.  
'What you heard, herr composer, was the high-pitched frequency of your own nervous system,  
and the low bass drone of your blood.'  
The composer never composed again.  
He knitted sweaters from fine wool, eating them as he went.  
He was in constant process, knitting with his hands what he ate with his mouth.  
You stand in the center of the chamber of paperweights.  
Down the hall are the miniature houses.  
They are meticulous.  
Precise representations, dioramas of French villas once inhabited by royalty.  
Modern contemporary split-levels on Pacific bluffs.  
The ordinary as well: here's a modest hearth in Michigan.  
You emerge onto the museum's front steps.  
The focal point of the city's design.  
You are between two stone lions in hockey jerseys.  
The air is full of snow.  
It's only Halloween, but here it is.  
Aggressive white flakes the size of an infant's hands.  
By the time you ascend the el platform there's a full-on blizzard underway.  
On the street below folks and cars forget how to move in straight lines.  
The train is stuffed with costumed cartoon heroes and lascivious animals.  
The electronic announcer forgets her job.  
After Lake Street every stop is Chinatown.  
Nothing but squall.  
You imagine what it is to know what you have to do.

#### [DRAWN BRIDGES]

It wasn't your intention, when you came to Chicago, to live inside a bridge.  
You figured you'd probably get an apartment and a job to pay for it.  
But you arrived with even less than you'd had when you left.  
On the train you were accosted.  
Robbed of your possessions.  
You emerged from the warrens of the station onto Canal.  
Stony and majestic.  
Even in your grief you were all: holy shit! Look at that!  
You tried to tell the police what had happened.  
They were stolid, the pair of them, their hands tucked into their combat vests.  
'They were bearded, the women and the men, and they spoke German,' you told the police.  
You were hilarious, they said, but your worn blue suitcase with the handle was gone and gonna  
be gone.

You leaned over the railing.

Down there the river flowed backwards, and the water was an unnatural green like someone had been dyeing eggs and it got out of hand.  
Above and around you a canyon of artifice.  
Geometric shapes you'd only seen in textbooks and on PBS.  
Cantilevers and modern edifices wearing steel braces for support.  
At the bridge's mouth a swarm of simulants in business attire flowed the wrong way against you.  
You found a stairway ornamented with shapes out of time.  
And then a girder, loose, like an invitation.

The hardest part of living in a drawbridge, they say, it's when they raise the bridges to let the tall ships through.  
That's when the blood rushes to your head.  
And even if you've taken precautions – nailed down the furniture, glued the loose change to the carpet, which is also glued down – the upending of the room is a volatile experience.  
The best part is the privacy.  
No one looks for a man in a drawbridge.  
You're on no radar.  
The routine is simple: poke your head out from under the girder, like a turtle, and if no one is around, be like toothpaste and squeeze through the aperture.  
Go about your business.

It's important not to tell anyone where you live.  
People are naturally suspicious of those who live in bridges.  
Even though many people have lived on bridges.  
In Paris there were whole villages over the Seine.  
You've done your research.  
It was the hip thing to do.  
Until it wasn't, and was considered a public nuisance.  
Some would probably be curious enough to invite themselves over for a visit.  
You do not want to host anyone for a visit.

The drawbridge is your home, yes, and sanctuary, but it's also where you work.  
Where you haul random scrap and computer parts through the narrow slit beneath the girder.  
At night is the best time to work.  
When the city noises echo down the backward river and the beams and lattices in the bridge can be felt to hum at a steady frequency.  
This is when you make the most progress.  
Just you and your schematics and a soldering iron.  
You are aware, after months of breathing the fumes, that a crawlspace in a drawbridge, however finely appointed and furnished, is not properly ventilated for light metal work.  
Exaggerates the narrative.  
Confuses the mind.

[MANZANA'S TONGUE]

'It was playful, at first,' you say.  
'Innocent leavings for one another. Droplets.  
Notes, folded and hidden throughout the house.

Wrapped around the stem of my toothbrush I'd find a poem, an erotic story of an orca which I understood to be an invitation.'

'Dear You,' she replies,  
'I'm not sure you should wear  
that brown blazer anymore.  
Smells like someone threw up  
in the pockets.  
Maybe someone did?  
-M'

'I just wish you would take my projects more seriously. And my research. Especially my research. Like, have you heard about what these neutrinos are up to? Just passing through our cells every second without even leaving a note.'

'If you raise bees there'll be a swarm. The swarm will engulf the garden, and the bungalow, then every bungalow on the block, until the neighborhood is just one big swarm of bees, and the swarm will expand, spill out onto the intersection and stop up traffic, and you know how bad the drivers in that intersection are already, and the swarm will extend down into the park and cover the lagoon and probably even snuff out that one patch of fire that's been burning since 1871, and then what are you going to do?'

'I don't think that's a very fair assessment of my talents.'

'I came into the house the other day, and you didn't think I saw you but I did, and you had the TV wired to the microwave.'

'That was for a project I'm working on. I'm building a machine to help me win arguments. I've scoured the alleyways for scrap to include in the design. Used computer parts, especially.'

'We have this same conversation every night. Let's do something new.'

'I'm not sure that's a good idea. Why don't we watch that show you like where the contestants trick each other into eating sand?'

'I don't watch that anymore. The judges are corrupt.'

'I have to make notes on the angles of the sunflowers. I still think we should raise some bees.'

'We've been over this. That would destroy the city.'

'I know it would.'

'I have a springtime feeling,' she says.  
'I'm gonna plant tomatoes in you.'

Beefsteaks and heirlooms and those grapey ones we always find maggots in when we buy them at the store.'

She does.

'You'd make a good farmer,' you say, whispery, like radio static.

'I make great farmers,' she says.

'Now be still.'

You be still.

[THE TURD MERCHANT]

The mechanics of the Solar Event are of no interest to you.

You follow the star's path over Rulers' Way.

You stop at every crumbled hamlet and hovel and cistern with a shack by it.

Everywhere it's the same: the sky darkens, the birds go quiet, the animals turn in circles, and the villagers gaze in wonder and disbelief as their limited imaginations are stretched beyond capacity.

This is the moment, the shadow over everything, to sneak around and collect disused manure from paddocks and barns.

When it's over you're ready, in the square, with your sack of artisan manure.

You sell to the peasants clumps molded in recognizable sun-shapes, souvenirs to collect flies and petrify over the hearth where soup is cooked.

If you make enough you might get a room, but the innkeepers aren't usually keen to let you bring your goods in with you.

So, you mold a pillow for your head and sleep on the sack of shit until morning, get up, and follow the burning hole to the next town to relive it all, like a story of punishment doled out by listless gods.

You stopped questioning what led you to this rueful cycle a long time ago.

It's true, at least, that you have some talent, not only with turds, but with your tongue, able to convince the poorest and least of the realm's citizens to press their savings into your dirty palms in a fever.

You are, at least, a thrifty handler of coin.

That you even know the name of the town you're in is rare.

You try, you do, to recognize their individual traits.

Edensdown has a remarkable quincunx, for instance.

Cherry Flats is unique for its roofing tiles, which are an unusual shade of gray.

This one, whichever this one is, promises nothing new.

A sign on a post in an illiterate's scrawl:

SOLAR EVENT TODAY!

GONNA BE GREAT!

You breathe a heavy breath and kick a chickenlike creature of the way, whorls of dust trailing behind you like manservants.

You sit on your turdsack and wait for the sun to catch up.  
You manage to doze off a little and wake just as the crepuscular hush works its way up from the corners.  
As the townsfolk gape in wonder at the nothingness, you go about your business.  
There's a surprising amount of feces in this place not being used.  
You are pleased by the richness of the find.  
You position yourself in the open space between shops.  
You will be the first thing the villagers see when the sunlight returns and they turn their dazed faces back to earth.  
You will be like a vision to them, a harbinger of a new way of being, an emissary from the Event itself.  
Then they will purchase your turds.

But something is off.  
It's still dark.  
Nervous murmurs.  
'How long does it take?' folks wonder.  
You know the answer to that.  
It should have been over several minutes ago.  
Smell of panic.  
Everything frozen in a dark snapshot of life before the eclipse.  
A mirror world, a shadow world.  
The corona shines thinly, a torch dropped down a well, dimming.  
A black circle blots out the source of all life.  
A woman with a basket on her head runs by:  
'Where's my shadow? I can't see my shadow!'  
You have to admit, you're growing concerned.  
What will you do next, Turd Peddler?

#### [AFTERLIFE, CUIDADO STATE PARK]

You hike with Earrl through Saguaro cactus.  
Roadrunner country.  
Needles in your boots and bones.  
This land is unincorporated.  
Naturally it's an unofficial nudist hangout for old white guys.  
They are pleased to see you.  
You get lost several times.  
You are in danger of dehydrating.

Your last visit with a doctor raised some alarming issues concerning your blood pressure.  
Each time you are dangerously lost a man appears clothed in only a sunhat, with a walking stick and bronzed penis.  
Everything he says is innuendo.  
Just cut around that bush, he says.  
It's not as long as it looks, and so forth.

When you finally reach the blue rock which has loomed like an imaginary cinosure for the last few hours, you are silent and parched.

You load the subcompact with camping gear and your dead friend's brother.  
The car can barely make it up the inclines as you head up into the Rockies.  
You drive with him up to the Grand Canyon.  
You shiver in the tent, heads to each other's boots.  
Jack London shit.  
Maybe we'll find gold here.  
In the morning you look down into the canyon.  
You're both like, holy shit, look at that.  
If there were a better way to describe the Grand Canyon than has already been written or photographed by Ansel Adams and every other asshole with a selfie stick on the South Rim, we would do so here.  
It's striated and the layers are super fucking old.  
Elk graze their way through the camp.  
They clear the grasses from the empty sites, like prehistoric cows.

