

## SLO Train to LAX

The two septuagenarian women didn't get on the train to San Francisco. Ready to pounce upon their abandoned bench, I watched the blue backs of their heads from behind a large ficus tree. Out of the walls trickled the passé croonery of some ancient sex symbol. His once confident voice was probably feebly crepitating somewhere in the presence of his antsy grandchildren. I peeled an orange with my teeth and dug too deeply into the flesh and the sticky citrus spurt got all over my hands. It dripped from my fangs and splattered the tile as I crammed the fruit into my mouth before anyone could see me. I rifled through my pack for a napkin, but of course there was none and by the time I replaced everything, I couldn't see the two little thimble heads anymore. Covetously, I strapped on my pack and walked outside as briskly, yet dispassionately as possible. I was glad to be wearing mirrored sunglasses when I saw them still sitting in the same position. Somehow, they had shrunk or perhaps they had just huddled together. Regardless, there was no open seat and I went back in and tried to read, but was immutably obsessed by the persisting hallucination of an empty bank outside and I found myself rereading the same sentence a dozen times. I peered through the foliage and it seemed like the bench was truly empty so I rose and nonchalantly strolled out where, again, I was met with a familiar sight. I enacted a perfectly believable scene of peering past the women and into the distance as any normal person would do when waiting for a public transportation vehicle. An afternoon zephyr smelling of Pacific brine hissed pleasantly through the mauve clusters of leaves like combs on an adjacent acacia. There was enough space for another body next to one of the dames and I thought about parking it there and feigning muteness if they tried to initiate any kind of conversation, but before I could embarrass myself a whistle blew and I remained standing as the train groaned to a halt.

It was exactly a quarter to two when I boarded. I found a seat in a relative empty car and fell into another person's warm posterior groove. There is something horrible about coming into contact with a stranger's thermal residue. That second-hand heat conjures up nauseating images of a squatter's exothermic loins. When dealing with anonymity, cold is clean; warmth is odious. Repulsed, I left in search of another chair. I turned into a sheet of paper and squeezed past a corpulent suspect-certainly, the humid perpetrator-jamming his bulging luggage into the storage bin above and caught a whiff of his pungent underarm secretion. I stifled the gag reflex and moved to the back, where, following a thorough prodding inspection, I found an inviolate chair. I sat down and left my pack next to me in plain sight-a sparkling message of my solitary wishes. The vent on the ceiling was not gated and exhaled a chilly breath through its black plastic teeth. I thought about moving again, but decided against it. I dug into my marvelous sack of travel oddities and pulled out a silver roll of duct tape. With my teeth, I ripped off a square slightly bigger than the hole and after the conductor passed by, I silenced that frosty mouth *sub rosa*. Hidden speakers piped in a squeaky voice wishing us a pleasant journey and pointed us in the direction of the café. I checked my newly acquired keychain compass and panicked when I saw the needle pointing north. I looked out the window as if I might find the directions painted upon a tree, but was only met by the silver shell of another Pacific Coastliner. Suddenly, I was sure I had boarded the wrong train. I stood abruptly rushed toward the door. I took one step and saw that the next row

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of seats was facing in the opposite direction. The train started moving slowly. I froze and it dawned on me that I was merely facing the back of the train. I tiptoed backward and slipped quietly into my fabric nest. We were indeed southbound and I leaned all the way back to watch the scenery unfold.

A tractor ate a sleepy green field of barley and dropped piles of yellow hay out of its backside. The hungrier cattle grazed while lazy ones lay crumpled on their bellies in an arroyo under a stand of sycamores. Neighborhoods of villas studded with salmon stucco wore scalloped tile hats and inside their garages lived haughty foreign sports cars offering only a glimpse of their immaculate bumpers and tailpipes to the proletarian rail rider.

After less than twenty minutes the train stopped in Grover Beach and I realized that it was going to be *that* kind of trip. With an appropriate backdrop of three chunky palms, a creamy white Volkswagen Bug like a scoop of vanilla ice cream, titivated with a pair of hearts shaped like sinuous trollops glued to the rear windshield birthed a Mexican woman and her daughter and her daughter's daughter. I watched them watch the littlest girl and was struck by how, when she got older, that youngest daughter would shockingly realize that through the crystal balls that were her mother and grandmother, she could actually peer into her own future. For now, she just chased a rosy rubber ball that seemed to languidly elude her from one end of the lot to the other.

The pneumatic door at the front of the car slid open with a spaceship hiss and a lissome girl with cropped raven hair and deeply bronzed skin approached and turned into the seat on the other side of the aisle. She had no luggage except for a magazine-*People* or *Us* or some other glossy tripe-that she carried rolled up into a tube. With one eye, I watched my wayward neighbor as she drew up her legs under her chin and rocked back and forth slightly, while with the other I saw the little girl finally capture the prized pink sphere in a bed of azaleas.

