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By

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Abstract:

The following creative work is the beginnings of a novel, reduced to two chapters for this thesis. Chapter one traces the psychological, sexual, political, and artistic development of an alienated protagonist. His closeted bisexuality is at odds with heteronormativity, his awareness of encroaching fascism at odds with a progressive culture, his depression is at odds with material comfort, his perception at odds with an inability to express himself, and his social atomization contrasts with a desire to escape the horizon of his own sensations and understand others. The end of the first chapter shifts perspective to a young woman who attempts to express in dancing a discontent which words cannot articulate, displaying the unique, irreplaceable way in which artistic forms express subjectivity.

The theme of deterioration is highlighted in the setting of (i) through its physical deconstruction, the instability of climate change expressed by an incoming hurricane, and the periodic breakdown of literary verisimilitude. Such ruptures reflect the psychological breakdown of the narrator along with the collapsing artifice of late capitalism. Finally, the perspective shift in chapter two destabilizes subjectivity itself, linking the imaginative experience of literature to the feeling of empathy, itself an imaginative leap.

Herbert Marcuse writes in *The Aesthetic Dimension* that a potentially subversive quality of literature is the creation of stories outside the existing class system, negating and thereby resisting the existing structure of reality, carving a space of reprieve out of oppressive conditions. Mark Fisher develops this reasoning in *The Weird and The Eerie*, noting that the aesthetic of strangeness can denote the intrusion of a reality inexpressible in strictly normative discourse. Fictional works can heighten this feeling and thus approach an explicit comprehension of how
contemporary reality alienates its subjects. With this narrative I hope to convey the artifice of fiction as a contrast to reality, and the way in which narratives can beguile, delude, suppress, or point to sensations and experience which exist outside the patterns and logic of the everyday.
Flint Valley is a small city in the Northeast. I lived there as a student. There must have been a time when the Appalachian mountains that nestle us, the thick, temperate Acadian forests, or the glacial lakes and rivers could unfold into a stable imagery of landscape. But the seasons here have grown erratic—a hurricane reached deep inland at the end of summer, a blizzard hit on Halloween, and thaw stretched into the depths of winter with the air so warm and still as if from nowhere. But then it plunged back down. Some had even felt earthquakes shiver up their feet now and again. People have turned strange with the weather.

On the day of the hurricane I remember walking alone, as I often did, tracing out the threads of stray thoughts, when I came across a stretch of tape blocking my path all quivering and plastic yellow with DO NOT CROSS printed in thick black letters on each side. The tape surrounded me, demarcating an invisible square barrier of the concrete courtyard I had wandered into.

“What are you doing here?” the security guard called. The outline of a uniform fleshed into human features as he approached, repeating the question either in outrage or in search of an answer.

“This is off limits, you’re not allowed here.”

“But this is where I started.”
He paused, his face blank like a mask of stone, staring through the shades. I couldn’t help but glance at his belt and its array of dark instruments glinting off the sunlight.

“I didn’t see the tape on the way in. I started on this side.” The perspective had, for a moment, flipped interior and exterior, the boundary’s command keeping me in instead of out. It left a strange set of options—I could cross the border to leave, thereby breaking its command to uphold it, remain inside in a sort of crazed obedience, or to backtrack, deeper into this forbidden zone to find the liminal space I had evidently, unconsciously, wandered through.

It struck me that our mutual silence had stretched on for an uncomfortably long time. “You can’t leave the way you came in,” he finally said, as if in answer to my thoughts. He lifted a stretch of the tape, nullifying its static command. “Have a lovely day.”

I ducked the divide and tried to find my way to a part of campus I recognized. It was easy to get lost amid these shifting construction zones. The University’s revitalization project resulted in once familiar paths suddenly blocked by the jutting chain-wire of eight-foot high fences draped over by tarp. Entire buildings were swallowed without warning, the presence of construction workers implied only by the percussive tremors of machinery inside. These zones tended to appear faster than they could reasonably end, making me at times feel hemmed in by a spontaneously unfolding maze.

Walking between the contours of two such zones I emerged into a flow of people heading to the class buildings. Enveloped by the anonymous bodies of the crowd, I looked on at the bursting array of saturated hues from their bright, psychedelia-laden clothes. Voices blended into an undulating sonic hum while shoulders brushing by carried the drifting auras of scents and perfumes. Eyes, here and there, revealed subsurface feelings in infinite, subtle variation. I found it impossible to interpret these transient glances as much as they never failed to spark my
curiosity. This tabula rasa of drifting, atomized strangers free from connection or context washed away meaning from these random pulses of affect. I caught the dark eyes of someone familiar. I couldn’t place her, barely acknowledged her before she was gone. I broke off the main artery of traffic to a line of people moving toward Ashbury Quad. Groups of isolated tie-dye shirts pock-marked the meadow as a flying saucer Frisbee cut across the translucent azure of a cloudless sky. The singed flower scent of marijuana rose from the meadow and people gazed into their phones’ that seduced them like mirrors. I think she smiled.

* * *

The packet fell on the desk in front of me. I saw the hand that dropped it drift by until Bill circled into view and took his seat opposite me. He clasped his hands behind his head of oil-black hair. Others filtered in and took their seats. The desks nearest him remained empty. This slight figure, pale and hunched over with a detached expression behind thick-rimmed glasses and expensive clothing carelessly worn, implied a timidity of character at odds with his personality. The fiction workshop, turned out to be a lively if not an enjoyable class. Rooms like these tended to fill with fragile egos still not finished growing, and Bill was a vicious critic. He attacked every story as though its errors were purposefully designed to poison him, and his audience took his words just as personally. After only a few classes, students had cried, lost their temper, many had left. Writers often took their invented lives more seriously than their actual ones. In cynical moments I wonder whether Plato wasn’t right to banish the poets from his ideal city-state. If this class was any indication, writing fiction did not have a terribly positive effect on people, and the process rarely produced anything worthwhile. Bill, unintentionally perhaps, made this case rather
well. About a third of the class had dropped already, and those of us who remained appeared in an enervated state. Bill however, thrived off the friction he produced.

I flipped through Bill’s copy of my story, curious how my words reassembled into meaning in another person’s head. There was no commentary or corrections, contrasting sharply with my previous story—soaked in the red marks of vivisecting invective. But this lack gave a false sense of ease. I found the endnote on the last page, scathing in its brevity. The previous story’s endnotes had taken up three pages stapled to the back, and I hated to admit that that critique read like a work of art all its own, the savagery with which he cut through conceit and clichés, effectively dispatching the piece entirely. I hadn’t so much as looked at that story since. Somehow, this endnote in its brevity lent an equal effect.

Plot (noun)- the events of a story that move the action from beginning to middle, and middle to merciful end. Often establishes the motivation of a character and his relation to others; aids in the development of mood and tension. Synonyms include: storyline, progress, structure, scenario, reason to read. Consider application.

The class drifted steadily in and Professor Meyer followed, appearing exhausted in a way sleep alone couldn’t account for. Only a few years older than us, Meyer’s position at Flint Valley was credited to a modestly successful, critically praised novel published the year before. Among the few teachers at the school untethered to the academic world, her teaching was given less to formality and critical theory than a sharp aesthetic intuition she used to coolly cut to the heart of our often-erratic prose. Whether she, in fact, enjoyed anything she read one couldn’t say. She kept an expression of trained inscrutability as she arrived with her notebook, a manila folder carrying the day’s work, and a sharp blazer with sleeves that were slightly too long.
Mostly in response to Bill and the rapidly dwindling class size he had inspired, Meyer introduced a new set of guidelines to smooth away the sharper edges of critique, emphasizing instead on more constructive commentary. This severely handicapped Bill’s typical style of diatribe. When the workshop began he remained silent for a while. I watched his fingers strum across the desk as he struggled to translate his barbs into palatable suggestions.

The first story that day was Carter’s, a junior English major and baseball player who rarely spoke, and always wore the same sweatshirt. Skipping the artificiality of contemporary life, his stories sought a more authentic realism in wholesome small towns, with the dispensed wisdom of father figures, and a transcendental impulse to sink into nature. Though he claimed his settings were contemporary, they might have easily taken place within the past fifty years, a neo-realism entirely absent of reference to reality. I wasn’t fond of the style personally, but the class largely approved. One sophomore visibly swooned. Built for people who tired of the internet, the service economy, processed food with fake colors, and the complexities of interconnected urban life, it was difficult to discern that such an aesthetic was dependent on this context rather than rebelling against it. Were it ever to fall away, such stories would quickly be unmasked as a counter-image of false idols dependent on its more conspicuously artificial opposite. I told him I liked the way he described the trees.