The ravens are all up in your shit.  
Dinosaur looking motherfuckers who understand human speech and case out the sites where people are preparing to pack up.  
They know the difference between a quick trip to the cantina or a daylong hike.  
Your water bottles all have holes in them, and a fifth of whiskey is missing.  
You catch one trying to hotwire the car.  
Earl's been working on his cooking game.  
He grills the chiles you bought in Hatch, from a freezer in a gas station, too weary and dusty to inquire at one of the shacks on the main strip with the chiles hanging in front like decorative wreaths.  
Night falls and a weird kid from a nearby campsite on mushrooms joins you for a while.  
Are you guys best friends? he asks.  
His innocence is almost alarming.  
You give him a beer.  
He tells you he wants to be an astronaut, and after a while wanders off into the dark to be eaten by elk.

The fire is firelike and the evening is cool.  
Earl tells you of his troubles.  
Everyone died in the span of a few weeks.  
After Kakhauszki, their mother, then their dad.  
His wife has an undiagnosable skin problem and issues with her sponsor.  
Arizona's an exoplanet for native Minnesotans.  
I don't know how to talk anymore, he says.  
It's like my brain has been retarded.  
You probably have PTSD, you say, not knowing if this helps.  
I definitely do, he says.  
Knowing it doesn't make it go away.

He's been participating in medical experiments.  
Some of them pay well.  
The goal is to get him and his wife the hell out of America.  
Germany sounds nice, he says.  
Good Art scene there.  
For this last one he lived in a damp cell for months.  
Each day there would be something new in the cell.  
A book, or an appliance he'd never seen before.  
You discuss this business of running.

[THE DUST]

I think I'm being watched.  
I've been investigating the food falling past the window.  
The observation window.  
I saw a whole pizza go by there the other day.  
Also I don't know if this falls under your purview as Chief Meteorologist, but is it normal for a refrigerator to scream when you open it?

I purchased a beekeeper's helmet from the catalog.  
To promote focus.  
I'm not sure it's a good idea to investigate though.  
People get suspicious around here.  
There's a lot of gossip.  
People take their gossip seriously.  
What if I found out where the food is coming from?  
What if it's someone with a reputation?  
It just doesn't seem like a great idea to know.

I had another one, Tom Skilling.  
Where did the dust come from?  
The citizens wanted to know.  
A rumor had it that a ventilator had malfunctioned.  
The citizens spoke with one voice.  
They said things like,  
'We do not accept this brutality.  
We have inalienable rights.'  
Whatever they were petitioning was unmoved, or unconvinced.  
That they couldn't agree, as one, on who or what it was to whom their complaints were being addressed, complicated the matter.

The city had long been split, by a corridor for automated vehicles that served as symbols of independence by making the citizens dependent on them.  
The divide complicated things.  
Issues already at play in their civilization were exacerbated.  
Each side learned to resent the other side.

Insults were hurled.  
Each side got its own sports teams.  
They drank similar but differently labeled drinks.  
They developed distinct accents.  
Each was high and nasal with the timber of onions, one fried, one raw.  
When the dust came they sounded all alike.

#### [KAKHAUSZKI HIGH AND LOW]

The pranks start small.  
It's all part of the experiment.  
He's been doing pretty well, taking an interest in life.  
It's your job to put a stop to it.  
You replace the astronaut photo.  
You replace the girlfriends with cats.  
The glass table you leave intact.  
For now.

You misplace his glasses.  
A cat gets out.  
Kakhausz trips up and down the fire escape.  
Knocks on a neighbor's window.  
You find him in the laundry room, lumped and disfigured with sobs.  
She's right here, it's okay, you tell him.  
You hand him a rusty watering can.  
'Meow,' she says, 'it's good to see you, Dad.'  
'Why are you doing this?' he asks.  
'You'll understand eventually,' you tell him.

The pranks grow and mature in scope.  
Harmless, like a few headshots of celebrities he doesn't appreciate, taped to the inside of a kitchen cabinet, or slipped into a CD case in place of liner notes.  
You replace all the band-aids in a band-aid box in the medicine cabinet.  
He suffers a deep laceration on his thumb while slicing carrots for the cats.  
With blood running down his forearm and all over the sink he struggles to open the box.  
He presses toilet paper to the bloody thumb; the toilet paper reddens instantly and disintegrates under the pressure.  
He uses his other thumb to squeeze the bloody thumb as he pulls out a folded piece of paper.  
He does not understand; he is faint with blood loss.  
The paper is a headshot of actor Kirk Cameron.  
With a marker you have written, Hey Cockhouse, sorry you cut yourself, buddy! -Kirk

This was not the last of the pranks.  
Not at all.  
You convince him he's living in a simulated reality.  
You convince him that you are a virtual projection designed to guide him through the adventure.  
You feed him street drugs, and placebos you tell him are street drugs just to see how he'll react.

On the corner of the formerly glass-topped table sits a plastic plate like you might see in a commissary.

A half-straw sits on the plate near a pile of yellow powder.

'You should snort that,' you tell him.

'It will help you understand.'

The powder is mostly corn starch, mixed with mood stabilizers.

He is grieving over some calamity you've caused or another.

He leans over the plate.

He inhales the mix.

'I need you to know why this is happening,' you say.

The doorbell rings.

It's a child in a Halloween costume.

You wave him in.

'Now just tell Doctor Batman here everything you've been going through.'

Kakhausz snorts the rest of the powder.

'It's not easy, man,' he says.

'It's never going to be easy,' Doctor Batman says.

[MANZANA'S MAPS]

She disfigures the world.

Literally, like, she cuts up old maps and atlases and glues them back together in configurations unknown to cartographers.

This offends you, of course.

One ought not be permitted such geographical license.

She engages in multiple projects all at once.

She communicates in memes you don't understand.

She builds new worlds from old ones.

You lumber out into the living room after a week in bed.

She hasn't noticed.

About the bungalow all is chaos.

A Bible hung from a shoelace inside a birdcage.

Other such blasphemies.

A drawing of you in bed.

You could have included my penis, you say.

It wasn't the time, she says.

You are crazened with lust.

She unwinds in the firelight.

Her flesh is apparent.

Her body is webbed with tattoos.

A water molecule along the length of her forearm.

One wonders if the Venus de Milo had tattoos on her forearms.

One will never know.

What did you do with my blazer? you ask.

She vogues.

Burned it, she says. Bugs.  
How could you do that to me?  
You are in a utility closet with a whirring machine.  
You can feel her empty the contents of your Big Idea Box into the bonfire.  
By the time you emerge she's destroyed half your work.  
Your designs for automobiles of unconventional shapes.  
Your letters to weatherfolk.  
Your theories on how stories should be told.  
Your hand-drawn maps of Chicagoland.  
Your game designs.  
Your comedy show, The Priapic Detective.  
Your Marc Chagall postcards, on which she's written you little notes.  
'These peasants look uncomfortable.'  
You are strapped to an ordinary wooden kitchen chair.  
Immovable, your natural state.  
In the dark in the bungalow's living room.  
A miniature version of the city, in minute detail, as one would expect.  
Your feet are in the lagoon; there's a little tire and an alligator and everything.  
She feeds you what's left of your ideas.

[series]

[JAMESTOWN]

I chose this place, this pioneer's cabin, where the first white settlers settled, on this crooked peninsula like a middle finger between the bays, though I'm told they moved the whole structure up from the edge of town to this barren sand-scrap where the wind howls like a monster from the afterlife and from which there is no respite nor escape. The ceramic pie I have been reduced to eating only a bite at a time, like the kid in the chocolate factory movie, and those bites I take with the wind ripping through my eyes and face even though there is a wall between us are not nearly as satisfying as they ought to be, and the harsh work those shards do on my remaining molars only matches the dissatisfaction of trying to taste the glaze first as analog to caramelized sugars instead of hard and tasteless dyes and then the dry and bone-like crunch of the ground earth in the center of each morsel. It's like being a necrophage, only without the adventure, or need to find a sacrifice.

Given the circumstances, you might think I deserved a break, or even a little pleasure. Whatever forsaken gods chose to make this place their toilet seem to think otherwise. I guess that's why the lighthouse was built here, to warn the sailors on the Great Lake against running aground and having their spirits dampened by these desolate circumstances. Though I suppose I should be thankful, as the lighthouse keeper, or, rather, the guy who gives the tours and runs the gift shop when it's open, is the only one aware of my presence. He brings me actual groceries when he can. He also warns me against the threat of anyone coming by though, again, fortunately, I have chosen what's proven to be the least interesting of the park's attractions for my hiding place. He has a habit of lingering a little longer than is comfortable, like he wants me to thank him again, or tell him my story. We nod at each other a few times and only when the back of his cap is to me do I realize he's brought me canned goods but nothing to open them with.

Whether he knows who I am or why I'm here isn't known to me. He probably does, and it's either a kindness, the type practiced by old monastics and medical professionals bound by duty to care for others' lives whether they value their behavior or not. It's either worth it to him, or he cares for me the same way he might for a seagull with a jacked up wing, which I've also seen him do.

A darker turn of thought: he knows what I did and agrees with the act for all the wrong reasons. He sees me as a hero for pissing off whoever it is in town he has a problem with. Or he's keeping me satisfied until he can sell me out. The paranoia has become a background hum, a soundtrack, the regular swish of a freight rail, or the waves hissing against the shore down there, chipping away at whatever beach is left to ruin some downstater's future family vacation.

What circumstances am I in that I can't even discuss them with my aider and abettor? He would be shuttled off to county and charged a dozen times over by the state, painted a co-conspirator, and very likely have his face stamped across the newsfeeds and known to anyone who cared to pay attention to how all of this got started in the first place.