The train moved slowly beneath a sky full of animated clouds a la *The Simpsons*. Turquoise fields of broccoli and cauliflower anxiously extended their waxy leaves in a tempestuous rain dance, but none would come. A solitary figure stood hunched over in a field surrounded by endless acres of strawberries. A mile later, on a another farm, a large carnival of pickers hopped on and off flat beds like fleas as they loaded endless crates of their sweet treasure for the farmers' markets or Trader Joe's or a local CSA. A no-name town sprouted out of the weeds. Beside a set of abandoned tracks next to a ghost train station, rotten telephone poles looked like they had been chopped down when they weren't looking. Behind a lewd eucalyptus grove where *peperchas de madera* peeled off their clothes, a partially razed brothel crumbled a little more with each gust of wind. A junkyard full of discarded rusty hunks of metal abutted the tow pound, its prisoners tagged with graffiti-large chunky letters like dinner rolls-and when I focused my ken I saw, through a tiny cobwebbed window, black spires of menthol smoke mixed with the vile intentions swirling around the stubby horns protruding out of the temples of a nefarious sadist attendant awaiting her next victim. Any vehicle swallowed by those wretched jaws never returns to its owner the same. All cars have souls and when they are towed, that steel hook that is jammed into their stomach leaves them scarred for life. Look closely at the cars in any impound lot. There is a halogen trauma in their headlights that eerily resembles the woeful eyes of a doe. While a new car, lovingly brought home to a clean garage smelling of pine aerosol and fresh paint simpers at its good fortune, its

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begrimed convict cousin, sitting scared and alone behind the concertina wire, trembles with fear. I spotted an unlikely denizen of the iron cemetery, a late model hunter-green Lexus in between an old lorry missing a hood and a banged up Charger with broken windows and spray-paint covering the doors. Where was its owner? Was he frantically looking for his baby? I swear I heard the bales of the Lexus. Had I been a mechanic of sound acumen, my ears might have discerned the slightest whimper emanating from the engine.

Just outside of Guadalupe, where the sagebrush fought bravely against the mighty wind-a merciless and invisible conquistador, bursting out of the ocean and flying breakneck over the dunes-I saw a de facto sulfur refinery, much as I had imagined Avenal would be. As soon as it came into view I heard a raspy voice behind me bark out.

“You dirty scum!” it snapped.

Startled, I warily glanced back, but the old man’s face was pressed against the glass.

Two Pythagorean thiol mountains rose above any building in sight and were the pinnacle of all visible relief. Their color was unlike any I had ever seen. I didn’t think such a hue existed outside a box of crayons or powdered lemonade. A man wearing a strange suit and a respirator climbed a spiral staircase up a tumescent metal tower expelling sickly gray soot out of its blowhole. The fumes hung in the air and even seemed to sag. Behind me an old man struck the window as we passed the refinery. “It wasn’t me,” he snarled. I checked the sage and then some clouds up above. The wind was blowing fiercely, but the sulfur cloud just lolled in the sky as if the forces of nature had no effect on it.

Ten minutes later the train came to a stop atop a ridge overlooking a field of dainty asparagus ferns like feather dusters. I watched their tops and saw that the wind was blowing from the north. The ride had been slow, but surprisingly smooth, something like riding on a pillow of air and I hadn’t been bothered by our snail’s pace. But now, perched on that ridge, I watched smog clouds pass us on their way to Los Angeles and it seemed that the turkey vultures were circling lower than usual. I grew restless. I tried to take in more scenery to pacify my discomfiture: an old barn with the paint weathered away; in the distance, a shiny red sports car passed a school bus leaving a dusty scud in its wake. I tried to read my book again, but I became fixated on the same passage. I needed to move. Any speed would do. Something unsettling comes over a man when he is immobilized. I had full use of my limbs and mind, but I was no longer my own entity. I had fused, along with everyone else, into a barnacle bloom upon the ship’s hull; a cloud of krill swallowed whole by the great steel whale and now the giant beast was idling and we feeble crustaceans could do nothing about it. I tried to decipher the strange code on the corner of the window: FRA TYPE II AS-4 GE MR10 25C ANSI 726.1 MPI 7-04. Somebody somewhere could interpret it. There were crumbs and two sticky stains shaped like amoebas on the tray table next to me. I ate a dry salami sandwich and looked at my scrawl on the legal pad in front of me. It was filled with superfluous detail and shorthand that only I would ever understand. Buried in a mess of sentence fragments I found the words: “Printed and Published = Whore. Locked Away = Virgin.” Something about Swift. Had I written those words? I was sweaty and uncomfortable. I ripped off the duct tape, but the vent was mute. I snuck a glance at the brunette and she was sitting up in her seat fanning herself with the magazine. She looked back at me with narrow eyes as if she didn’t trust me so close to her in this suspended state of animation.