Bill spoke, proceeding with caution, “Carter, when you describe the narrator’s father as a ‘bear of a man’, it invites a certain connotation that rests outside your intended effect.”

“What do you mean?” Carter asked.

“You see—Jeff help me out here.”

I was silent for a moment. Bill had walked in on me making out with another guy the week prior, and had made a habit of entertaining himself by referring to it. Given that my
bisexuality wasn’t something I had opened up about with others, these repeated implications vexed me.

I explained, remembering to unclench my teeth. “Well Carter, a ‘bear’ is colloquially a sexual subtype in the gay community, like a big hairy guy.”

“Right,” Bill added, “and the fact that you have characters keep calling him ‘daddy’ doesn’t help either.”

“But he’s the dad character.” A pause. “Wait why doesn’t that help?”

“Well it’s just,” he trailed off, then gestured my way. “Jeff can explain.”

I glared at him, my face a mask. He cocked his head and smiled.

We steadily worked through Carter’s story while Meyer pretended not to notice the strange undercurrent this commentary signified. Soon it was my turn, and the class was silent. The reaction to my story was mixed; many in the room were unsure what to say. One person described the ending as vivid. She looked like she wanted to say more but didn’t. Another liked the part with the rabbit at the beginning, asked me if it lived. I said I wasn’t sure.

The commentary remained tepid in this way until Bill evidently lost patience and added his own. “Yes do tell us your secrets. How did you plumb the psychoanalytical depths of your narrator whose name is the same as yours? You didn’t pull a muscle stretching the imagination so far did you? Don’t overextend yourself on our accounts, we only had to read it.”

“Pull back the throttle Bill,” Meyer said halfheartedly as she absently flipped through the packet.

“Sorry, sorry.” He took a breath. “I take it back Jeff. There’s far more to this than initially meets the eye, especially in the way you render the romantic tension between the narrator and that girl. No, this had its creative elements. Hardly a straight line from the story to you.”
The commentary died down, typically Professor Meyer’s cue to add in her own. We all sat in the inward facing circle. Meyer had been silently staring out the window, her eyes dark pools reflecting only what they saw and revealing nothing within.

“Jeffrey, in your story we receive news that a young woman had drowned herself in a lake. You introduce this with a newspaper article that the narrator reads at the end. Though it’s a fascinating choice to bring a new thread of the plot within a break in form, I wonder if it’s necessary? The entire storyline before this moment is dropped rather abruptly beyond a thin thematic connection between this death and the mental anguish of the characters earlier. We’re offered little hint beforehand that an event like this might prove the catalyst to move your character forward, nor do we know where it leads.”

I said nothing.

“What this does express is a story split between two worlds, an artistic ambition placed against real world suffering. It’s a contradiction you’ve introduced. The next step would be to resolve it.”

After it was clear that I would offer no response, Meyer shook her wrist from its sleeve in a bit of struggle and checked her watch. “As good a point to end as any. Enjoy the afternoon everyone.”

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At least a handful of students in the room likely noticed, but chose not to point out, the allegorical connection between the young woman who drowned in my story and the homeless man who froze to death on campus last winter. They didn’t have to. The article on his death was the only thing I had written that I could characterize as widely known, if only in the limited context of Flint Valley. This was mostly due to the unequivocal blame I placed on the university
admin for letting a man die surrounded by warm buildings closed to strangers, and yet the article’s snatching the front page certainly aided its infamy. In return for this recognition, after the backlash it inspired, the paper’s editorial board unofficially requested that I never write for them again. I remember the most difficult part was taking the matching picture. I was a poor photographer, and chose a simple subject, taking a photo of an empty bed beneath an open window overlooking the white snow of the field beyond. Once on newsprint the photograph denatured into a monochromatic blur. The bed, the wall, and the window were still broadly discernable, but the snow became a TV static haze of gray. The story for the class was meant to bring a sense of closure to my brief journalistic stint, and the death that had sparked it.

One of writing’s greatest gambles is the assumption that a chain of words might transmit a certain thread of meaning across our minds, but words are hardly restricted to a single, agreed upon meaning. I walked back across the quad. The crowd had cleared as the clouds crept in, making shadows rush across the grass. Just as neural pathways depend on their arrangement rather than the independent meaning of one synapse, so do words distinguish themselves only in relation to each other. Words explained themselves by words, which similarly could only be described in words. Prose is metonymic, poetry is metaphoric, and language itself is tautology. It’s a web of associations that cascades into ever more subtle subjective variations. A gust of wind passed by. Fall felt a bit closer.

More than a mode of expression, a person’s very capacity to think was tethered to their words and voice. Sensory information that had no direct conduit in language sublimated itself within other words, whether in connotation or memory. But such buried, inexpressible sensations could not, without words, hold fast in the mind for very long. Like an unused muscle, such a malnourished impulse would occasionally tremor when called upon, but otherwise remain still. If
Heidegger was correct that language is the house of human beings, than “I” is the doorway where one is placed, the standpoint from which this closed system envelopes. For instance, were I to place myself within a web of words associated with my character or past, it might look like this:

![Diagram of a web of words]

There are of course, so many pathways of association that the significance of these choices hardly matters, the point being that the way language structures thought is dependent on one’s subjectivity. The will to connect with others requires its own leap of faith.

As I scribbled down such thoughts in a small notebook I caught the sudden black gaze of a thin, young looking guy in the throes of an acid trip. I hadn’t expected the wide, cavernous pupils staring at me, or rather at whatever invisible malevolence haunted him, so I found myself stuck in place. He didn’t look older than nineteen, with chestnut skin and tousled black hair, without even the shadow of crow’s feet beneath his eyes. I wanted to stay a while and comfort him, but there was no way to. So we stood locked for a moment, together and a world apart.

The wind rose and fell as I walked on. How little it takes to trip across time and fall back into past sensations. An LSD flashback set in and melded with my present musings. I imagined, far too vividly, the material world breaking down into words. Where things related to each other spatially, they now cohered conceptually. A park bench broke down into its name, its description, and its associations all in the shape of what the words signified. The world briefly
took this shape as color drained from reality’s pages and the words took their place. But then the
growing nexus of cascading stimuli, in which physical and immaterial thought lost all
distinction, could no longer contain itself in such form, and as the intermittent gusts bellowed,
the waves of pages washed over me as I steadily walked. I dared not look down at my hand to
check if it was still there, fearful of what my palm might read.

* * *

Once a week, a few of us gathered in a small room to fervently debate the fate of the
world, the political science club. Though I primarily related to novels, these lonely etchings of
consciousness within the impoverished medium of words, politics also took an outsized part of
my attention. In times like these one either shut the world out or obsessed over the intricacies of
impending collapse. I read in the political a story of another kind, for if novels were stories we
told to shape ourselves, then politics could be a world-changing fiction.

As a Department, political science contained four branches: U.S. politics, international
relations, theory, and law. I chose theory, since the skill of parsing those texts was easily
transferrable to other areas. But beyond that, it preoccupied my attention because it was radical
in the true sense of the word, from the Latin *radix*, the root. And though theory promised that the
point of returning to the root was to change it, the road from *radix* to praxis had proven an
illusive one.

The root cause of how I started attending political science club meetings however, was by
recommendation of the club president and my ex-girlfriend, Olivia. We had been dating at the
time, but as she arrived to take her seat at the dais and scanned her eyes past me with the same
expression of manicured indifference with which she read the rest of the room, I was less certain of my decision to show up that day.

Olivia pursued law with the expectation that she would one day shape it. For now she shaped her behavior accordingly: attaining top grades, taking leadership roles in every extra-curricular activity she could manage, joining the right charity drives, avoiding the wrong parties. The undergraduate pre-law specialty, if played well, could be a stepping-stone to an elite law school. As she ruthlessly pursued a path leading up the vines of the Ivy League, we parted ways in part because that path was not mine. Perhaps she needed someone who matched her ambition, and I had greater interest in opposing the structures of power than joining them.