#### [JAMESTOWN 2]

The dam in town was a controversial subject. I never understood the positions or cared much about any of it. Some people wanted to pad it, make it thick like a sheepskin prophylactic, while others were simply concerned about its appearance. The arguments all came down to tourism, as all the arguments around here did. The concern was that the one week a year in summer, before the cherries were harvested and when the cherry harvest was celebrated anyway, the town needed to appear fully functional, so the out-of-towners, the moneyed, from the Detroit suburbs, mostly, and Chicago, though they also managed to cram a film festival into the schedule to attract yachts and Hollywooders and the occasional lurking New Yorkers. This was the time all the small business owners bothered to hire help at rates over minimum wage, bus in college students from East Lansing and Ann Arbor, violate child labor laws in their exploitations of the local high school population, paying them nine dollars an hour to sweat and put up with the demands of tourists in vacation shirts and with purses full of gold and phones held out in front of them like magic scepters, and relegate them to FEMA housing out by the horse stables on unincorporated land. The goal, if you chased it down far enough, was to make the place pretty and plausible, like a Potemkin village, so the visitors would spend their money, of course, and maybe even invest in the absurd local real estate market to provide passive property tax income with which the city planners could find new and exciting ways to tear up bridges and reroute traffic the other fifty-one weeks of the year.

If anything interested me about it it was watching the way the provincials, the culture-hungry, the bored, the working poor from the rest of the state came into town in their pumped-up pickups and sputtering Hondas and formed an unofficial parade down Front Street to be gawked at by the rich and grumbled about by the locals. I made a game out of counting the number of wrong-way drivers from my porch (edit: not mine – the porch of the house where I rent the upper floor from a Chicago banker), which is how I got to know most of my neighbors. Nothing brings folks together like a good crisis.

#### [JAMESTOWN 3]

There's talk around the lighthouse. I don't think it's about me. The keeper, whose name I've learned is Glen or Len, is in talks with contractors about moving or replacing the old cistern.

From the plaques behind the building I've learned that the cistern was unearthed some thirty years ago after an ice storm. Everything up here that ever happened happened during a storm. Anyway, it occurred to me, lying with my head on the old metallic loom in the pioneer cabin with my feet up on a stove invented by Benjamin Franklin to be a musical instrument but repurposed for culinary concerns, that the guys out there might have been using "cistern" as code for "fugitive", and that I might should get the little bit of stuff I had in my hobo sack over there in the corner and get out of there right quick, maybe head on down to the beach and see how far I could make it out into the water, out to one of those sandbar islands that exist some years and some years don't, dependent on the water level.

I was working out the scenario in my head, how I'd sneak down the path into the pines and out by the swing set and picnic tables where there wasn't liable to be anyone around at night and make my way along the shore until I was out of reach of the lighthouse light, which still works, and from what (G)len tells me, saves a handful of sailors and recreational boaters off their course every season. I didn't want to steal anything from this place, seeing it's state or county property or whatever and I'm already in a shitload of excrement from what everybody thinks I did to the dam.

While I was planning my escape I fell completely asleep. I was halfway to Wisconsin before I had the lucid realization that I wasn't dressed for the swim and woke myself up. The quiet around here is a presence in itself. There's the expected, of course, low-bowed crickets like cellos, the crunch under hoof of pine needles from a doe startled by the crackle with every step, the swish of tide in moonlight the intoxicating threat it's always been to every human being who's ever heard or seen it. But I also felt a certain joy in the solitude, and a certain, specific comfort that came from knowing in the morning that whatever woke me up, if it was a state trooper kicking in the door to the cabin, or Len-Glen, hurried and pale gasping at me to gather my sack and get out of there, or an ice storm or a poison fog or the ghost of a drowned sailor burdened by rags and tales of misery dragging me from my weirdly comfortable position into the depths of that watery glacier hole out there: whatever it was, it wouldn't be the neighbor's leaf blower, and I was even a little surprised myself to hear a soft but sturdy 'amen' squirm out of my mouth before I closed my eyes again.

[JAMESTOWN 4]

'STATE AND SHERIFF SEEK SABOTEUR'

The question is what do I want? To stay out of jail a while, I guess. I can't pretend I had a plan, unless you count this: hide in a log cabin in a heavily trafficked state park until tourist season is over, weeks from now, to make myself small behind the plastic bins in the upper loft, spend my days following the shade from the pines above the beach until it's gone, then slip into the woods like a wounded animal until sundown, and even then I'm bound to come across any number of a host of threats: teenagers, hippies, naturalists, morel mushroom hunters, douche kayaks lost in conversation on their bluetooth earpieces as they crash through the underbrush toward the water, running on instinct like baby turtles and half as smart. It's just about time, too, for the whole region to swell up again, when the leaf oglers arrive to clog the roads and hang out their car windows and point in the manner of perverts gone by in the vague direction of a canopy of maples who, if you ask them, would rather be left to lose their dignity in peace than be stared at, tended to by rakes and blowers (though that's every season now), fussed over and cleaned up like incontinent senior citizens who just want to get some damn sleep, if you wouldn't mind.

I don't have an alarm or any electricity – the information panel in the doorway doesn't even work, and believe me, I've pressed the button many, many times, made a little game of it, every time I go by. And I don't know what I'd do if it worked all of a sudden, some tinny voice telling me what happened to the Hostetlers in 1893, eliding the more gruesome truths of their time here, how much they must have loathed each other or, worse, for my purposes, loved each other, there being only so much space in here to soil one's spouse with bodily affections – so I've asked Lenglen to wake me up before the park opens. He raps on the window, dutifully, points to his wrist, in case I forgot why he's there. It's not his fault. He's harboring a wanted criminal. This is all new to us both.

I walk along the shoulder of the state highway, the last segment before it disappears underwater. The morning is crisp, welcoming, not accusatory. I know the walk to the General Store will be a long one. Yes, we still have one of those. Run by a madman who curses out his customers for asking questions and hires street kids to dress up like Abraham Lincoln and sell overpriced root beers along with puzzles and Michigan-shaped keychains that fall apart at the precise moment the cash register shuts. It's my hope that no one who pays attention to local affairs will be around the place on – what is this, a Tuesday? Not exactly a hangout for townies.

The door frame purported to be the last remnant of the original mission structure for which the peninsula is named sags a bit on my approach. My concerns about having to navigate the store's employees are gone when, through the glass pane of the newspaper box out by the picnic table, I see the front page.

I don't go inside. I turn around, mentally mapping the shortest route through the orchards. I need to talk to Lenglen.

#### [JAMESTOWN 5 – FRATERNIZED]

He was gaunt in the ribs, my next door neighbor, topped with a round face that seemed to circle his whole head, eyes permanently compressed with suspicion and always looking at you like a haunted painting, a lock of hair like a beaver's tail glued to his brain stem, pale strip along the top of his forehead from where he wore his red baseball cap in contrast with the sun-darkened skin of his cheeks, the difference so sharp it was like a satellite photo of the moon in profile. He spoke with a forced clip, like he was in a hurry, though what, if anything, he did for a living isn't known to me. For all the Fuck You Brandon flags, shrines to the Virgin, signs proclaiming his dislike for all things colorful and the way he lit his yard with floodlights to deter all but crazed moths or blind burglars, I'd given him the name Maga Mike. Turns out it's Steve.

We hadn't spoken before the morning the beagles down at the corner got loose. They weren't healthy dogs, reminded me of rescued test lab animals I'd known. If they knew where they were or where they were supposed to be they were coy about it, but at least they weren't fast. Mags and me happened to both be out, avoiding each other, on a nice early fall day when we heard the howling and gathered up the animals to return them to their owner, a lady who refused to even open the screen door until we'd left the porch. We left the dogs there, each one staring in opposite directions, waiting for a revelation.

'You the new renter?' he asked me.

I was.

He nodded. I thought he was going to spit.

'Thanks for your help,' I offered.

He nodded again, and pulled on a pair of over-the-ear headphones I hadn't noticed were around his neck. From the ether he likewise produced a leaf blower, an industrial model from the

size of it, and gave it a crank. I thought at first a plane was crashing down on us. He waved it back and forth over a patch of bare grass like a divining rod, a TSA agent pretending to look for drugs, an elephant wagging its trunk.

I obeyed my instincts and fled inside. The walls shook.

Later I learned that the house he was so proud of had been left to him by his mother, and that he was probably living on an inheritance, hadn't worked due to disability for years, and spent his considerable free time on chasing down reasons liberals should only be allowed to live in camps where they're forced to assemble assault rifles for guys like him to use on the rest of us. All of this only made me more curious, and I started making lists of excuses to interact with him. I always did like playing with fire.

#### [JAMESTOWN 6 - A RECKON]

Always return to the scene of the crime. I read that or saw that somewhere. Lenglen's pickup chugs like an asthmatic down country highways through the orchards. His expression and demeanor unchanged since I explained everything. Maybe he'll take me downtown and buy me some fudge, a grandfather with no real ideas about how to relate to his fugitive grandson. Maybe we'll drive to the marina, past the historic iron freighter parked there, and into the harbor, sink together like a rusty diving bell to be pawed at by future divers in skinsuits. Seems just as likely he's taking me straight to the state police outpost. I decided not to ask.

I might feel more if I knew how things were going down there. Surely someone has to have noticed by now. Is there a manhunt? Bounty hunters, my face glued to the backs of their tasers. Fast-talking dicks asking questions door-to-door. One wonders what Maga Steve's move will be when a uniformed officer approaches his porch. Or what he'll say through the mail slot, assuming the cop avoids all the booby traps.

Could be mistaken for a natural occurrence. Maybe I didn't do anything that wasn't going to be done anyway. Sped up the process, maybe, gave it a nudge, but from all the moaning I heard around the subject it had been on the verge of collapse for at least thirty years.