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Behind me the old man was acting strange, too. Every few seconds he slammed his fist into the window and followed with a guttural curse. “Not my fault.” Whack. I followed his pattern for a while and was amazed at his steady rhythm.

The conductor came by and when she was within earshot he poked his withered little onion head out into the aisle and snapped at her. “Why the hell ain’t we movin’?” She brushed by him and casually responded without turning around. “We’ll be on our way any moment now, sir.” She disappeared into the café and the old man retracted back into his space and resumed his impeccable vitreous drumming. I heard him grumbling in between attacks. “Hmmp. What’s that goddamn smell?” A moment later he quaffed noisily and followed it with a belch of proportionate volume. The brunette leaned her head back and bit her lower lip. She had plugged up her ears with her index fingers and was rubbing her temples with her pinkies. The conductor emerged out of the café. “We ain’t movin’ yet, lady,” croaked the old man. His voice sounded like a nail pried out of a board. “Any moment now, sir.” She was even more pleasant this time. She paused two rows in front of me to talk to the two blue-haired matrons. They knew each other from somewhere and she recalled a particularly disturbing train ride she had taken several weeks earlier.

“I’m surprised you didn’t hear about it. It was all over the papers and television for the entire month of April. The poor boy’s mother tried to kill herself a week after it happened. Just a real tragedy. Where? Oh, it was somewhere around Redding. My husband and I were going up to spend Easter Sunday with his family. No, Rusty died last year. This year we went to Jim’s. No, that’s okay. It was Friday...yes Friday night, I think. Luther was asleep-as always. He just can’t stay awake unless he’s driving. I guess it’s a blessing, but I was wide awake because I’m the exact opposite. There’s just too much noise on-oh, yes, we were in a sleeper near the front of the train. We had a nice suite with two reclining seats facing each other with plenty of room and I remember Luther’s snoring was terribly loud and I was really thinking about nudging him a bit when I felt a sharp crack. No, it wasn’t like we hit a car or anything like that. It was like something hit the *train*-hard. Even Luther woke up and he said: ‘What was that? Did you hear that Joanne?’ And I didn’t answer because I’ve been working on trains for twenty-five years and I’d never heard any sound like that before...Of course. Well, that would probably be a deaf black bear. I don’t know how they found out it was deaf. I guess they did an autopsy because it was so weird. Mostly, kids think it’s funny to leave things on the track. Oh, you know, shopping carts, old TV sets. Once, they left a car. Some old thing that didn’t run anymore. They must’ve towed it there and pushed onto the tracks. Well, no, there wasn’t any time to brake. Yes, we did stop after the collision, but we pushed it almost a half-mile before we could stop.

“So I knew that we’d hit something and I was a little scared because it was such a strange sound and I thought, you know, maybe it was a person. You hear about these things happening and you wonder how people don’t hear the train coming. We’re always blowing the whistle, but I guess sometimes people just aren’t paying attention or they get some kind of thrill playing around with the train. I don’t know what it is either, but as soon as I heard that sound I knew it was something bad. No, there was nothing we *could* do. Luther and I just sat there through that terrible noise of the train braking and I was trembling and saying, ‘This is bad, Luther. This is *really* bad.’ And he was trying his best to calm me down, but I just kept shaking. I just couldn’t stop shaking. A few

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minutes later when we finally stopped, I heard a lot of commotion up front and the doors opened and the conductor and the engineer walked out and a few minutes later I heard ambulances and fire trucks and police. Some people in the train got outside, but I didn't want to see it. We were stopped so long I already knew what it was. I didn't want to see that.

"I read about it the next day in *The Record*. There had been a group of high school kids in the woods near the tracks. I think they were football players or something. Most of them were just drinking and smoking and doing that sort of thing, but they said a couple of them were taking PCP. Apparently, they left the group and went off by themselves near the tracks. They heard the whistle, but they were so disturbed that they believed that they could stop the train by running into it head first. So, they put on their helmets and ran as fast as they could into the locomotive, but one of them lost his balance-that's what he said to the police, anyway-or realized at the last moment what he was doing and fell into a tree, but his friend ran right into our train."

"Oh dear," said the lady in the window seat.

"Yes, I remember that now. Terrible tragedy," said the other.