But if I’m faithful to my study and dig to the root of the fissure between us, I would say our break up had more to do with the strain of my unresolved mental health issues, and one time I walked in on her sleeping with the club secretary, Taylor. I noticed Taylor now, seated at the edge of the front table. In avoiding me he appeared to avoid looking in every direction at once. He had a habit of flexing through the tight v-neck t-shirts he always wore, lending an impression not so much of physical intimidation as of someone trying to leave his own skin. In this way he telegraphed his every anxiety, and perversely gained my sympathy. I understood the appeal, which only made matters worse when Olivia mistook my lack of jealousy for a lack of feeling. The relationship between passion and the need to possess the sole rights to another’s body was never something I understood. I did feel some insecurity in how long it took them to notice me once I had walked in on them however. I felt outperformed, which was unfair given that Taylor was on his back doing all but nothing while she held him down by his admittedly impressive biceps. It occurred to me now that the last time Taylor and I made eye contact was on that day. Suddenly I wasn’t so keen on meeting his gaze either.
“Jeff!” shouted Danny, a former classmate of mine, as he walked over. We shook hands. I should say friend, but I hadn’t returned his texts of late, or anyone’s, and was unsure of where I stood among the cliques of the previous semester. He clapped me on the shoulder. “You would show up in the last place I’d expect you. How the hell are you?” Olivia glanced our way, betraying a flash of irritation but saying nothing.

I wore what I hoped was an affable smile. He had spent the summer working in the construction company that employed his father. He told me about how shingling in the August heat was brutal work and I believed him; his forearms held a deep farmer’s tan and the back of his neck still lingered with the aftereffects of a burn.

He noticed me glance at it and said, “Hey man, that’s why they call us rednecks.” Could be, I thought, though the term likely wasn’t too well known before the Battle of Blair Mountain, the armed insurrection of West Virginian coal miners in 1921. The largest labor uprising in U.S. history, rebellious workers wore red bandanas as they battled police and private mercenaries to unionize the coalfields. No one is certain why they chose red, whether the mix of white, Chinese, and black workers had redefined redneck intentionally, or in solidarity with the Russian Revolution, or for none of these reasons. But since then that resonance had long since been buried. After enough time and edits, all revolutionary history dies with its intent.

I chose not to bring this up. Olivia had mentioned that she found such random historical asides insufferable, and I wondered how many others agreed. Danny looked happy to be here.

“So, rumor has it you’ve been active this summer,” Danny coyly broached. “How does it feel to be back?”

“Unreal.” His grin wavered until I remembered to smile back. “It’s good to see you.”
People settled in and the meeting commenced. The day’s question for that meeting, our dry symposium, was written on a white board in ornate cursive. “Is the liberal democratic order a force for good in the world, and should it be preserved?” This second, ominous clause might have been omitted from the first were the question asked a few short years ago, but signs of the system’s unraveling were growing too clear to ignore. The second recession, the invasion of Iran, the teeming flows of refugees clamoring at the walled fortresses of rich nations, all undergirded by an ecological catastrophe so immense that the human mind could not comprehend it, and often chose not to. The howling of the world was difficult to drown out; we could taste it in the water, feel it in the air, and hear the most devastating sound in the deepest of woods—nothing at all.

The structure of the debate was as such: speakers could sign up to give an opening address elucidating their position. One could give this speech seated or standing, prepared or not, with a cap at two minutes. A more free flowing exchange would follow, with questions, clarifications, rebuttals, or polemics from anyone present.

Olivia began like a true rhetorician. “We read the news, scan the headlines, and watch as catastrophes near and far unfold before our eyes that we seem helpless to prevent. For distraction, we turn to entertainment such as television, movies, games, or even the odd book.” Someone laughed. She continued. “But even our distractions paint an equally grim picture. The culture saturates with pessimism, and every artist who fits this mould believes themselves countercultural for doing so. Rejection of civil society, of the structures that created the world around us, is not only a fashionable opinion, but even a tempting one. But what this worldview lacks is not adequate concern but perspective. Liberalism, which has fostered our own Constitution, an international order based on human rights and national sovereignty, and the
lifting of billions out of poverty and disease with breathtaking technological advances the likes of which this world has never seen, has had an unquestionably positive impact on the human condition. But since this quiet, steadier progress doesn’t capture the public’s attention like a disaster with a sexy headline, calamity is too often all we see. All that’s needed to correct this however, is some context, to zoom out and see the bigger picture.”

I should have expected this polished performance. Nothing Olivia did was unprepared. She hooked her audience with a connection, preempted her potential detractors by weaving in their anxieties, agreeing with them to a degree, all while chiding the media and the gloomy artists that had so thoroughly misguided them.

The room was ready to hear her case, and she wasted no time. “The twentieth-century was a grim picture from the outset. The delicate balance of power known as the Concert of Europe of the long nineteenth-century had shattered into the horrors of the First World War. Borne out of this mass bloodshed, two competing ideologies flourished: communism and fascism. The first destroyed the monarchy of Czarist Russia, then spilled out across Eastern Europe to impose its revolution upon the world. Fascism meanwhile, attacked the heart of Europe itself, twisting national sovereignty into racist supremacy, then using the energy of its loyal masses to violently snatch all vestiges of freedom. But there was a quieter, older set of ideas and values at play as well. Its roots delved back to the Enlightenment, whereby instead of yielding to past authorities and myths, the free application of reason guided Enlightenment thinkers to the best possible results. Liberal democracy seemed weak compared to its ideological competitors because it did not impose itself upon its people, but rather used free discourse and debate to adapt to new conditions, improving itself perpetually.”
She paced the center forum in slow, deliberate steps. Despite myself, I admired the performance. She gave her opening address in the center of the room, discouraging others from taking this authoritative position later. Her posture indicated confidence, her gestures precisely accentuating her points. She did not point or make a fist, she addressed everyone present but met no one’s eyes for too long. This was a diplomatic appeal, designed to impress, evoke confidence, perhaps intimidate just enough to dissuade forceful objection. Coalitions had not yet formed; this was an overture to join the side of reason.

She continued. “Fascism, blinded in the worship of its own violence, consumed itself in the fires of the very war it began. The United States, inheriting its portion of a broken world, set about rebuilding it. While communism under the Soviet Union and then China brutally oppressed their people under totalitarian regimes, the United States tried to contain these ideologies to their own spheres while creating international institutions for the development and self-determination of a now decolonized world. The communist dream of global, centralized dictatorship was defeated not through overt war, but by minimizing conflict that could result in nuclear catastrophe, and allowing the system of centralized planning to collapse under the weight of its own ambitions.”

Perhaps only I was tempted by her performance I thought as she glided by in a close-fitting skirt suit. I glanced around, much of the room seemed persuaded, with more to follow.

“Although we haven’t reached the proverbial end of history that Fukuyama declared after the Soviet Union’s fall, liberalism has proven itself as an invaluable instrument for the progress of the human condition. But ideas on their own become little else. The twin systems that guide this process forward are democracy, which formed the debate, founded the ideas, and organized the institutions to envision a more peaceful, organized world, and the engine of
innovation that makes the enactment of our ideals possible, capitalism. I know one of these has become a dirty word in some circles, but each is based upon disentangling the free application of individual reason from all possible limits. They are imperfect because their innovations emerge from the bottom up, but are adaptive for these very reasons, ushering forth ingenuities of the human mind the likes of which no alternative system has ever conceived. This past century has created greater innovation than the twenty centuries that preceded it. After millennia of people who could only stare at the sky in wonder, we’ve unlocked technology that enabled us to land on the moon, explore the stars, and trace the history of the universe itself to its origin. While the spread of democracy founded on human rights continually liberates people of all nations, capitalist ingenuity frees them from some of the oldest scourges of humanity. Small pox was eliminated from the Earth in 1977, with Polio soon on its way out as well. Life expectancy, literacy, and women’s rights have all flourished, while a revolution in food production continually reduces malnourishment and world hunger while supporting a growing global population. Information technology not only enables global communication with ease but restructures and expands the very capacities of the human mind.”

She continued this exaltation of progress, obscuring the millions ground under to make it so. “The Pyramid of Giza, the tomb of a God-king built by slave-labor, was the tallest structure on Earth for over four-thousand years until the industrial revolution made possible the construction of the Washington Monument in 1884, an ancient milestone of human history, finally surpassed without coercion. Five years later, an all steel structure we know as the Eiffel Tower surpassed even that, and ever since then feats of human architecture have climbed to heights that vastly overshadow the ancient world.”
Her narrative’s dizzying historical omission was too much to keep track of. I fixated on Giza, which had likely been built not by slaves but primarily by farmers who needed work in the off seasons, no more enslaved than workers the world over tethered to the factories of Pharaoh Apple or Shell, talismans and symbols that so successfully veiled the forces behind them. The light of reason turns to its own myth-making. The wonder of ancient structures was far more than their height, I thought, reflecting on the comparatively miniscule Sphinx that had guarded the tombs until spreading sectarian war destroyed it a few years earlier. Iconoclasm occasionally clenched the minds of the devout, rending destruction upon all false idols beyond their totalizing God, whether called by an ancient name or an invisible hand.