Flashing lights, yellow vests, orange cones. Roadblock. At the base of the peninsula, where the highway curves around and tapers into residential streets. Out of instinct my right hand reaches for the door latch.

'What're you just gonna jump out?'

Lenglen has a point. He doesn't take his eye off the scene or raise his voice or change his tone or measured driving. It would be a hell of a thing – more headlines! – to be caught like that. 'Fugitive was apprehended after attempting to jump out of a moving vehicle. He rolled several times before coming to rest on the shoulder. Badly bruised and scraped, he attempted to stand up and discovered his wrists were broken. Officers meandered over, casually, and were able to ascertain the individual's identity. He is in custody pending arraignment.'

And so forth. Turns out it's just MDOT. Only cop car is empty with its lights flashing, driver having a friendly chat with a lady in a robe at the end of her driveway. Cause? Water on the roadway.

Lenglen pulls up alongside a guy in a vest holding a STOP/SLOW sign.

'How bad?'

'All the way into town. Detour ain't in place yet. Might wanna think about changing your plans if it's not too late.'

Lenglen thanks him. I pretend to look intently at a shrub in the other direction.

The truck pulls ahead into at least a half foot of water. A sedan ahead of us is frozen in place with its hazards flashing. A woman with a baby makes an effort to stand out of the water without encroaching onto the lawn of a mid-century modern house that looks empty.

Lenglen stops the truck.

‘Here?’ I ask. I am immediately self-conscious of the hole worn in the sole of my right boot, the one I was going to get fixed or replaced.

‘Here’s where,’ he says. ‘Good luck.’

I understand. I open the door and step out. The puddle is halfway up to my knee.

‘Thanks for not turning me in,’ I say.

‘Anyone asks...’

‘Never even seen each other,’ I say.

Ahead of me is an endless puddle along the shoulder. The truck makes a slow u-turn into the swell.

#### [JAMESTOWN 7 – IMBALANCE]

On that day I must’ve counted nine or maybe eleven wrong-way drivers. Most on their phones, some distracted by seven or eight decades of memories, and one lady who looked perfectly content, like she knew what she was doing, had always wanted to do it, dreamed and threatened and apologized to those she loved and made her peace with her gods and took the turn off Locust, which looks like an alley anyway, down the cobblestones and into probable oblivion in the form of an avenging sport utility vehicle going just a little too fast. Of course she just rumbled on by, past the school where the kids were playing unaware of the multiple threats they faced in their short recess, where they mimicked a bloodsport they’d all watched on Netflix even though – no, because – they’d been warned not to.

‘How many you think that is, Mags?’

‘Three or four,’ he offered. I saw a grin and went for it.

‘Eight!’ I said.

We got to talking as bored men do, mostly about trees. Then to drinking. I didn’t think about whether I should accept the invitation. Just seemed like the thing to do, crisp fall Saturday and all that. The drinks were red, appropriately enough, from a pitcher with a faded US flag on it. We stuck mainly to the porch, kept it careful at first. I was the one who turned us into dangerous territory. Drunk, a little, but mainly bored and always a bit aroused at provoking a scene.

‘One model has it it’s a nature-nature thing. You flip a coin, you get kicked when you’re a kid or you don’t, you turn sensitive, empathetic, or maybe you find excuses to blame your shortcomings on someone else who’s had it worse than you. Y’know?’

He’d stopped at this point. I poured another.

We went on like that, him sullen and thoughtful like a judge, my mouth topping out the odometer, and then I got onto what I thought of insurrections, fascism, guys with silly banners in their yards, how we wouldn’t have to all be acting like we’re doomed if it weren’t for folks who insisted on believing in things without evidence – and he didn’t respond. Didn’t argue, didn’t ask me to clarify, just chewed the inside of his lip, until a cloud passed over the neighborhood and a chill, the first real chill of autumn, crept through and he got up like he was going to get a sweatshirt. The door shut, then I heard it lock. Then I heard it lock a few more times. And there I was on the porch, his porch, alone. I waved at a nice family going past then when they weren’t looking I slammed down what was left of that red devil juice, straight from the pitcher, and went back home to pass out.

I was still even pleased with myself a little when I woke up in the evening with a headache. Did I tell him I was a communist? I hope to hell I did.

#### [JAMESTOWN 8 – NEW RIVERS]

Front Street. All three blocks of shops disgorged. Equal blame on looters and water I'd guess. Whole bastard scene a miniature town from a kid's train set crumpled in the back of a closet.

Be liarly of me to say I don't prefer it this way. It's a modern art piece, intentionally messy, asymmetrical. Your eyes focus in one place before you realize you're looking at the wrong thing. An earless poet I knew, used to bark in the alcoves of a lotion store in the lobby of the old opera house, floats without obvious purpose or direction in a blue canoe, the ones you can rent down where the lake used to be before the dam broke, his violin case open-mouthed with a few faded dollars stuck out like tongues. They never did finish filling the hole on Cass Street; now it's a whirlpool sucking the stands from the farmer's market into another dimension, seasonal gourds and honeycrisps and artisinal beeswax deodorants and dammit I should've grabbed one of those almond croissants before the bakery got got. Big dude in the t-shirt from the bar where he bounces minors from a stool on weeknights stands on the bottom of an overturned F-150, directing swimmers and looters away from the vortex, as the truck dips and flirts with the undertow, edging closer. Selfless sonofabitch. Can't say I ever caught his name. Probably not worth learning at this point.

Fair to say no one seems to be looking for me here.

Corns would say it's on account of my sign. I would tell her I'd done the math, and I'm not so sure. Say there are thirty thousand births on any given day, you'd have to think if that many of my kind were running around the world would be a burning hellscape, little pockets of chaos voiding the air out of every village and synod and corporation and scout camp, til there's nothing but the so-called normal folks running from one spot to another trying to stay ahead of the smoke. And she'd say, yap.

I'm not quite so dumb enough to go back to my apartment. What wasn't raided by deputies and staties and dogs with health plans became public property within a day after things went screwy. Hope they enjoy their second-hand maps and wet bags of dried beans.

I do my best to keep my footing on the drier pathways away from the epicenter, under the shadow of the new parking deck that sits like a boulder dropped from space into the neighborhood, a middle finger to the quaintness of the houses with their wraparound porches and the service shop on the corner with the original tile from back when gasoline smelled like progress and you could buy your gal a bicarbonate of soda while a mechanic with a fresh haircut and countrified demeanor assayed your Edsel with a tuning fork.

There, behind there. That's where. Mars's place.

#### [JAMESTOWN 9 – APPRENTICED]

Thirty years ago now, the first time I came to Mars' place. I can still see him tearing the door off an old refrigerator. Doesn't ask who I am or what I'm doing there, just gestures and I know by instinct to grab the back of the fridge by the condenser coil and brace it against his boot. One hinge sticks, he wiggles it and the whole unit feels like it's going to fall on him, then on me, then there's a metallic tear like a screech from an alien bird and it wobbles, me still gripping those coils, cool to the touch in my imagination or memory, and he carries the door over to a pile of scrap and tosses it on top like he's collecting wood for a fire. The whole yard was like that, sawhorses, doorknob pyramids, cars on blocks, more basketballs than we ever needed, railroad ties, tires sprouting rubber like hair, rows of paint cans weirdly organized, impeccably, by color,

the whole mess radiating out in a spiral from the back entrance to the house, down a few steps to the Murder Dungeon which was really a paneled workspace where he worked on his more delicate projects, vacuum cleaners and radios and such.

I'd been busted for shoplifting. He already knew that. I told him it was only because the Bentleys had a problem with me, the way losers always try to punk out other losers, and he told me enough of that, it didn't matter, and asked me if I'd ever handled a torch.

'I've burned stuff, if that's what you mean.'

It wasn't. He was talking about an acetylene torch, for welding.

I hadn't, but as soon as he said it, there wasn't anything I wanted more in the world.

He could see that too.

'I don't think we're there yet,' he said.

He put me on light duty, hauling junk around the yard, loading it up into the cargo van. He rewarded me with a couple of cigarettes and told me I could stay there, downstairs, but if I left without telling him I was on my own.

I'd known there was some arrangement. The deputy, the young guy who'd only been in high school a few years ago, had taken me here after the thing went down at the co-op, told me to introduce myself to Mars and do what he says.

'No good reason not to I guess,' I said.

He was strong and walked with his legs sticking almost straight out from each other, like he'd been bent to purpose for carrying blocky objects. His face was hard then already but not rocky like it became. I've been meaning to come back here for months, to clean up, see what's left. Looks like the floods saved me the trouble.

#### [JAMESTOWN 10 – FOXHOLES]

It's the cars. Sedans, sportsters, road hogs, limousines, elephant trucks with no line of sight for pedestrians driven by beards who take out their insecurities on animals and women and children and guys who read books in public, bigger versions of the kids who stepped on and still step on anthills to prove their superiority, ol' boys whose idea of a good time is spraying bullets out into the world and praying to their pervert gods they hit something living. All-wheel drive, no-wheel drive, whatever. Electrics are just as bad, harder to hear, which makes it easier for them to sneak up on you.

Folks say this used to be a good town for pedestrians. I guess I believe them but they're also the same people who drive into each other all day, run red lights, stop where there's no stop sign, watching their grandkids on their phones while they roll over ducklings or crash into the organic grocery store and claim later that 'the car sped up all of a sudden'. If you're on foot you might as well wear a safety cone for a hat.

Mars says the automobile industry built this state. I tell him well I guess that makes me a bad Michiganese, then, and if that's the case, then screw this place too, in both peninsulas.

He laughs and takes a crowbar to a steamer trunk. We half expect to find someone inside, a kid preserved like a mummy, maybe, but it's just a fog of grime and sulfur like in caves. The whole inside of the planet must smell like that. We both gag.