There was a groan and then a jolt and the train started moving again. The conductor pulled away from the seats and adjusted her cap with both hands. "Well, I guess that was my break. Not even supposed to have one, really. Beatrice, Beatrice, you girls enjoy the rest of the trip. Should be just another couple of hours to LA." The two women exchanged polite formalities and then huddled together in collusion as Joanne marched away into one of the other cars. I think that if the train had failed to start moving again at that exact moment, I might have jumped to my feet and put my fist through the window.

I sighed to myself and watched as we slowly overtook the smog. Another train passed and I counted fourteen cars moving along in a triplet feel at approximately 95 beats per minute. So that was it. Nobody dead after all. Outside, sun-baked willows grew out of yellow fissures in the earth. Dead oaks rotting on their backs looked like ossified claws of some giant prehistoric bird. When the old man burst into a violent fit of coughing, I was certain he was choking. I turned around and peered at him through the gap between the seats.

He wasn't choking, but he was in bad shape, nevertheless. As he spit on the floor, his face shriveled up like he was in great pain. Deep wrinkles formed around his distended mouth and followed a deep epidermal furrow along the sides of his ruddy nose. Like shadowy capillaries, they extended from his canthi and wrapped around the side of his head so that it looked like an invisible web of great tensile strength was pressed against his head. Below his forehead, where two bushy white eyebrows came to a point, there was more hair; a tuft connecting two hirsute ocular awnings. His face was dirty and sweaty under hoary stubble that extended across his cheeks and covered the front of his neck. The silver flask lying on its side on the seat beside him was an affirmation of his weakness. He was a sot and a lifelong smoker. There was no mistaking his porous purple beak. It was bloated and despite his constant warthog snorting, a clear slime dripped over his top lip and into his mouth.

He managed to get himself under control and brought the spasm down to a slight wheeze. He took off his mesh cap revealing a wet crown of silver hair. He scratched at the base of his spine and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his Pendleton. He settled

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back into his chair, quaffed the flask and was readjusting his brass parts when he saw me. I quickly turned around hoping that the meeting between our eyes had only been an aluminum glint, but a moment later he was upon the back of my seat. His bushy top and purplish head looked like an overexposed turnip. I eyed him carefully as I immediately noticed my glassy reflection in his eyes.

“You know what Jessie Corn Senior told me the night he died, Man-Well? He said, ‘The farm ain’t no place for late nights and drinkin’. This gonna be your land someday, son. You don’t gotta be a genius to grow food, just gotta keep at it every day. You respect the land, it’ll pay you back.’ Well, nobody ever paid me back nothin’. I been ridin’ this train up and down the coast for forty years and there’s nothin’ but poison in the earth.”

He disappeared behind the seat and I heard another deep swallow. He screwed the top on and his arm dropped heavily into his lap. The flask bounced off his leg and skipped under my chair. His eyelids descended slowly over his dilated pupils and his nose produced a sound like a tin whistle as he drifted away. Keeping an eye on him, I searched for the flask with my bare foot. I brought it up with my big toe like an orangutan and slobbered it around next to my ear. There wasn’t much left. I smelled it. He was drinking bourbon or whisky. I sealed it up and reached into the gap between my seats and dropped it onto his lap. It slid into a little space between his legs and remained wedged there while Jessie Corn Jr. wheezed and dreamt on the train.

I left him there and went to the café. An indifferent man with pink jowls, wearing a white shirt and a black tie sat behind the counter reading the daily. Hank Williams sang *Cold, Cold Heart* on a little radio beside him. Neither of us looked at each other as I bought the candy; I was sullen for paying three dollars for a bag of Skittles and he had already sold so many of these vulgar sugar beads that he just didn’t care. I sat down at a booth and leafed through his discarded newspaper remains. The headline on the front page was a story about a rocket launch in Vandenberg today. I read a little bit, but found the article tedious. The projectile carried an experimental satellite that was a new and exciting tool in our country’s developing missile defense program. It had cost 500 million dollars to shoot the thing into space as an assurance that we would be keeping up with the world’s rogue states in the missile race. Someone in the article was quoted as saying, “It’s a very exciting time. With the increasing North Korean threat, we need a strong system in place to intercept any ballistic threat.”