I had tried to write a story once about the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, and one of the Pakistani slaves forced to build it. I could never finish it, getting only so far as a man looking out to a horizon of lighted spires touching the stars, in a depression of sand like a black hole, huddled in a human mass from which he couldn’t distinguish a single person, only mounds of limbs from other, far away lands he had given up trying to speak to. The man couldn’t remember how old he was. The Burj Khalifa always loomed in the background, while the broken backs of its foundation clung to life in the cold desert dark.

The story never progressed past that. It had nowhere to go. Most of my writing remained unfinished or disassembled in this way, like partially recalled dreams, nothing so polished and complete as Olivia’s speech.

“Freedom is the ground upon which enlightenment inevitably flourishes—the freedom to let reason guide you. Of course, not everyone with rational capacity will choose to use it. Faced with the growing complexities of the world, some toxic ideologies have once again asserted that humanity’s very improvements are the seeds of our destruction. The opposite, of course, is true.
The answer is not in childishly rejecting the gains of the modern age for the sake of its glitches, but to redouble our commitment to the continued improvement of the human condition. Illiberal ideologies demand the sacrifice of your individuality for the sake of a future that never arrives. Liberalism marches forward, not on the false promise of achieving heaven on earth, but by freeing each individual to pursue their own highest aims. This is a dream well worth keeping.”

She concluded to much applause as she took her seat behind the front table. The time for opening statements had ended. Few had signed up to begin with, public speaking among the more commonly dreaded activities. Now, with a more relaxed format, the room gradually warmed to the idea of adding their opinions. A freshman tepidly raised her hand, asked for an agreed upon definition of liberalism to start with. Victoria, the vice president, laughed at the oversight on their part. She and Olivia briefly discussed the matter.

“Though we all probably have approximations for the term it would be preferable to have something more precise,” Olivia agreed. “Jeff, why don’t you provide us with one?”

All heads turned my way. I was surprised in more ways than one at this casual, direct address. Was she tacitly trying to release some tension since I was here? Was she trying to throw me off, expecting a rebuttal to her position somewhere down the line? I couldn’t trace her motives like I used to. Best to take the question in good faith and not as a challenge. I leaned forward and cleared my voice. “As you’ve already pointed out, it’s a political philosophy traced to the Enlightenment, an eighteenth century response to the Scientific Revolution a century earlier, believing a similar application of reason could determine a unified conception of civil society in the same way Newton established universal laws of gravity and motion. Hence the frequent reference among writers of this era to such concepts as Natural Laws, the state of nature and...” I was rambling, I realized. “But for this discussion, um, liberalism posits human beings
as fundamentally rational and self-interested. So organizing a society that allows individuals to operate within this tendency unencumbered by external constraints will lead to the organic manifestation of each individual’s own best life. Government is instrumental in this aim by removing as many obstacles to individual freedom as possible, the only restriction being to the degree my freedom might limit someone else’s.”

“So liberalism and capitalism are the same?”

I tried to see who had spoken but couldn’t trace the voice to anyone. “Um, liberalism is the philosophical underpinning of the economic system, enabling outsized reward to whomever can make the technological and societal improvements desired by others.”

Danny took the opportunity for critique. “That’s sort of the problem though, isn’t it? That the liberalism of the United States is motivated by the profit margin of a select few. Hence, you know, the constant wars?”

Olivia answered. “The legacy of the United States is not without its excesses, this is true, but all in the pursuit of a universal standard of human rights across the world, and the ensuing proliferation of human ingenuity that inevitably follows whenever a people are set free.”

“Free to starve.”

“Really?” Olivia added. “By 2035 the United Nations is projected to eradicate extreme poverty from the globe, the first coalition to even envision such a goal let alone achieve it. And beyond that, we’re on our way to establishing a global minimum wage and a universal right to work.” My mind caught upon that word, eradicate, the speed with which she glossed over it and the darker intent it obscured, even from her.

“And who do we have the right to work for?” Danny continued.
“Wherever one’s talents guide them according to the system’s needs.” Someone taken in by Olivia’s speech answered. Another added, “We’re hardly living in an Orwellian nightmare.”

“That’s true,” I said. “Orwell was too optimistic. He only envisioned the unblinking lens of Big Brother’s eye watching you in your home. He never imagined that the eyes and ears would go with you, that recordings could be kept and compiled, sent digitally and stored forever.”

“My colleague,” Olivia replied, “is referring of course to the NSA’s capability to trace terror suspects not only through meta-data but direct observation through one’s computer camera or phone microphone for instance. These illegal revelations have led to the somewhat hysterical presumption that the NSA is implementing these vast capabilities on everyone for their own amusement rather than an isolated group of terror suspects, a technique not categorically distinct from an FBI stake out in less efficient times.”

“Yes, for terrorism. Or drugs. Or for NSA agents to spy on their spouses if they suspect infidelity. Or for targeted marketing.” I was involving myself more than I had intended to. “And government power has advanced even past this with the recent mandate on backdoor encryption, the Solar Map—”

“Hang on,” someone in the back cut in, “the Solar Map program dramatically improved cell service in every city in the country. Most of the school was ecstatic when we could finally introduce a drone set here.

“Alexa, play the world’s smallest violin.”

The room laughed. No violin played. Echo’s hadn’t been installed in classrooms yet.

“Yet no one is forcing you to carry your phone around,” a male voice from a middle row added. “Sorry I wanted to respond to the earlier point. They’re taking your meta-data and credit
card information, yet the public still chooses to use these conveniences even if it means an increased network of surveillance. You could pay in cash, go to a library to look something up. Same with the cell phone. It could be recording you, yet if you’re so scared, you could always leave it at home. So, although the public may disapprove of it in polls, it’s clear their opposition isn’t a high priority.”

Someone else added, “People are dumb.”

By whose judgment, and compared to what? I thought, noticing how people became externalized, an ignorant “they” to be reviled. To what exalted status did they refer to themselves? I let this go. Cell phones were only a patchwork to smooth over capitalism’s isolating tendencies anyways, as markets forced people to cut away their social fabric and move with the money. Cutting even this phantom tendril of connection was too high a cost for most, even if it were possible. It seemed that this technology had enmeshed itself so thoroughly as to become less an extension of our dresser drawers than our minds.

A vibration with a shrill, violent alarm radiated through the pockets of the room. The message read: *Amber Alert: Severe flood warning, high winds. Stay indoors.*

The hurricane had reached further inland than previously thought. Even with this warning the room’s attention remained partially fixed upon Olivia as she slowly drew her phone to her eye. Her brow slightly arched.

* * *

The early hour and speed with which the September sky darkened added a disquieting undertone to the café’s frenetic vibe. The hurricane kept its steady pace like a colliding planet in slow motion, but free from the warm waters of the Atlantic its force weakened. Friday night, if
nothing else, would proceed as planned. Underclassmen excitedly chatted about plans to seek out house parties, alcohol, or a hook up. Boys in hoodies piled on hastily made campus food from the buffet corner as if carb loading for a marathon. Cliques connected, anxiously glanced out the window, or eyed their crushes across the room. The abrupt lack of natural light accentuated the desiccated yellow cast by the café’s bulb covers. The light, like the food, seemed designed to produce illness, the jaundice-toned wavelength never failed to give me a headache. The coffee, however, was made well. I gratefully sipped the full-body dark roast in a corner with a few bulbs out.

I could tell by the brisk, sharp-toned tapping of footfalls ascending the stairwell that Olivia had arrived before she opened the door. She regarded the excited crowd, in typical prim composure, like misbehaving children. She again paid me no mind, making it all the stranger when after getting coffee she joined my table without a word.

“Jeffrey,” she said by way of greeting.

“O-Olivia,” I replied, my throat catching before I could match her even tone.

“What happened back there? I had hoped the darling of the campus left would put up a little more fight than that.”

“What can I say? Punditry isn’t my game.”

“Detaching yourself from the game is no excuse for playing poorly.”

She was right of course, and I had no response to it. “I’m hardly the leader you paint me to be,” I conceded. “I don’t think I’ll be going to those meetings any longer.”

“Why?” Her tone tinged on a release of tension.