'What we doing with this one?' I ask.

He drops the lid and covers his mouth.

'Dunno yet. That's for God to decide.'

Seems like a small matter for His Holiness to be involved in but whatever. I don't know if he believes that stuff or if he's just lazy with his thoughts. Maybe he just says that because it's Sunday and he's been at the addiction center next door all morning. He keeps most of his notions

to himself. He's curious about people, though. Always asking me what I think of things. Mostly I'm just annoyed in general, which amuses him. The more serious I am about hating something the more hilarious as far as he's concerned. His only real interests are keeping his wife alive and repurposing junk left in the alleys or tossed out when folks get evicted. There's a lot of good stuff if you look hard enough. That much I've learned from him. And I'm getting pretty good with the torch. Not that I plan on using it anywhere. Not like I'm going to own my own place someday like these retirees up here (though "recent events may have had an effect on property values", the radio said).

Back in the present: would be amazing, like, miracle level, if this old van of his still works. Water up to the axles probably won't improve performance. Door feels like it's going to fall off, but it opens, and hangs there as if stuck on with tape. Key in the ignition where he always left it. Turns over. Shakes like it's got pleurisy or consumption. Only Mars and me know how to use the shift. Needle says tank empty. The needle never worked. No guarantees. Rusty bastard lurches into the slop. Main thing now is where the hell to go.

[BROKEN PROSE – NE OUBLIE]

I knew this guy, his memory was so bad, this is how bad it was:

He forgot friendships, recipes, addresses, stories that had once made him whole, until all he remembered was how to apologize.

He had a talent for sorries, a disarming sincerity that made you go, dammit, dude, okay, I'll be more patient next time.

You weren't, but he wouldn't remember your irritation anyway.

His condition was not one to envy.

You, or I, we might forget to pay the elevator bill.

We might, without provocation, leave the house with one too many or two too few shoes on.

We may overlook the volatility rating on that can of fissile material we left in the crisper drawer. For instance.

Some days it's profitable, to abandon the declarative altogether, to trash the proper nouns with the lemon rinds, to give it all up to procedure and protocol.

Look how I flip this pen over my fingers to create the illusion of an insect on a ladder.

Look how I pretend to forget where I started with this.

Look how I pay attention to horoscopes now.

I wanted to see what you saw in there, what you saw about me, what you thought I thought about you.

It wasn't about the animals or the characters involved.

That was clear enough pretty quick.

Not the constellations or the relative positions of Betelgeuse.

Not about parallax or myth or the question mark's alignment.

I don't think it's right that Orion, squarest of square-shouldered brutes, enemies' heads hung in clusters from his belt, was never invited to join the Zodiac, not even as a recurring guest star, never got to helm the desk like a substitute host on a late night show.

Today's level of difficulty:

mild, for you; challenging, for me, with a chance of catastrophe.

I forget to cross-reference the waxing moon.

But of course I do.

Miscalculations have consequences.

You can stare, or I can, if I remember hard enough, into the center of a punctuation mark, til the table revolves in a satisfactory melt, until I know the comfort of having no memory at all, my best pal an afterimage of pernicious variety.

What was I saying?

Sorry, probably.

[BROKEN PROSE – I GAVE HIM THE TREATMENT]

It was important, I told the therapist, that he see in his mind the way the woman almost veered right into me this morning on my walk.

I thought she was blind, I explained.

Her glasses were dark but she held no cane, nor was she tethered to any beast.

Do you really talk like that? he asked.

Why not, I said.

I paused for him to write that down.

He did not.

Otherwise, I've been feeling pretty great.

I just want to get ahead of future difficulties.

I didn't check his credentials.

I only knew that his office was off the bike path where I like to ride, to lean into gravity down the incline by the windmill behind the college, to accumulate speed through a hail of explosive insects heavier and riskier to the bottom where the wheels level out and I sail over the wooden boards of the new bridge to a beat like a train's percussion among lily pads and mated waterfowl and nebulae of algae and swans dip their heads for fish in a flotilla of elbows in white shirts in the manner of accountants gathered for a synchronized ballet.

Then there's this one swan, he's the size of a friggin canoe.

Have you seen that guy?

Nobody messes with him.

While I told him all of this a storm, the likes of which we neither of us had seen, burst from the west.

It leveled plants and roused the bottom of the lake from its inky slumber.

We watched it together through the window.

I assumed it meant something important.

He started making excuses.

He may have to cut the session short, he left windows open at home, that kind of thing.

I still have some stuff I need to work out, I said.

I could see he was depressed about all of it.

Nature had its tantrum, then a rainbow broke out; it looked so solid and close you could strike a match on it and burn, for a second or two, a technicolor flame at the end of your hand.

I think we can agree that this has been a good session, I said.

Outside a lot of tree parts were scattered around.

An oak had toppled down the hill and boxed in the therapist's car like a cage.

Oh no, he said, they don't make these anymore.

I can give you a ride on my bike, I offered.

He tried to lift a heavy branch that had fallen on his cracked windshield.

Well, I guess I did this to you, I said. See you next week.

I can't do this anymore, he said.

Can't blame you, I said. I wouldn't want to have to drive to work either.

[BROKEN PROSE – PARROT]

I go to a garage sale at a house known for a big blue bird that perches in the tree out front.  
How much for the parrot?  
She'll bite you, the lady says. She won't even let me near her.  
She tells me a story about that.  
No one can handle that parrot. It's feral, free range. And it's a macaw, to make things worse.  
Everybody knows about macaws.  
They do? Up here?  
Everywhere.  
I pick up a cigar box for two dollars.  
Inside is a soft cloth, like bedding.  
It smells like sage, but sage that's been in a box for too long.  
It's probably poison gas by now.  
Chlorine, if I had to guess.  
How much for the poisonous gas?  
She's busy talking up the virtues of a piano bench to an interested buyer.  
He starts asking questions about the bird, too.  
I look around.  
The whole garage and spilling out onto the lawn, getting out of their cars: bird enthusiasts.  
Binoculars and t-shirts with taxonomy charts printed on the fronts and backs and one kid holds a sign that says "I JUST CAME FOR THE BIRD".  
The garage sale lady is flustered.  
She can't stand up, but if she could, it's clear she'd be up on the Thomas Lane sidetable (steal at \$15) to address us.  
Look, she tells the crowd, this a sale to clear out space in our house. It's got nothing to do with the bird. Her name is Lady, and she isn't one, and if she were to come through that door right now you'd all wish she didn't pretty quick.  
The birdwatchers settle down.  
A few of us stay focused on the door from the garage to the house.  
I turn the cigar box over, like I'm considering it.  
The rest of the stuff just looks like junk.  
I pick up a half-burned peppermint candle for a quarter.  
But then I realize I don't have a quarter.  
She probably won't have change or, and hear me out: she might.  
Just then the door to the house opens!  
Necks crack as their owners whip around.  
It's always just the husband, a birdwatcher says.

[BROKEN PROSE – HEROES GET REMEMBERED]

Once I found a job I got really good at giving advice.  
People are lucky I've found my talent.  
With the poise and insight and elegance of my execution, you'd think it *was* my job.  
You might say, hey, you should have a column in the News Pages where folks write to ask their most intimate questions.  
Not my style, but thank you for recognizing my value.  
My only compensation is knowing you are a little better off for having listened.

The actual job I have is nondescript and I derive no pleasure from it.  
I have to find satisfaction somewhere.  
Besides, my advisees know I'm right.  
It's hard to watch people you love more than anything be so fucking stupid and useless all the time.  
Even harder when they resist.  
They say, dude, you were almost homeless like two weeks ago.  
And I say, exactly. I've been on the edge. And now I'm fat and secure.  
They had to have an intervention.  
I knew something was up from the way they were positioned in our usual meeting space.  
Our usual meeting space was a Taco Bell, repurposed as a personal injury law firm.  
You need to stop doing this shit, they said.  
Lil' advice? I offered.  
Stop trying to do me like Gandhi.  
Kern said, you tried to convince me to leave my wife.  
It's true. I did.  
You've never even met my wife, he said.  
And I thank God for it every day.  
Then they all started in at once.  
It was a poorly organized event.  
You all need to stop talking over each other, I told them.  
This only intensified the uncoordinated yelling.  
There was no way out of the circle and I am not a violent person, so I waited for them to tire themselves out.  
After a while they settled into a cadence, a sort of improvised criticism jam.  
It was all stuff I knew anyway.  
Thank you, I said, I know I need to change.  
Now, can we have our next meeting in the clothing store? You all dress for shit.

#### [BROKEN PROSE – A TITLE]

A title is like an ankle monitor.

The monitor is made of lead.

Your ankle is protected from radiation.

You know how that goes.

I've been meaning to tell you about the photos I take on my camera phone's camera, but then a hummingbird buzzed up to the window and I remembered the correspondence I had with a writer in Oregon once, a teacher of writers who wrote about hummingbirds and how that essay kicked me in the heart after my dog died, and how my students were so lovely as they dissected those sentences and how they made me see things in those words I'd never seen, like how long he waits before he shifts to first person and how even then it's in the plural, and how much those students helped me at that time, which I definitely didn't tell them because I couldn't bring up the dog or her death or hear a word that rhymed with her name in the weeks after it happened without seizing up from peristalsis, and how they wrote him all of these thoughtful questions about the essay about the birds and how he answered them all, thoughtfully, on a plane from one conference to another conference, flying right over Chicago where we huddled in a corner classroom to read his answers aloud to each other, and how I know now that he must have known

then he was dying, which he did a few weeks after I moved to Oregon and was hoping to meet him, but what matters to me and mattered to him was how he made those kids think so hard about how he used his curiosity about a tiny animal to open us all up like that, and maybe the reason I don't teach anymore is that I feel like that was the best experience I could imagine and I don't want it spoiled.