I popped two of the confectionaries like medicine. They were both cherry. I hate cherry-not real cherries of course, (they are in fact my *favorite* fruit) but artificial cherry flavor-but ate them anyway since I calculated each Skittle to value approximately six cents and I’ve never been one to waste money or food. I wondered how much of that 500 million was used to buy Skittles. Surely, some of the hundreds or thousands of the mad geniuses involved in thrusting that metal phallus into orbit shared my addiction to refined cane. How many late nights did they put in checking and rechecking sequences and programs and making sure the math was correct while relying on (excluding, of course, the illicit, yet omnipresent amphetamines and alkaloids) coffee, cigarettes and yes, Skittles. Now, I realize that some of those people may have preferred a Kit Kat or even Runts, but the fact remains that Skittles are popular and I’m convinced that the company profited from the launch. But what about the engineers and physicists that didn’t eat candy, you ask? Well, don’t forget about their kids. First of all, I’ve known enough

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physicists to tell you that they *all* eat Skittles. Something about refined cane makes their minds more nimble. Furthermore, as many are single parents or married to another person working on the *same* project, they have to hire a babysitter to watch those children during the ungodly hours of planning such a monolithic endeavor. Babysitters typically aren't the best cooks, but the good ones quickly develop into rather adept psychologists after spending some time with young kids. An appropriate dose of Skittles after dinner is a trick the seasoned au pair knows well. If she can withstand the child's initial saccharine squall, an hour later she will be reading quietly by the fire while the moppet, now docile as a lamb, is comfortably crashed beneath a down comforter.

These were my thoughts as I stared out the window at a plastic pink flamingo living out its immortality camouflaged within an explosion of bougainvillea. We moved slowly enough that I saw a one-eyed sphinx moth sleeping on the yellow vinyl siding of a bait shop. The azure Pacific. Pretty pink and yellow flowers breathed in that salty mist. A beautiful Mexican girl with copper hair, soft brown shoulders and smooth knees rode a bike with a watermelon in the basket. She moistened her lips and I saw a landscape on her face: two peaks above and the round outline of a rosy lake below. Her dress fluttered in the breeze. She wiggled her bare toes and her flip flops slapped against her heels. All of these things were beautiful from a distance. Everything was in its right place. Suddenly, I escaped from that train as a hummingbird and followed that auburn beauty down a sleepy little lane. I flew high above the train to look upon the ocean, but it was no longer that brilliant cobalt hue. Instead, the water dimmed to a waxy lead wash. That gentle salty breeze turned into a pepper monsoon that stung like birdshot. I flew alongside her russet silhouette, but she swatted me away with a hand covered in gaudy rings. Her hair was brittle reeked of smoke. It clung to moist face full of colored grease and powder. Her mouth was twisted into an ugly snarl. She spat into the air and the cold slime struck my feathers. Her knees were worn and little worms of carpet clung to the skin across her patella. I trailed behind her bicycle, but now she straddled a thick chrome machine between her brisk legs sheathed in buskins. She twisted the tusks of the wild boar and it jerked violently, spewing its toxic flatus into the air. The watermelon was a bowl of gazpacho. The hog was a pumpkin. The pumpkin dehydrated into a large egg-a large rotten egg. Chunks broke off and clogged my wings. They couldn't beat anymore. All of her lovely graces were gone, but I was still a bird. My wings were coated in sallow grime. Then I was myself again. I drew my face away from the window. I was shaking my head as I peeled a bit of yolk out of my hair. Jessie Corn was staring at me with a half-eaten egg in his hand, hacking and laughing like a wild dog.

His eyes were narrow and mean and his torso swooned as if he was astride a buoy. I didn't know how long he had been sitting at the booth in front of me, but his sharp voice yanked me back into the train like a rusty gaffe.

"Jessie Corn Senior used to own 70 acres in Santa Maria. Best land on the Central Coast, too. We was gonna make some money on them berries."

"Uh huh."

"You think *I* killed them? I seen the way you looked at me that morning. Everybody in the county know it was that goddamn dog did it," he barked like a vicious cur. "I already tole you it ain't nothin' to do with me. I loved my family."

"Who do you think I am?"

"State found me innocent, boy. It was an *accident*. So you just stop lookin' at me

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like you think you know sumthin'? You don't know nothin'. Not one goddamn thing."

He finished off the hardboiled egg and chewed it with his mouth open. His beard was smattered with boiled yolk. There were three more brown replicas sitting on the table in front of him. I could see them vibrating upon the mottled formica. A metal thermos stood next to a Dixie cup filled with steaming black liquid.

"Christ, you ever gonna leave me alone? Been forty years now! Why can't you all jes' let me be? I was proven innocent in a court of law, Man-Well!" He smashed his fist into the table and the little cup jumped, spilling the coffee.

"Look, you've got the wrong..."

He appeared exhausted and his head sagged. "I sold you that land, Man-Well. You still got yer family."

"Look, sir. You're obviously thinking of someone else. I wasn't alive forty years ago. I don't know who you think I am, but I'm not him. My family's not even..."