“I could use some distance from politics.”
“When you came back I thought you’d jump right back into it—protests, mobilizing, speeches, the whole sophomoric shebang. Then a few weeks flew by and I had my doubts. Now here you are,” she watched the steam drift from her coffee and dissipate, “and there you go.” Her eyes met mine for the first time. “You’re a hard man to read Jeff.”

I asked how life had been treating her. She had spent most of the summer as an intern at a think tank with some vague, tautological name. American Citizens For A Brighter Future Tomorrow. It was unpaid, but did offer a sleek metro-area apartment and conducive access inside the beltway. Outside work she kept to herself, visited the monuments and memorial gardens. The apartment’s balcony offered a brilliant view of the city at sunset. She enjoyed those moments, putting everything on pause to clear her mind and look out at the shifting colors of the sky. Afterwards her family had taken her on a brief trip to Vienna. She was awestruck by the Hapsburg summer palace, but even so preferred the art museums with the impressionist paintings. She felt that the brushstrokes replicated the motion of the wind and that if she unfocused her gaze, the pictures moved.

Fall classes offered her little trouble aside from occasional boredom. While recounting this, she had the finesse to subtly work in that her and Taylor were no longer seeing each other, while also making clear that she needed time to focus on her future.

“So how are you?” She asked.

“Fine, just getting used to being back. Did we always have hurricanes here?”

She laughed, a sound I missed hearing. Its echo seemed to linger a touch too long, with declining pitch in its fading reverberations. Raindrops tapped against the window. I could feel the storm’s tendrils reaching in, bursting past the mountains and into the valley. My headache, momentarily relieved, returned.
Our attention shifted to an adjacent table, around which freshmen had loudly gathered, passing around a flask to pour into glasses of fruit punch with less subtlety than they likely supposed.

“Weather advisory states severe flooding and wind for the next twenty-four hours, a state of emergency declared, and the campus urging all students to stay indoors. I hope everyone follows that advice.”

“What are you kidding? It’s Friday night. No one is staying in. Bacchanalia awaits.”

“What’s the use of having these systems in place if no one will follow them?” She snapped.

I shrugged. The system, it seems, hadn’t anticipated this turn by much, one’s own eyes were nearly as fast as the satellites. “Maybe the storm will dissipate,” I suggested.

“Or maybe the floodwaters will clean the streets.”

Her eyes lingered on someone. Like the focal point of a Renaissance painting, I found it difficult to pull my gaze away from him as well. He was quite tall, standing well above the small crowd that surrounded him, broad shouldered, in the thrall of several conversations at once. The flow of his gesticulations articulated a power behind his words as he crossed the café. He wore a collared shirt in a rich shade of red and I was trying to discern whether the ornate, archaic pattern I saw on it was real or imagined.

“Don’t tell me you’ve fallen in with him too,” Olivia said, noticing my attention.

I looked back at her. “No, who is he?”

“Never mind. I forgot that he had transferred here after you. Where were you anyhow?”

I knew the piece of the story she was searching for, the only part I was reluctant to give. In essence, I had joined an occupation in D.C. against the construction of a detention center,
what then became an expanding nexus of detention centers to manage the influx of people declared, in some form or another, exceptions from the inalienable right to liberty. The facilities were often built on the outskirts of cities, just beyond the horizon of most people’s perception. Flint Valley had one as well, only a few miles from campus, built into the slope of a densely forested hillside, impossible to see but from the right vantage. But like a bi-stable image, once seen, it became impossible not to see anymore.

She joked that I ought to have called her from the occupation, but she wasn’t there when I was. Our timing remained out of joint.

“But wait, I know the response to that was brutal, lots of arrests, excessive force, but there were also reports of a riot, a few deaths went along with it.”

“We halted construction, tampered with the machines, pulled down a few half built walls. But no one in that movement hurt anyone unless violently confronted first.” The occasional alt-right militia attempted some perfunctory agitation, but they were never a great threat, more like cheerleaders of the police than their successors. “That riot was pinned on us, an excuse for the police’s response.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know.”

She waited for me to say more, and when I didn’t she shrugged, relaxed back in her seat. I was grateful to her for letting it go. Some parts of that dissent were also difficult to stop seeing, like an afterimage burned deep enough to linger behind the eyelids.

Olivia grasped for some way to close the conversation. She could tell it was having an effect on me just as I tried to hide it. “I suppose it’s like Churchill said, history is written by the victor.”
“I believe Walter Benjamin said that. Not Churchill.”

“Yeah well, there you go.” She paused. A distant look came over her eyes, as if trying to pull at some fragment at the edge of memory. “Did Benjamin paint that weird picture you had hanging in your dorm room. Do you still have that?”

“The painting’s by Klee, Benjamin wrote a particularly arresting passage about it, his ninth thesis. But yeah, I kept it.”

“That picture was hideous, especially at night. I nearly asked you to take it down a thousand times but never did.” Revulsion overcame her expression, its contours far deeper than aesthetic distaste.

I also used the painting to meditate on occasion, but was less inclined to admit that now. Taking it down from the bedroom wall would’ve amounted to such a slight bother that I wondered why she had never asked. We sat in silence for a while and watched our coffee cool. The inchoate steam rose, faded. I watched her mind begin to wander.

“This is the very painting of your fear,” she said in dramatic affectation.

“What?”

“I was just thinking back to freshman year, remember? When I thought I wanted to be a theater major?”

“Ah yes, your Macbeth production. Still the best one I’ve seen.”

“You said Macbeth adaptions are always terrible.”

“I said Hamlet film adaptions are always terrible. And they are. I suspect his infinite meditations are meant to stay on the page. Macbeth on the other hand, never fails, particularly yours m’lady.”
“It wasn’t my production, I merely played my leading part. I must admit, for a dead white
guy worshipped by stuffy English departments the world over, that was some part to play. Some
lines have never left my head since.

“But that painting, yes the painting. I remember it now. That passage Benjamin wrote,
you showed me it once, about the wreckage of history and the storm that blows away the angel
helpless to stop it, what an absolutely nightmarish vision of the world. Once you showed it to me
I never again asked where your depression came from.”

She regretted letting that slip, but there was no detracting it now. I replied rather sullenly,
“I thought mental disorders were no different than physical ones, just some chemical imbalance.
That’s the prevailing view now, isn’t it?”

“I’m sure a lot of it’s neurological, and I’m not presuming that I understand what it feels
like, but the things you study, what you’ve devoted yourself to, seems to reinforce—”

“Benjamin wrote that in exile, just before fleeing the Nazis. He didn’t make it. So I
wouldn’t say his outlook was the reflection of a mere mental state.”

“Okay, yes. He had just cause to think the world was ending around him, but it wasn’t.
The Holocaust was a nightmare, but it ended.”

Convinced she was wrong, about this, about me, I held my tongue. Nothing good would
come of arguing now. I considered the circumstances of his death, which strangely echoed her
point. Walter Benjamin fled the Nazi advance across Europe in the fall of 1940, leaving Paris,
across France to its Southwestern border. He joined a group of fellow refugees who crossed the
Pyrenees on foot to a small Spanish border town, Port Bou, nestled between the mountains and
the Mediterranean Sea. From there he planned to travel to Lisbon, Portugal, sailing to the United
States where his colleagues in philosophy and fellow German-Jewish refugees worked to secure
his safe passage from the other side. He couldn’t control that fascist Spain closed the border upon their reaching Port Bou, that Benjamin and his entire party of refugees were suddenly condemned to deportation back to Vichy France, and from there to Nazi Germany, and from there the Holocaust. Nor could he have guessed that the day after he committed suicide the borders reopened. How could he have known that all was not lost?

Olivia hesitated, then said, “You know that Greek philosophy class we had together? A waste of time, but every once in a while I get caught on Zeno’s paradox, such a nonsensical notion, that you could journey to somewhere else and never get there, the distance splitting by half *ad infinitum*, the arrow that never lands. But I suppose, if you accepted this paradox of motion, that two objects could never truly meet, then you would be locked in place, and the helplessness the delusion instilled would only reinforce its conclusions—like a negative feedback loop, or maybe a descending spiral. There was a time I wished I could show you that this nightmarish vision of the world is only that, the painting of your fear.”

I said nothing. So the Klee painting marked an insoluble divide, I couldn’t have taken it down for her after all. The rain intensified, descending in sheets.

We decided to part ways, the storm was only getting worse. I told her it was good to see her again and she said the same. We wished each other well, but made no future plans. Our dorms were in opposite directions, so she zippered up her coat and headed off. I lingered until she disappeared into the dark, thinking about those things she most savored while I was gone, paintings that waved in the breeze and the skyline at sunset when time stood still.