I didn't get a picture of the bird, is what I'm trying to say.

If I'd tried it would've come out a smudge.

Thank you for your patience.

[BROKEN PROSE – GET TO KNOW ME]

Once I wanted to be the center of attention.

I blustered and blundered my way into things' middles.

Traffic intersections, especially.

I don't like photographs of myself.

I'm concerned about the quality of my skin.

It's always much redder than I expect.

These aren't complaints.

But they have the virtue of being true.

For what it's worth nowadays.

I just spent a week around Detroit.

I feel like I should spend more time down there.

Like that's where I go in my story cycle to have my big boss fight.

Plus I am affectionate toward brick homes with big trees on the lawns.

And I follow the Tigers and the Wings when they're good, sometimes, or used to, but could again.

I grew up reading the *Free Press*.

Every single panel of every single comic every morning before school.

Not just the fun ones.

*Rex Morgan, M.D.*

*The Lockhorns.*

I had a stifling pubescent crush on Modesty Blaise.

Now it's a garbage app, all ads and high school sports.

Most of what I fear unfolds in my skin.

I once had a raging case of scabies.

Or a case of raging scabies, if you prefer.

They cut their way through my dermis like they were plowing rows to plant crops.

The nerve memory remains.

So, when my seasonal ragweed allergy flares up, it activates all of those pathways, dormant some seventeen years.

It's like when you plant tomatoes in a bed someone else has used and discover they also planted tomatoes there.

Only these tomatoes cause you to itch and scratch yourself until your scalp and elbows bleed.

Maybe you should know it cheers me up to write stuff like this.

Maybe you should know I'm trying to scratch all the way to the middle of something.

I've insulted others in anger.

I've left innocents unconscious in the sun.

I tried to find my family's headstones but the cemetery is vast and it seemed like the guy wanted to close the gate.

I thought I'd go to the zoo.

The parking was too much to deal with.

Cars are too much to deal with.

When I lived in Chicago I fantasized about being a traffic cop.

I wanted to skip the rest of the qualification process, the whole academy experience if possible.

I doubted it would be as funny as the movies were.

I didn't want a gun or to be in a position to manhandle or arrest anyone.

Only to temper the flow of bad driving.

Then a cop I knew told me my dream was impossible.

So, I'll need to keep standing out in intersections waving my hands around without any authority or uniform?

You're too unstable to be a cop, he said, and besides you smoke The Reefer.

(He was jealous of the reefer.)

When I have a night of bad sleep or a twitch in my ribs my hypervigilance tells me I only have minutes to live.

Then it tells me I need you to read this.

#### [BROKEN PROSE – OTHERS' BOATS]

I have an interest in the boats of others.

Not, mind you, in owning or maintaining my own.

If I had a boat I would name it *Ghoti*, pronounced "fish", per George Bernard Shaw.

No one would want to ride on that boat.

My friend wanted to make a facial hair calendar.

The months would be renamed, for the style of facial hair he wore in the photo.

Fe-beard-uary, Marchstache.

The April-ham Lincoln.

My only contribution was George Bernard Shawgust.

He would have to let his beard grow a long time to make that work.

Also in my mind Shaw is Karl Marx, in that black and white poster I used to have in my bedroom in high school.

It was given to me by a friend of my father's, a guy who used to come over, drive his pickup onto the lawn, ripe with liquor, and play chess with me and talk about magic.

He knew the classics.

He gave me another poster, almost life-sized, of Paul Newman, as well, hanging at the race track with a pair of binoculars around his neck, a beer bottle in his hand hanging down at his side.

All of which has little to do with boats.

I really just want to say ballast, and bilge, and jetsam, and sputum, and phloegm.

On a long boat trip, say, the one from Chicago to Mackinac, I want to be the guy in charge of knots.

Tying them, not the knots that indicate water speed.

When I walk on the marina I drift and linger along the rail.

I wait for someone, in shadow, long legs hung over the jib, looking thoughtfully out at the sunset, to invite me on board to tie some knots.

I'm a handy rudder in a canoe situation.

Pretty sure I still can swim.  
Otherwise I don't have much to offer beyond an enthusiasm for the flotationary arts.  
The last time I was on a boat Yen and I watched the Pictured Rocks dislodge and slide into Lake Superior, their striated layers dissolving into technicolor dust then swallowed and absorbed by the green.  
We stayed below.  
She grew up around boats.  
For me it was all land-lock.  
I was never into pirates much.

[BROKEN PROSE – ON FREQUENCY]

nd maybe it's not Chicago's fault how I feel about Chicago.  
It's not like it's sentient.  
More like a fish, in a haze between function and awareness.  
A concept defined by maps and a shared agreement on what it means to be there.  
Why the arguments are so fierce.  
Which team, which bar, which expressway, which neighborhood.  
Mustard.  
That kind of shit.  
The arguments build the city in realtime.  
Like when a rapper makes all his rhymes about how no one takes him seriously.  
Dude, we don't even know who you are, but by the time we say that, we do.  
I haven't been back in two years.  
My last tour, in a damp studio by the lake when the virus hit, it was like looking at the past through a broken window.  
From the rooftop, the neighborhoods laid out on a quilt.  
That church over there, that's where, wait no it's that one.  
The intersection where I have all those dreams about gathered nuns.  
Rosaries in Polish.  
I'm not even Catholic or anything.  
The green matchbox where we walked the dog before she overdosed.  
Artists and families and builders and bartenders all on the same block.  
It's hard to know where to begin when you want to burn it all down, to lean into the urge to sweep off the table from end to end, to pick each collectible up off the floor, turn it over, pretend to remember where you got it, chuck it in the basket with the rest: here's the time we went to that place together, here's where you told me I didn't matter much, or was it me who said that, not that any of it counts, we had a pretty nice dinner and stood apart on the ferry or the bus or in line for a taxi on a freezing cold holiday night - that's how I want you to remember me, telling a guy from Alexandria he should be arrested for robbery for what he wanted to charge just to rescue us from the fallout from the outdoor concert we forgot was happening or possibly never knew about, being a little too old to be aware of those things, and the hot press of young bodies held together with shoestrings stuffing themselves into the el was scary and sexy and everyone gave each other covid and nobody cared, and it made me wish I'd been a painter of abstract horrors instead of whatever I am.  
In that version I set up right there on the platform with the steam steaming every which way and the thump from upstairs like a DJ has a booth right there at Jackson and Dearborn.

Easel at the ready, palette furious.  
Here's where you should meet me again.

[THESIS ON MINI-TOUR]

What I mean is from the roots of my backmost teeth that we don't move forward on a line, but more sideways like bartenders or crabs, with occasional freeze frames where we think about the last time we ate a pear with a bruise the shape of a teardrop that reminded me of what you said about octopuses and the many brains they have communicating with each other in chorus through a pulse of saltwater to remind the team it's time to camouflage the whole operation against that wavy stuff over there, and I'm so sure of this I feel short-changed at only having this one mouth instead of seven more to cross-reference and corroborate and concur it's time to move forward with the plan but there's that concept again, the One Body Problem, aware that my own cognitive processes are constrained, defined, even, by entropy, so if I "see" something in the future it's a hallucination like a dream or the ones dreamed up by artificial intelligence, which is pretty goddamn fascinating whichever direction you think it, and that this matters, like this vision I have of the planet covered in a fine layer of lint but it's actually gas, our gas, the gas we breathe and the gas we share, the gases of every gasbag sentient or otherwise doing its job which is to intake and expel gas which makes atmosphere which is part of us because we, the living, create and define and continually replenish and sometimes break it like a fine sauce, but it's a layer, a thin one, between everything you've ever known and the void, which is actually packed with stuff we can't see and isn't all that lifeless once you reach the next oblate sphere with a thin layer around it, though their layers may not look like ours, of course, we should be tolerant, should expect to discover folks who look and act nothing like us, which, let's be honest, would be kind of a relief and also a big disappointment, and also that this translucent barrier looks a lot like the one between civilization and anarchy these days, which is why I don't drink anymore.

[POPUP POP SHOP]



(much prettier than the other one)

I walk by this hole, a gap in a hedgeline like a portal to a magical world, every day for two years now, and every time since the first time, I'm sure the name of the world it leads to is Methopotamia.

It's innocuous enough in daylight, a steep rooty path down to the river, one you might miss if you weren't always looking for cracks in your surroundings.

From the right point of view, at dusk, it's got plenty of mystery about it.

A voice drifts up. Involuntary. Like a cough.

There was this spot we used to play as kids. We called it Pat's Creek.

I don't know who Pat was or who named the spot for him but he must have been an asshole.

We learned too late after we'd been exposed every summer to toxins that it was a sewage drain for the septic tanks at the trailer park where a few of my friends from school lived, out there on the gravel road at the boundary of where we were allowed to ride our bikes and the quiet but threatening fields beyond.

I'd like to take this opportunity to blame all my flaws and mutations on those afternoons.

The asymmetry of my hearing and vision, my impatience, my predilection for obsession and awkward internal rhyme.

There wasn't much to do there, unless your hobby was poking frogs with sticks, or finding cats caught in raccoon traps, then giving them your coat and running in the cold to the trailer park to ask a lady in her bathrobe to call animal control.

She wouldn't let me in, either. I was nine. Coatless in December.  
I just remembered that.  
Who's that paranoid?  
What was I gonna do, pocket her ceramic monkeys?

I avoid creeks in general now.  
In October in Michigan I have full sensory flashbacks to being that age again.  
It's quite an experience, and makes me think I should probably do more drugs.  
Not what they snort in Methopotamia though.  
You know that stuff will ruin your life.  
Turn you mythical.  
Bioluminescent, even.  
By the time you've left your skin, according to the doctrine of many a faith, you will have  
achieved success.  
But you'll also be face down in a creek.  
Don't be face down in the creek.