He jumped out of his seat and raised his fists. His upper lip curled into an ugly, yet harmless sneer. "Don't talk about family! Loved my family!" He appeared as an intoxicated, but benign buffoon, threatening trouble in the saloon. Unfortunately, there was not a bottle nearby so he could menacingly break it off against the table and brandish its jagged crown, thus completing his tragically clichéd role. There was a bump on the rail and the train jerked upward, causing him to lose his balance. He fell backward into the aisle and landed on the seat of his pants. The attendant lowered his newspaper just below his eyes and looked at me with disgust. I started to say something, but he disappeared behind the comics. I tried to become the hummingbird again, but it was useless.

"Goddamn knees are shot," Jessie Corn said angrily. Emitting a lugubrious groan, he rose to his feet and fell back into the seat. One egg remained intact next to the thermos. The other two had rolled off the table and disappeared. He dropped to his knees and searched under the bench and returned with one a moment later. He started peeling it and flicked the broken shells onto the floor. We both sat and stared out of our windows in silence.

When did the smog overtake us? All traces of sun were gone and the sordid fog had descended, settling close to the ground. Condensation formed in between the two panes and with a sideways glance, I saw Jessie Corn slide next to the window and forcefully expectorated an elastic projectile into the glass. It struck the window yet remained partially attached to his mouth forming a pearly bridge from lower lip to the pane. He pulled the cuff of his shirt over his hand and rubbed the slime into a murky paste. The cloudy circle looked like a small porthole window. I wondered what he was looking at. If we exchanged an eye for an eye, would we see the same thing country? Would I see an empty coastal wasteland, with its dirty ocean-fed lakes inhabited by petulant gulls leaving their acrid ammonia trail behind them? Would that obfuscated ocean view well up feelings of resentment within my heart or could I just look past all of that and see the sparkling Pacific as it had been a moment ago, brilliant and lustrous, full of inspiration, a sobering reminder of the vast and infinite possibilities latent within every soul in this train?

He ate the egg as repulsively as a gopher snake swallows its prey whole. Though it was unbearable to watch him feed, my eyes kept darting in his direction for the sheer shock value of its repugnance. As he masticated, nuggets of the tawny sterile embryo

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spread across the table and soaked up coffee like sponges. With fingers like tweezers, he picked up a soggy morsel and, squinting like a rodent, flicked it in my direction. The fillip caused me to turn just in time to see the projectile land on the lowest knuckle of my middle finger. It left a cool brown trail over my cuticle and smoothly glided across the exsanguinated surface of my nail. It reached the precipice of the overhang and finally, swollen, after absorbing its little chocolate estuary, it fell next to the tip of my finger.

I tilted my bag of candy until a pebble fell into my palm. I rolled it around between my fingers and we locked eyes like two pubescent soldiers, awaiting the general's battle cry in a puerile cafeteria food fight. I strained my ears for any signal to attack: a cymbal crash on the radio, the annoying little melody that preceded the engineer's announcements, the hiss of the automatic door to the rear, the flushing of a toilet, but it never came. We stood as still as two stone-faced infantrymen listening for a radio communication, each with our comestible weapons in hand.

I snuck a furtive glance at my ammunition and saw it was a green bullet (my favorite synthetic fruit impostor) and decided that I would rather eat it than waste it on his head. Besides, my aim was always spotty and sugar was not cheap on this train. Keeping my eyes trained on him, I stood up and started to leave the car. I passed him tentatively and I heard him grumble: "I ain't no murderer, Man-Well."

I turned around and decided to put an end to his mistaken identity crisis.

"Listen to me you old fool," I said, pointing a finger downward at him. "I'm Tom, Dick or Harry. Anybody, but *not* Manuel. You've never seen me before and whatever you did to your family is your business, not mine."

The edge of his lip curled downward. "Jes like in sixty-eight, eh? Nobody cared back then and nobody gives a hoot now. I shoulda sprayed those fields with gasoline!" His eyes were straining in their sockets. "You don't know what I gotta live with."

He had worked himself into a state of sobriety.

"You did what you had to do, right?" I ventured and turned to go. "Anyway, it's all water under the bridge now,"

"Water under the bridge!" Ain't no water under the bridge! That was my *life*. That was my entire rotten life!"