Of course I had little in common with Benjamin, or anyone else who actually faced the monsters I could only glimpse through the dark. A descending spiral. Where was I on its coiled path? I wondered. When I joined that dissent in D.C. I believed that another world was possible.
Afterwards, that belief wasn’t there anymore. I kept going through the motions pretending otherwise, but could no longer hold back this revelation. Quitting politics was, in essence, a retreat further inward. My mind flashed to Dante, and his description of hell’s outermost ring.

“In this alone we suffer:
cut off from hope, we live on in desire.”

I walked out through the waving gray curtains of falling sky. It opened and poured—at first in puddles on the street, then taking the streets, rushing for a way further down. The highways closed, then the stores. Rain jackets with legs wandered the snaking gaps between the waterways, the downpouring haze making lonely, faceless phantoms of the other people.

At the outer edge of campus was a tree line that wrapped around like a border or a maw. From the outside it seemed uniform throughout, but there was one narrow patch of woods that only revealed itself once inside. There the porch lights of the dilapidated house reveal itself at the other side. It acted as a lighthouse, a something steady among the uniform, widely spaced pine trees. Without it I might not have seen the end so nearby. I could have been lost, making the path between the narrow woods suddenly long and strange and dark.

When I was a child my house was at the outskirts of town. My friends lived in the village about five miles off. I’d imagine that I could wander into the woods in the backyard and that space would bend like an accordion, the miles would compress and after a short walk I’d find myself wherever I wished to be. Different directions in this small, deep forest would exit into familiar, blissfully impossible spaces.
Before my eyes could adjust to the interior light I heard the off-kilter lilt of an autotuned guitar. “I can feel your energy from two planets away” came a distant, faded voice before the beat of the song picked up. The house was as crowded as it might be on any weekend night, the dancing bodies oblivious to the unraveling world outside. I had been to this house before, but no one I recognized was here. I got a drink from the keg and explored the crowded house.

I caught sight of Bill down the hall just long enough to duck away in the other direction, not eager for his sardonic pearls of wisdom. Entering a living room, I found three women facing a glass door turn suddenly on my arrival and crowd me. They looked a few drinks ahead of me and spoke all at once. One handed me a liter bottle of Svedka and smiled while another chastised her, but didn’t take the bottle back when I tried to return it. They jointly communicated that a friend of theirs was outside, had gone through a bad breakup recently. They were worried, of what no one specified, but each had tried to talk her into coming back inside to no avail. In part deliberating among themselves, and in part to me, it was decided that I would be sent as a neutral party, a diplomat of sorts, to persuade their friend back inside. The girl who had handed me the bottle, whose name I found out was Bethany, elbowed me and made some innuendo about a rebound. Again, her mood seemed out of joint with the other two, who quickly rebuked her about the danger of the situation.

“Wait,” Bethany asked, “is she okay?”

“No!” They simultaneously confirmed.

I peered outside the sliding glass door. It revealed nothing. If she had wandered out into the storm it would be incredibly difficult to find her, and depending on how much she had to drink it could be even harder for her to find the house again. If her friends’ worried intimations
about self-harm were justified. . . I cut off that line of reasoning. Gratefully, I took a swig from
Bethany’s bottle.

Walking through the door I found her sitting on the floor of a concrete balcony, facing
out into the dark. Her hands held the metal railing bars while her legs swung pendulous over the
edge. I leaned my back against the railing and sat next to her, facing the opposite direction. The
roof extended a few feet past the railing, shielding us from the thunderous rain above. We felt it.
The rain fell in a waterfall over the edge, making a hazy inchoate void of the night.

“Your friends are worried about you.”

I took a sip from the bottle and handed it to her. Without looking she took a drag and
handed it back. She bit her lower lip, like it burned.

“It looks like the end of the world,” she said.

“I think we’ve still got some time left.” I replied, facing the other direction. The light
showed the people inside, solid and clear, but the glass blurred them, while the storm’s white
noise muffled everything inside and made it seem far away.

We traded another drink and introduced. I realized that she was the woman who had
caught my eye in the crowd earlier that day, but I thought it would be a bit odd to share this. Her
name was Hannah. She asked if I had been sent as a diplomat, I supposed so. Her friends would
occasionally glance out, but they couldn’t see anything, just as I hadn’t earlier. They thought
Hannah was upset over a recent break up, but this didn’t seem to be the case. She had initiated
that break up herself. It was a relief to her. No, that day was the anniversary of something else,
something she wouldn’t specify. Unseeing eyes fixed on us, moved on. I checked my watch, a
cobalt faced, silver thing with hands that emitted a slight glow.

“It’s after midnight.” I told her.
“Oh good.” She said, deadpan.

Offering her the bottle again, she declined, I took another drink and stowed it. Though I didn’t think she minded my company at first, I sensed that I had now worn my welcome. I went inside, thought I’d persuade her friends to give her some space for just a little while longer. She seemed like she needed it. They were sitting in a wide circle with some others, rotating a joint. It didn’t appear that they remembered the crisis of a few minutes earlier.

A familiar laugh rang out at the other end of the hallway. Following the sound I saw him—close-cropped blonde hair with a streak of blue soaked from the rain, confident, slow gait that alcohol dramatized into a lurch, and a thin smile—follow as on puppet strings another guy into a side room. The door swung shut. I paused at the door and considered going in, the window shaped indentations of the red wood showing a warped gargoyle reflection from its polished surface. I came back to myself and walked away, colliding into a man built like a linebacker. I was pushed back into the door, nearly opening it. I turned just in time for Ethan to open the door in answer to the knock.

The other guy was Chase, I realized as I sat at the edge of someone’s bed, another student from the fiction workshop. As much a hippie as anyone still could be, he was affable, complacent, laconic in speech, musically stranded in the 1960s, and awash in LSD. And through this spin cycle emerged his writing—a digressive, free flowing stream of consciousness which distilled any glimmer of talent on the page with stylistic indulgence. At any point he could veer from his own story and slip into a recursive spiral, falling ever-inward until this closed loop would distort and blend like a bleeding rainbow. This style I took to mirror Chase’s ambition, a retreat inward until the psychedelically laden landscape of his own mind became the world entire.
Though quite thoughtful, Chase was rather oblivious in most situations, so I wasn’t worried he’d catch on that Ethan and I had hooked up. Ethan finished the line of coke I had interrupted and took a seat next to me on the bed. When he got closer, I sidled away.

“Hey,” it dawned on Chase, “you’re in my writing class right?”

“Yep.” I could almost see the tie-die gears in his head achingly turn.

I had tried cocaine before, but wasn’t a fan of the way it effected me so when Ethan offered I declined. Apparently coke wasn’t so much Chase’s speed either; he pulled a joint from his pocket and soon we were all smoking that. Ethan’s hand had drifted over to mine, I made no move to encourage or dissuade this. First the tips of his fingers brushed over my knuckles, then eventually we were holding hands and stayed that way for a while. Forgetting about the storm, Chase opened the window to dissipate the smoke. The air erupted into motion, the flame I held winked and vanished. Chase shut the window. The swirling wind dissipated into the bluish haze of smoke. Ethan’s hand had tightened on mine when the window opened. Then the door opened too.

“Someone said there’s coke—oh hey Jeff.”

Bill had stumbled in. Instinctively my hand flew away from Ethan and he looked at me. He passed the dust-spattered mirror to Bill with his eyes still fixed on me. I looked back at him and saw he knew exactly what I had done and why. His expression was not a look of pain or anger or even disgust, merely blank. If anything he looked slightly bored.

He got up to leave. I tried to stop him, started thinking of some haphazard apology when he said “No I get it. You’ll be with me, you’re just not so keen on being seen with me.” He tilted his head and gave me a pitying look, then left.
As the door swung shut it lightly disturbed the haze of smoke, which quickly resettled and felt much heavier now. The effects of the joint were starting to hit me too strongly. The room began to whirl.

Bill cut the silence. “Damn, that’s some tough luck. He was hot.” I stared daggers of ice. “What? I’m straight not blind. Hey man, pass me that?”

Chase complied and they fell into idle chat. They discussed writing, a conversation that mostly involved Bill dismissing any idea or opinion Chase happened to possess. He had latched onto the idea that we could craft a joint story between the three of us right there in the room. Neither of us were charmed by this but, blind to this fact, he continued eagerly spinning the wheels of this digression forward while we talked.

“Why do you keep tormenting me about this? What’s it matter to you?”