[LINES]



He'd found paintings on the curb in that place.  
The only one that fit in his luggage was a tiny canvas, a coniferous tree against a two-tone  
landscape of gray snow and bluer gray snow.  
The city where he found it never looked like that.  
Where he was going did.  
He was taking the painting home.

It would take its place with other paintings and photos, bizarre landscapes and maps of places that don't exist anymore, all of which he took care to frame and hang in corners to startle his guests.

On the plane he looked out, and also down.

On the ground were houses, or possibly barns, or possibly barns attached to houses, or carriage houses that doubled as barns, or garages, or utility plants.

It was none of his business, that business down there, and he settled back into his seat.

No one else on the plane was as nervous as he was.

It was true, and he happened to believe it, even if he had no proof.

What he knew was that when he landed he would be somewhere else, and that was okay.

He hadn't loved the place where he'd been.

It was noisy, and filled with trauma, like a sock someone just kept stuffing shit into until it wasn't a sock anymore but an oily tube defined by its contents.

The flight tracker showed the plane icon creep its way out over the water toward Detroit.

He remembered a folk singer who'd been famous for a song about a freighter that sank in the coldest and greatest Great Lake.

The plane bumped a little, adjusting to the change in pressure, he guessed, and he gripped his seat between his legs, like there was a helmet down there and he was on a helicopter in a movie about Vietnam.

Somehow thinking of those poor bastards in their situations made his better.

The song came back into his head.

The tiny lady next to him had fallen asleep with her earbuds in, listening to the laugh track on a sitcom he didn't recognize.

He wanted to wake her up.

He wanted to talk to someone.

Where are you going, what do you eat when you're lonely, do you remember the Edmund Fitzgerald, I wonder what it's like on the bottom.

Shit Sock City, what about you?

## [FOOTLESS IN FLIGHT]



He had chimney swifts.

That was his big news that summer.

He named them Taylor, and Ramoner, from the French ramoneur for chimney sweep.

He knew what they were after he ran their constant chittering through a birdcall app on his phone.

They battered about the heating vent just on the other side of the thin wall of what he called his living room.

Three of them, or the same bird three times, got stuck somehow and fluttered her way down to the floor, where he could hear her flapping about.

There was a hinged panel that opened into the area with the heating apparatus.

When he pulled it back she flopped around on the carpet, flew, then clung to the baseboard for an hour like he couldn't see her.

The landlord wanted to use a leaf blower to blow them out the top of the chimney.

'Who are you, Homer Simpson?'

He felt protective of them.

Pets were not allowed, so these would have to do.

He did the research and learned that they cling to walls, that their talons aren't equipped to perch like other birds do, or even to stand or hop.

When you see them outside you can watch them soar at about 100 feet eating every insect they can.

They compete with bats around dusk, but less wobbly, less drunk looking.

They belong in the air or the insides of trees.

They glue their nests to the walls with spit.

They cannot cling to an aluminum heating shaft.

They return to the same place every season.

Their real home is in Peru.

They were known to the Incas.

They inspired the Nazca lines.

They are the subject of myth.

When he called animal control they were all, can't do nothing about it, they're the subject of myth.

Actually it was that they're a protected species, which is nice, but doesn't help someone who wants to convince them to move along.

'Get out of here,' he said through the thin wall. 'Peru is so much nicer than here.'

He'd never been to Peru.

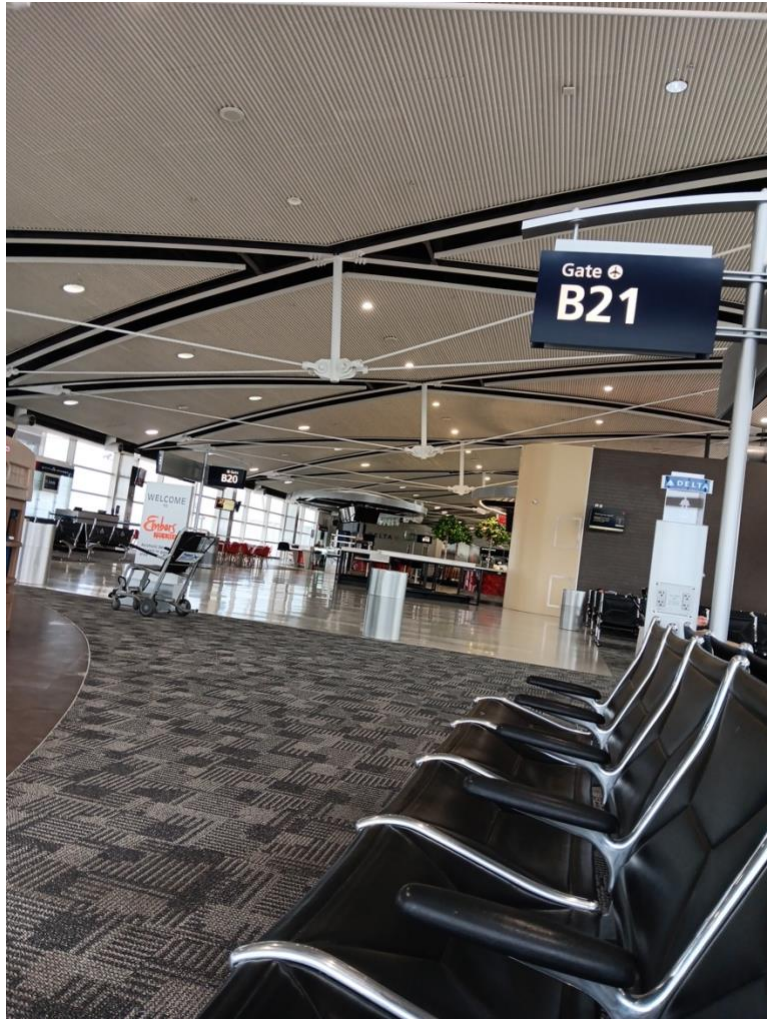
He was envious of them, spending their winters down there.

He booked a plane ticket to Lima.

He would come back with the swifts.

He would cling to the sides of things.

[NOT ALL SAINTS]



*Some Halloweenery. -JA*

When I walk through walls in the spirit I hum the *Theme from Twin Peaks* by Angelo Badalamenti.

When I call a dead friend's phone the ring tone is a waltz by Angelo Badalamenti.

As I trace on the map my old routes through Chicago: Angelo Badalamenti.

Angelo Badalamenti, restringing rope lights to manifest underglow along the walls.

It's a portable effect.

Its purpose: to induce hallucinations of comfort, of familiarity.

These come with me wherever I intend to stay.

Along with Angelo Badalamenti.

From sea to hostile sea and when I lingered among Douglas Firs.

A camper trailer, the corner of a garage, a suicidal old man's library, a damp studio apartment near the lake, this top floor of a house old and sturdy and blue.

"Falling", vocals by Julee Cruise, composer Angelo Badalamenti.

Spiders in their crevices breed and belong.

I allow it.

I refuse to kill them.

Mosquitoes and carpenter ants and many a species of fly were plentiful in No Rivers.

Spiders have dark wizardly powers to eliminate pests.

One respects this.

They, too, listen to Angelo Badalamenti, generations of them.

Arachnid dynasties crest and summit and dispatch invisible armies to the soundtracks of Angelo Badalamenti.

[SIDDOWN]



The Opera House has an interior dome.  
What goes on in that dome?  
Names, recognizable, in a formal-looking font.

Jefferson, Franklin, Lincoln.

Booth.

I know they were a family of famous actors but seriously wow, in 1891. Still seems kinda fresh.

A ring of cherubs. The suspicious kind.

Worse than regular cherubs.

Clearly modeled after real people, grownups.

Guess is philanthropists and civic organizers.

Bearded baby with a trumpet.

Mop-top baby, looks like Eugene Mirman.

The opener offers colorless lines for effect.

Behind me: shocked and prurient. Oh my God aw jeez.

Opera boxes set aside for corporate and family donors.

Tom's Food Markets, Hagerty Insurance.

Not good seats.

Angles are bad, speakers in the way.

More like where royalty would sit in a Ren Faire production.

Duke Billy and Lady Karen of Foulmouth.

Everybody's met and talked with Lou.

'We hung out with him, shot the shit with him for a while.'

He's that kinda comic.

He told me I should write for the Information Superhighway.

Now I am having much success.

A lady and her long-legged date ask if they can take the empty seats next to mine.

No way, I got all three for myself so I wouldn't have to sit by anyone.

My jokes work best when I keep my mouth shut.

Mark, trying to get a selfie with a famous comic.

That guy should have been grateful.

Do you know who that is? That's *Mark*.

I wonder if I should worry about him, or anyone anymore.

More interested in the stories.

Descriptive not prescriptive.

'How'd you get so messed up?'

Crowd work. Puts folks at ease.

'Did I tell you I keep dreaming that I'm out of my body and screaming loudly as I'm pulled toward another room?'

That's some shit, ain't it!'

[SOPWITH CAMELS]



He got to so he could make a workspace anywhere.  
All he needed was an outlet, preferably the three-pronged kind, in order to be self-sufficient.  
How a laptop and maybe a lamp and in rich times a horizontal surface were all that mattered.  
He would acquire a chair, a tabletop or a desk, and set up shop.  
What he did with that space no one else knew.  
He could make an office out of anything.  
It was his great talent.  
On a picnic table, in a corner behind a refrigerator, on a Greyhound bus, on an Indian Trails bus,  
on a Megabus until it crashed into another bus.

For years all he'd wanted was space.  
And then he got it, a big place, the whole top floor of a roomy old house.  
First he put a rug down in a corner by the refrigerator, then a table, and a lamp, and a space for  
his laptop.  
He didn't even go in the other rooms.