He emphasized his last word by striking the table again and the thermos fell, spilling the rest of the coffee into his lap. He yelped like a wounded dog and shot out from under the bench. He cursed and smacked the dark stain on his crotch with an open palm as if he could beat the heat right out of the denim. This was the first time I had seen him on his feet. He was short, but he hadn't always been that way. Forty years ago he might have been a foot taller and filled out his clothes. Now his shirt hung off his drooping shoulders like a towel and there weren't enough holes in his belt to properly clamp his jeans around his waist. They were streaked with crusted earth that was likely older than me and they bunched around his feet, like a pair of accordions. I noticed a small black leather case clipped to his hip, probably a knife. Was he actually wearing spurs on his boots? That couldn't be legal on a train anymore. A pair of more compassionate individuals might have gotten him a rag or a towel, but the attendant was gone and I, too, slunk back into the bowels of the train leaving him wringing out his trousers into a brown puddle between his legs.

I walked past my old lair. An orange marked the spot and I picked it up and put it in my pack. The brunette was gone. I assumed she had gotten off somewhere around

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Surf Beach. The two old women were still there, whispering in collusion. “My, it’s hot in here all of a sudden. “ Yes, let’s ask Joanne to turn the air back on next time she comes around.” Two cars down, in a cool and comfortable car, I passed a large Vietnamese man with a flat face and a leonine nose that had been broken several times. He wore a pair of headphones and kept spelling the word wolf out loud. “Wolfs. Wolfs. W-O-L-F-S. They took *everything*.” he repeated. I found another seat further back behind a businessman with a lucid appearance and made another roost. I looked at my watch. We had less than two hours left until Union Station so I dipped my hat over my eyes and leaned back. The enthusiastic capitalist was on the phone, quoting figures pertaining to his company’s latest quarterly loss and speculating about the end of the recession.

“You see, Mr. Abernathy, it’s all about consumer confidence. We have to have faith that the economy will recover. These trends are cyclical. Just look at our current assets compared to twenty years ago. If you adjust the market value for inflation you’ll see that...”

How soothing his voice was. It was like listening to a lullaby in a foreign language. “Compare five and quarter percent to six and a half. In some cases interest rates have actually *decreased* by two percentage points. I agree, now is the perfect time for homeowners to refinance...market shares have dropped... I see, well just let me calculate the compound interest here...” There was no need to count any sheep as both eyelids draped over my corneas. Heart rate dropping, brain activity decreased. My soporific shepherd had fed my drowsy flock all the melatonin it needed.

It was a deep sleep and I was the hummingbird again. I found a virgin honeysuckle bush in full bloom. Insects scattered as I probed those creamy honey pots with my curved beak and slurped sweet nectar until my shimmering red belly bulged. I flew to the top of a sycamore tree and rested in the palm of a furry leaf. Where did the other hummingbirds sleep? I longed to tell one about my secret bottomless sugar well. I strained and emitted a strange sound, but there was no response. Two noisy crows shrieked below, but their language was unintelligible. In their hushed murderous tone they seemed to be plotting a devious a mob hit. A pair of blackbirds argued in a strange dialect-probably a territorial dispute. The supercilious jays were laughing about something. It was hysterical, but I could not understand, for you see, every species of bird speaks a different language. The barbaric war cry of the corvid cannot be mimicked even by a mynah bird and the erudite soliloquy of the parrot will never be understood by the idiotic woodpecker.

I flew from the tree and over a lake filled with houseboats and canoes. Black clouds of mosquitoes hung over the water like levitating shrubbery. They followed the sanguinary scent of warm veins and descended upon their victims in droves forcing them indoors. One unlucky couple burst into a frantic baboon arm flail that capsized their canoe and left them splashing in the water. I dove straight into the swarm, spearing several of the winged bloodsuckers, but they paid little attention to me, as my avian blood was not palatable to them.

I zipped along until my body grew weary-completely free, unbound-yet still I craved, and as rapid wing bursts slowed to the languorous flutter of the cabbage butterfly, I worked my lids until my eyeballs were moist. I lolled my head to one side producing several sharp reports from within my neck and noticed the brunette sitting across from

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me. She was curled up in her seat like a fawn. I caught her glance momentarily as she heard my sinews cracking and I was sure she flashed me a languid smile. Had I not changed cars? The fledgling entrepreneur was still at it with the numbers. The geriatric Beatrices were at the front of the car. We had all migrated toward the cold. The blue and red geometric patterns on the fuzzy seat covers seemed right. Had I awoken in a parallel universe?

“Ortiz! You turncoat sumbitch. Get outta there. Other people need to use that john, too.”

I awoke abruptly to the sound of Jessie Corn’s voice knifing through the cabin. He was banging his fist against the bathroom door at the front of the car. “Goddamit, Ortiz! You been in there twenty minutes. What in God’s name are you-”

The door folded inward and the hulking Vietnamese dragon stepped out. Jessie Corn’s eyes grew wide and the rest of him shrunk just a bit as the swarthy giant calmly moved past without acknowledging him. As he struggled with the pliant partition I heard him mutter under his breath: “Nobody knows nothin’ ‘nymore. Ain’t no common courtesy. Damn devil’s playground out here.” He finally figured out the mechanism and slammed the door, confining himself with the echoes of his own curses.