He ignored my question, instead launching into his own impromptu digression. “You know it’s funny, in another class we were just reading *Passing*.

“The class was rather unforgiving of Clare Kendry, you know, the one who’s passing. It surprised me. I found her more of a tragic figure, but the rest hated her because she willingly joined the ranks of her oppressor. I found it a little harsh but I was one of the only white guys in the class and this wasn’t exactly within the bounds of a literary question so I left it alone.”

“That’s good of you.” I said, making sure to emphasize my sarcasm.

“I have my moments. Anyways it got me thinking. Of passing. What was the problem, really? If you’re dealt a poor hand in life, why not cling to whatever advantage possible? Then I thought of the drawbacks. The husband, if you recall, was deeply racist, would kill her if he found out. Therefore, she must partially live in terror of being discovered.
“But there’s a split. Reading the book, I realized passing isn’t only a way to navigate reality but to escape it. When her husband casually jokes about racist violence, she laughs. In those moments she deludes herself into thinking he’s talking about someone else. In passing Clare does more than move within a racist hierarchy, she accepts it. She accepts the white valuation of herself and by extension, of the people she left behind. This came at a price, at the expense of being terrorized, emotionally wilted, and lonely beyond measure.”

“As I recall, Irene was not so well-adjusted either.”

“Yes well, the book also traces a passing of another kind.”

I had gathered the point he was driving at, and felt somewhat condescended to when he put that fine a point on it.

“We could make it like *Fight Club!* But instead of just one person, nothing is real.”

This random interlude startled both of us. I had forgotten that Chase was even in the room, no doubt an effect of his earlier generosity with the joint. Evidently he had blocked out our conversation out as well.

“Chase, what the hell are you talking about?” Bill asked.

“I mean instead of the one guy who’s a projection of the main guy’s conscience, everybody is like that.”

“Okay but, why?”

“I don’t know,” he said sheepishly, “it’d be extra spooky because all the characters would be made up.”

“Chase, all characters are made up.” Bill was getting angry now.

Chase mumbled something about how that would be the irony of it all as he glumly rolled another joint. He maintained that the reveal at the end would be “effing sick.”
“See Jeff, this is why he writes better stories than you. Sure he makes no sense half the time but he’s in touch with his instincts.” Bill took this moment to add, “Hey Chase, mind if I get a hit of that?”

Chase nodded, seeming as though he’d already forgotten the prior disagreement. Absorbed in his task, he looked like his mind was in another world, a world that his blissed out smile made quite appealing at the moment.

“The point is,” said Bill, ditching the analogies, “We’re not in the 1920s anymore. You’re no more bound to the closet than Chase is bound to high modernism.” Chase nodded again, not processing this as a jibe. “You’re at a liberal arts college in the twenty-first century. If you’re afraid to come out, it’s not because the world can’t handle it, it’s because you can’t. If you like guys, no one cares except you.”

“You seem a little preoccupied with the topic actually.” Trying to out me in class, tracking me down at this party, the very fact that he was the only person to find out who I hadn’t told myself. At least, as far as I could know. My stomach lurched. That was the core anxiety—that the careful façade I’d crafted, the strange indefinable effort of appearing straight, was slipping away.

“Well, it’s purely a writing concern of course. The reason Passing surpasses the scope of Quicksand is that book’s ability to give shape to emotional resonances Larsen’s own time couldn’t deal with.”

Chase again cut in. “So what you’re saying is, Jeff could write his own passing.” I looked up, shocked. He had been following this the whole time? He stood elegantly in the corner, his arms folded while puffing on the pristine joint he had just rolled. His prior obliviousness suddenly seemed an act.
“Well, let’s not get crazy.” Bill rebuffed, bristling at the neat little bow Chase’s comment placed on the whole diatribe.

We smoked more and changed the topic. I remembered the vodka bottle and passed that around as well. In a few moments the world had the quality of a light dream as it blissfully spun. The hook of an M83 track blared over the speakers in the other room like a warped siren. I decided to rejoin the party. Waves of wind rocketed the dilapidated house. I imagined the walls themselves evaporating to the touch. The storm erupted inward from all sides, gushing to fill the perforation. Someone’s hand fell on my shoulder and steadied me.

At some point the music had changed and I was watching Hannah, in much better spirits than before, dancing. She moved with an easy grace that suggested training.

When I was a kid I thought I could enter the minds of people around me. In my dreams I tried to walk in the dreams of others. Originally writing was a solipsistic extension of this impulse but watching Hannah at that moment, I wondered how absurd that impulse truly was. Sympath. Empath. Telepath. Was the void between these registers cognitive or conceptual? A matter of the world or of words?

She danced. Though I could only see her, to imagine being her, I closed my eyes.
Chapter ii

Sunlight opened her eyes—for a moment the submerged logic of dreams drifted up with her and she imagined the sun had dried the tears that had never really come. But as she arose she let that thought slip away along with her dreams. She sat up and stayed still. Birdsong, footsteps, voices, breeze—the sounds of morning pulled her further from sleep. Opening the window she felt the slight, rushing chill of the breeze as the sounds grew clearer. She so rarely had a weekend to herself, graduate work in Psychology devoured most of her time. Strange that a free weekend would coincide with a time she’d rather not be alone with her thoughts.

Hannah stretched as she walked, searching out breakfast from the kitchen downstairs. She ate oatmeal and a banana, preferring something effortless and insubstantial. Hannah was usually gone before her housemates woke up, so she had rarely considered how sharply their morning habits contrasted with her own. Breakfast for them meant every possible food cooked in abundance, while Hannah particularly disliked meat or eggs so early. The after-aromas they left behind were no better, and worse still the resinous musk of coffee grounds. She opened a window here too. A new sound joined the morning din, a faint, tinnitus-like ringing she soon realized was her phone upstairs. She nearly tripped over herself running to catch the call.

“Hello? Oh hi mom.” She relaxed. In retrospect rushing to the phone instead of calling back a few minutes later no longer seemed so vital.

“...”

“No I’m fine. It had to happen sometime.”

“...”

“Last night, that’s when I finally went through with it.”

“...”
“Yeah, I told you this is a good thing.”

“...”

“I had my suspicions for a while, waited until I was sure, then it was only a matter of getting up the nerve to go through with it. It was a tense conversation, but now that it’s over with it doesn’t feel like...” She let her mother interrupt as she struggled to catch her breath.

“...”

“Well no, there were problems besides that.” She gradually drifted back downstairs.

“...”

“Three years.”

“...”

“Was I? I guess it could’ve been around then I was still dancing. I don’t remember.”

“...”

“If you say so.”

“...”

“No mom, he wasn’t hitting me. Stop it, it wasn’t like that at all.” She laughed without meaning to. The suggestion was so abrupt, like she had been waiting to broach it the whole time.

“...”

“That’s not what I’m saying. You know it’s not.”

They continued talking, Hannah’s words becoming sharper and more stressed, matching her mother’s octave as if to find her there and bring her back, and then Hannah did calm her, spoke in soothing tones and gentle words, assured her that her daughter would be alright. It was as close to the truth as she could tell.

The night before had ended a three-year relationship with her boyfriend Tom. A voicemail to her mother letting her know that she had gone through with it came soon after. The breakup was a long time coming. Though she felt no remorse, Hannah couldn’t help feeling a bit empty. Without Tom she had lost most of her life outside of work. All at once she now realized that she had housemates and coworkers but few friends, a career path but no hobbies, fulfillment but no joy.

She used to dance. Her thoughts so seldom wandered to that piece of her past anymore. Until a few years ago, she had always danced.

As a child she couldn’t stay still. She’d try her best to mind her teachers, but a boundless frenetic energy would bounce her off the walls and onto furniture, the whole world a blur of motion. Even focusing on a grown-up’s face demanded Herculean concentration, add to that listening to the words, and carrying out what they asked? Impossible.

Her parents brought her to a psychiatrist. He wanted to put her on Concerta. Her father thought she could try getting the energy out. Then came ballet.

Her father played up how dramatically it improved her concentration in school. It hadn’t, not by very much, but kid Hannah did find an abundant talent for listening to her teacher while spinning in circles. If she didn’t have to look and didn’t have to stay still, she found that she could listen. And if the instructions were to move more, in strange new ways that she had never thought of, she could follow those instructions. For the most part at least. When a ballerina twirls her body, her head has to remain still if she wants to keep balance. Hannah learned quickly, eagerly absorbing the intricacies of sophisticated movements but for a reason her instructors could never discern, she refused to follow the simple trick of keeping her head still. Her teachers watched her closely, but the insight was past sight. The sensation of dizziness was exhilarating,
and offered a curious reprieve from Hannah’s jittery compulsions. When her centrifugal force wavered and the energy cascaded out like a psychic aura she collapsed and for that sliver of time while the world was spinning, she could stay still.