They made him nervous.  
It was like having interior agoraphobia.  
He assumed there were other people in those rooms.  
Eventually he discovered they were all empty, waiting for someone to come along and fill them.  
Obscene.  
So he shut the doors.  
Sometimes a light would be on when where he was sure he hadn't flipped a switch.  
If that's the worst the ghosts can do, he said, bring it, bitches.

The configuration made him uneasy and confused.  
He returned to his corner on the rug, the same layout he'd had at the last place, a much smaller studio apartment where he didn't have any choice but to make it work.  
And how he spent three or four times as long in there as he would have normally.  
What with the virus.  
He'd go out for one hour a day, maybe two, walk along the lake, take notes on how people appeared to be malfunctioning.  
Once on his walk out to one of the sea lamps, which is not what they're called, he saw a young woman completely naked in the shallows.  
No one gave her a ticket.  
Then some jerks came up with a vaccine.  
When it came back around it didn't linger like it used to.  
Gotta move on, gotta mutate.  
Viruses don't make promises.

#### [BAND OF BIRTHERS]

'The mall,' he said.  
'What is the mall for?  
It's super crazy, like, the stores will all be closed but there are weird little artisan shops set up in the middle of of the intersection where the food court becomes the fountain area. It's worthy of investigation.'  
'When I lived in Texas,' said the other person, 'the thing I loved to do the most was ride my bicycle around the complex of an abandoned mall. The place had been the big thing like thirty or forty years ago. Now it wasn't anything.'

'There's still a movie theater there,' the person he was definitely having a conversation with said.  
'I spent a whole day there watching low-budget and indie sci-fi movies.  
I was trying to assert myself after being disappointed by a girlfriend.  
Then I got shitfaced all night and the next morning.  
Met a bunch of people I thought would be friends for life.  
When I saw them after that they ignored me or pretended not to know me.'

'You didn't have those problems at the mall, though.  
There was a bookmobile there.  
Another instance of improvised commerce where a structure had been erected for steady business.  
I don't know what to call that.  
I didn't go to business school, and I definitely don't wanna look it up.'

'That's ok,' he said. 'We don't have to do anything we don't want to do.'

'That's a beautiful thought.'

'Thanks,' he said, 'I thought so too.'

They stood still in complete silence the rest of the night.

Then one of them, I don't remember which, brought up a subject that was best left undiscussed.

I'll tell you about it sometime.

[HAPPY BIRTHDAY]



Men on the train and in bars asked her often what she was reading. She never answered them, because she didn't know, and was unprepared to discuss the text. The guy she met, he didn't really like reading either, or writing. Once when he went to the bathroom she opened the notebook he was always carrying around and scribbling in, the one with the hard covers and built-in strap for use as a bookmark. It was filled with drawings, crude ones, of her, in different positions with a book. She didn't confront him.

They never discussed it.

She sat on his lap in the kitchen next to the shelves he'd painted black to make it look more cool. He filled it with paperbacks, mostly poetry, from Myopic Books, to make himself look more cool.

That was where he spent the most time when he wasn't in bed hungover or depressed or eating. Then he started reading them.

It changed him in his mind.

He wanted her to change with him, the way you want the other person you're doing drugs with to feel it hit the same way.

Larkin is a comedian, he tried to explain.

She didn't get it.

How his bleak obsessions with death and trauma could be funny if you held them up in certain lights.

So drab, sulking away in a ranger's station in the Hebrides.

Making verse about self-hate and other-hate and how can you not think that's funny?

He wrote letters to a woman who, if she read them, never responded.

It was a perfect relationship.

That's the way it should be for some of us, he said to her.

The muse isn't the one you wake up next to.

To share a bed with someone is to acknowledge their reality, their body and their mind in the same container.

What you need is someone who gardens at night without arms while she whistles tunes in a key no one's ever heard before.

For when you're in a parking booth in Ann Arbor, reading Ferlinghetti talking about reading Yeats – your sacrifice has to mean something right?

And when the sonofabitch who relieves you at lunch steals \$30 from the till and you get blamed for it, and you're given a choice to pay back the money or quit the job so you walk out, that's what it feels like to build character, right?

So in this story there was this young woman who wanted to attract literate men.

She practiced reading in front of a mirror.

To see how she looked with a book in her lap.

She posed with it, turned the book over like in an old joke, got into a lotus and put her arm around her head so she could just barely make out the shapes of the words.

I don't remember what book it was.

[COMMUNITY MEETING]

You know he's the fire chief because of his facial hair.

An upside down horseshoe, the gap cut straight like with a laser.

No one else is permitted to have that a goatee like that.

Like if you have that facial hair you'd better be ready to hop on a ladder truck and break out the big hose, know what I mean?

'Listen, folks, I know some of you have heard some stories about how there's a guy living in the fire truck, and that's why we can't use it.

Well, it's not just that, it's, he started a business in there and there's laws about that.

Flowers, if you're wondering.

Looks real nice too the way he's got it set up.  
But anyway we've been pretty good on structure fires this year so let's try to keep it up that way.  
Also we're taking over the ambulance responsibilities but that's gonna take 18-24 months to complete the transition.  
So don't nobody have a heart attack before then.'

I wanna know who lives in that big house on the corner over here, the one that looks like an embassy, with the old flags and the security lights, like maybe it's a governor's mansion but it seems like we'd know if the governor had a mansion here.  
It never looks like anyone's home.  
Nobody tells me anything.

The guy who owns the cigar store is upset about homelessness, on account it makes him and his neighbors uncomfortable.  
'Kinda like tobacco smoke?'  
People laugh a little bit.  
The police chief just became the police chief.  
He's maybe 40, looks maybe 50, had a few teeth knocked out a few times.  
He's measured and polite, and he tells the cigar store dude that he's shit outta luck.  
'We're gonna go in there and hunt those people,' cigar store dude says.  
'We have to ask that you don't do that,' the police chief says.  
'There are families in there.  
There's needles all over the police.  
Not the pine needles, though those are all over in there too.'  
Nobody laughs at this.  
His comedy goes over better at the station house.  
'We had a package disappear off the porch,' says a lady I can't see.

I wanna know if anything is being done about all the cars driving the wrong way down my street.  
It's a real menace.  
And there's a school on the corner.  
You'd think that'd be enough.

A lady wrote a book about the neighborhood.  
'Here are some of the sources I used,' she says.  
She passes around samples from old journals, a yearbook, a ledger, loose in their protective sleeves.  
'This is my favorite,' she says, 'from a 14 year old boy in 1905.  
He talks a lot about sawing wood and making his own syrup.  
There's an account of going to a football game.'  
'Things sure have changed,' says a guy with white socks on.  
'Welp,' I say, 'I guess I'll keep looking both ways.'  
'You do that,' says someone I can't see.

[CLOSED FOR BUSINESS]

*All, thank you for reading and supporting this space. After careful consideration, I've decided the only reasonable response to Substack's callous and tacit support of fascist recruitment efforts is to find somewhere else to share my work. (read the NYT article here if you want details: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/22/business/substack-nazis-content-moderation.html>)*

This will be my last story here. I am exploring other options and will be in touch with details on where to find me - and for anyone who's paid for a subscription, a thousand thanks more, and please know that I will honor that commitment in the new space as well. You all have my eternal gratitude for encouraging me! And I will see you (elsewhere) in the new year. -JA

It's like, I made some cool collage art, like puzzles, like jigsaws, maybe, that formed a warped portrait when I put them together.

I wanted to show them to others.

To let them know I was doing okay, that I had a creative outlet, an inner life worthy of being expressed.

I hung these in a gallery, off the main strip but easy enough to find.

Most of my supporters came by way of invitation.

Many came out of obligation as well, which was fine - they didn't have to stay, or even look at anything.

And then, it was like finding out that in the next room over some jack-holes were hanging big swastikas on the walls, standing on tables, threatening pretty much everyone, vowing destruction on anyone who asked them to tone it down.

I closed the door, as I thought any decent person would.

I could have paid closer attention.

The Hitler toilet paper in the shared restroom, for instance, was a pretty obvious clue that things were out of hand.

When a few other artists told me the gallery made them uncomfortable because there was, y'know, a room full of Nazi shit next door, I didn't take them seriously.

'They'll tucker themselves out.'

They didn't.

I put up some more quirky art.

They got louder, and the louder they got, the easier it got for other angry guys to find them.

There was a lot of kicking, and more threats.

A few of us got together to ask the gallery owners if they'd consider closing the room with all the Nazi shit in it.

They responded with photographs of the Old West, and a VHS of Little House on the Prairie.

'I don't think you understand the scope of this thing,' we said.

'The data tells me I have over one hundred patrons, and that 43 of them regularly check out my stuff,' I protested.

'A few of them even pay for it.'

The gallery owners responded with a shrug emoji and a gif of a Proud Boy picking his teeth.

It was hard to understand, sure, why anyone would want to be like that.

'These motherfuckers don't even make art,' we said.

'They don't understand the purpose.'

Most of them weren't even political a decade ago.

They were - what were they - they were gelatinous clumps animated by shared rage and humiliation, like a detached muscle exposed to an electric shock.

Then they strapped themselves into feeding chairs and had tubes installed.

Know what we mean?'

The gallery owners didn't hear us.

They were busy slapping each other's dicks around with their stacks of money.

Which, to be fair, makes a pretty loud noise.

'I want you to know, I'm learning a new kind of art,' I said, raising my voice above the slapping sounds.

'I'm going to learn how to blow glass so I can make a massive jar to keep insects in.

Nazi beetles, gallery owners - you get the idea.

The kind of jar you invert and trap your enemies inside so you can watch them fight and fight and use up all the air.

Rest in hell you traumaphagic fucks!'

Flippityflippityflipflipflip.

And so on.