Then a few years later something changed. She grew dissatisfied again, lost the slim degree of concentration she had so struggled to gain. Not only that, she grew quick to anger, quick to lash out. She stopped eating and the resulting fatigue compounded with the need to move didn’t pair well. She was always tired but could never sleep, never stay still.

This time her parents and the doctors agreed, these were symptoms of a sickness called puberty. They told Hannah that her body was changing, and with this came a flood of these chemicals called hormones that altered the way she would think and feel. This explanation didn’t satisfy her then, and later on when she studied Psychology she found that this wasn’t really true. The hormones of pubescent kids do change but not enough to account for the often dramatic shift in behavior. This wasn’t merely a matter of chemicals.

Her behavior at school and refusal to eat grew alarming enough to warrant therapy. The therapist kept implying some trauma related to the periods she started having but that didn’t fit either. Sure, she was terrified at that abrupt first sight of blood, but once her mother explained to her what the periods were, that they would for the most part arrive at regular intervals and there was a specific way to treat them, they didn’t bother her too much. It did help that she was for whatever reason free of the extra difficulties other girls her age encountered: cramps, headaches, waves of nausea.

Since whatever afflicted her was not well understood, she would have to find the cure herself this time. Her thoughts returned to ballet, with its tights, fluffy little skirts and narrow shoes that made her feet ache. But the trouble wasn’t only skin deep. Ballet idealized the petite,
childlike figure she no longer had. As her muscles grew they also tightened, so flexibility was no longer presupposed. Even without the outfits, she was still constrained by controlled gestures laden with tight, symbolic language. The dances she learned were so particular because every gesture and movement signified an intransient meaning. She wasn’t the artist; she was the pen writing someone else’s story. When Hannah was a child ballet liberated her from the school desk, but now her body no longer felt free. Ballet centered on the fluttering movement of limbs—delicately tapping toes, the disjointed motion of flowing arms and rigid torso, always to create the illusion of graceful levity, as if the perfect dancer were weightless. She still wanted to dance, but dance without denying that gravity was real for her too. So while her body outgrew the style, her personality outgrew the form.

On her own she began to improvise. She retained a central element of ballet, the twirl, and shaped it into a core of her own style. Instead of a beauty defined by contrast, tapping toes versus rigid torso, shortness of breath versus exacting posture and plastered smiles, feathery grace versus the force of gravity, her new style synthesized movement. The motion of her limbs grew fluidly out of the solar plexus, gravity became momentum.

Her new form needed a new genre, so she danced to contemporary pop music with its percussive bursts of energy. Classical music still had its allure, but it represented the rigid choreography she had just escaped, the calcified, bloodless beauty of a stone statue. Now she danced to music with a pulse. Of course she soon realized she wasn’t the first to try this. Youtube became a helpful teacher for the amalgamation of styles sometimes called modern, free form, interpretive. She regained her appetite.

The ballet instructor called such formless dancing amateur, and that if she was going to indulge in such impressionistic nonsense to do so elsewhere. His studio was for young girls who
hoped to professionalize within an art form with a history that stretched back centuries. He taught her dances that were fit for the eyes of kings and she expected to build a style by rote of her own centrifugal force alone? Then she could do so elsewhere.

So she did, but not without a keen sense of regret from spurring her mentor’s rejection. Hannah’s mother interceded at this juncture with a useful analogy. She said that the word professional emerged from the Latin *professus*, to vow, while amateur came from the Latin *amare*, with love. It was a complex association for a young teenager but she caught the gist. The ballet instructor had first taught her a love of dance, to channel her energy through disciplined motion and thus gain control of it. Now she would use dance to express something which she was just beginning to understand, herself.

Her parents bought her mats, enrolled her in a gymnastics program to augment her dancing, and for the most part let her be. Through improvisation and invention she explored this new language, a stream of corporeal consciousness.

But like Latin this language would die too. By the time she reached college her brief stint in therapy had engendered a new preoccupation, the study of the human mind. The symptoms of what she by now understood as ADHD dissipated once she’d grown, and in college she excelled as a student. For a time she balanced her exploration of the body with her curiosity towards the mind, but these twin passions could only intertwine so long. The word professional would reemerge, along with its cousins—career, security, marketability, networking. She could safely devote the first portion of her life to finding herself. Now was the time to sell herself.

She advanced past undergrad into Flint Valley Masters of Science Program for Clinical Psychology. It among the most competitive programs in the state, advisors assured her that it virtually guaranteed a stable job after graduation. In the mean time she worked between sixty-
five and eighty hours per week. The course work, fieldwork, mandated volunteer hours, and weekend seminars were often compelling, but always taxing. This weekend she had a reprieve from the seminar and finished her homework, clearing her schedule for a bad breakup.

Once a relationship dissipates from romance to disillusionment, when to avoid the confrontation of a hard break up a partner remains like an appendage long after all warm feelings have withered and died, it’s at times difficult to reach back and imagine the initial appeal. Tom was a frat boy who helped her relax, Tom was blessed with a charming smile, Tom’s scent and embrace paired well with his soothing words, Tom was tall, Tom drank so he would never be alone with his thoughts after dark, Tom was a helpless male who could barely wash a plate, Tom used his mental health issues to emotionally manipulate her, Tom cheated, Tom was gone: a summation of three years.

Hannah didn’t want to admit that her boyfriend’s light jokes about her dancing helped her give it up. But somehow he had convinced her that dancing was little more than a frivolous hobby next to the true crucible of physical action, football. Not that Tom played football. Oh no, the discipline required to maintain the training regimen of a college team was way too much for him. But he did play rugby on a club team on the weekends. But even the lightest male pastime was more serious to him than female sports. Or worse yet, an art form. He never suggested that she should give dancing up. Her prancing hardly crossed his mind long enough for him to fixate on it. It was just funny how it was so serious to her.

Sure Hannah was prone to her boyfriend’s influences, but she probably could have maintained her passion in the face of a few jokes every now and then. It’s also likely she could have kept going in the face of the mounting stress to pursue a fruitful career. But with both these
influences, the romantic and private on the one hand and the professional institution on the other, the dance started to feel lonely. She danced less and less, then none at all.

* * *

On the night of the storm Hannah found a party to take her mind off the world. After a couple of drinks, and a strange encounter with a boy out on the patio, she decided to dance.

Her beginning steps were uncertain, a stuttering pace searching out the rhythm. She stepped out onto the balls of her feet, withholding her weight as though the ground might give way beneath her. While the song’s percussive pulse eased to heighten the singer’s verse she threaded a focused core with a gradual arm extension, emphasizing the motion of each interconnected joint taut in suspension like the air itself.

She lightly bounced from one foot to another but muscle memory was slow to stir and her ankle nearly gave way. Instead of overcorrecting and leaning back however she tilted into it and spun, rushing to catch her balance. She danced on the knife edge between grace and collapse, oscillated among the extremes and retained that tension more than she needed to. Like a tap dance on crackling ice she wouldn’t press to regain balance all at once but let her stability build until her steps again connected to her full kinetic power. Sluggishly, the coordination she’d developed from those years of practice flowed from the past back into her. She lightly jumped and absorbed the force of the landing, releasing it into the next spin, and the one after that, extending a leg out to further pull on the sense of whiplash.

She wondered how she looked to others and caught the sight of her own shadow blurred from the low light that cast it. She played with this disembodied projection, the warped simulacrum would swell and sling-shot back to her variant on proportions of motion, perspective, light, a dizzying array to attempt control over. She considered how the shadow
might look upside down, an inversion of the projection so when she next spun her arms out form
her torso instead of stepping forward she followed the momentum down, down until fingertips
touched the ground and rest fell upwards. With all else in suspension she gingerly stepped with
her hands in playful mimicry of her initial timid steps. The one foot felt like falling first,
followed by its leg then the vertebrae one by one upended the inversion until the blood rushed
back again as though it had paused too.

The song started reaching for its crescendo and Hannah kept pace, blending improvised
moves with ones she remembered, moves that matched the flow of the music with dances from
her dreams, gestures and movements spiraled outward from a rushing kinesthetic center. As the
song ended she planted her feet and centered herself, resisting the urge to topple as everything
spun around her. Eventually the world stopped rushing by.