The Vietnamese man moved slowly down the aisle. He looked overwhelmed by mental anguish, some fierce struggle consuming him. He wore a yellow knit cap that sat on top of his head like a crookneck squash as if he had started to pull it off, but had been distracted by an escaping thought. Everyone turned to look at him, but he remained unaware of the glossy eyes like bits of caviar that followed his spotlight.

He stopped in the aisle in the space next to the brunette. He pressed his huge palms against the front of his orange sleeveless muscle shirt, leaving two giant paw prints on his chest. I thought him comical for a moment as those two moist imprints reminded me of learning how to draw hand-turkeys in elementary school. Pinned in between his arms like fence posts, those two evanescent stains seemed committed in a standoff to the death. Who would evaporate first? Would it be the bird with a protruding nipple for an eye or the blind one closer to his armpit? Perhaps, since it was damper in the armpit...

“Do you mind if I sit here?”

His voice was barely a murmur, but it was so quiet in the car that I had no problem hearing him speak, even as he sat down next to her.

“You don’t mind if I sit,” he repeated. “If I sit here, next to you?” He had a thick unfriendly accent. He seemed to be speaking through his teeth. He leaned back in the chair and his upper lip curled forming a scary cartoon grin. I looked around. Everyone was watching. Nothing about him seemed funny anymore.

It is interesting to observe a person taken completely by surprise. I once surreptitiously released a small mouse in the bathroom while showering with a woman. When she stepped out and saw the little fur ball scurrying through the steam she screamed and jumped back into the tub. She remained utterly shaken for the next hour and I consoled her tenderly while trying not to laugh. I never told her the truth, although that would have been a nice experiment as well. The brunette was more discrete. She was able to stifle her gasps though I saw her hands involuntarily ball up into little thumb-concealing fists and her nostrils briefly displayed the temporary indentations accompanying a rapid intake of air. All traces of her listless doe eyes disappeared. Her soft, feathery features instantly petrified. The blood from her face drained into her neck

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and she grew several shades paler. Nervously, she quickly donned her fleece, concealing her gooseflesh.

She watched him with razor eyes as he took off his hat, revealing sodden tufts of black hair that poked out of his skull at right angles. He seemed quite comfortable next to her and he made no attempt to say anything else. She flinched when he thrust his groin upward, but he only reached into his back pocket and pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He tapped one out and placed it behind his ear. It was an awkward, yet very logical situation; perfectly balanced. It was a living demonstration of the first law of thermodynamics applied to human emotion. No energy lost, none gained; only the mundane transfer of heat from one body to another. The gentle hand of the pickpocket plucks a wallet out of the back pocket of the unsuspecting rubberneck. Where, only a moment ago, the brunette was calmly resting, lost in that corrugated icy blue surf of the Pacific, on the verge of sleep, basking in the peaceful caress of the hypnotic solar flare of late afternoon, she was now beside herself, quivering in an agitated state resembling a hunted animal's primal survival mode. And the dragon, he was smiling broadly. He could have easily been sitting bare-skinned on a bear skin rug next to a roaring fire after a sumptuous feast. He wore the expression of a thief sprawled among the scattered spoils of a perfectly executed heist. His nervous little plague, shivering and nude, with its twitches and tics had penetrated the invisible barrier separating those two polar opposite souls, and burrowed into the brunette's heart. In its place, he absorbed her soft blue mist that was actually not even hers to give. Ultimately though, he too would only bathe in its euphoric waters for a short time before being forced to relinquish it to another. And so on and so forth. We lugubrious vessels, affixing so much attachment, meaning and value to our infinitesimally insignificant odysseys through a bizarre narcissistic galaxy, merely swapped invisible drops of spirit like spit as we unwittingly crashed into one another like subatomic particles.

I had a vision of Isaac Newton. His decomposed corpse was now merely a shrine—a token of the potential of the mind; an inspiration to aspiring geniuses. But how many of those reverent souls standing silently in Westminster Abbey came away with much more than the token moment when paying homage to the monolithic mind of this man? Which lucky tourist finally inhaled that small dusty remnant of the great physicist, drifting through the Abbey for centuries, always just out of reach of the sniffing infantry of tourist nostrils? Was it the asthmatic Union Carbide engineer visiting from South Charleston, huffing while desperately trying to control his rogue teenage son or was it one of the three unemployed English-born Indian mathematicians, fresh out of college, traveling Europe, paying tribute to their dead mentors and staying as drunk as possible for three weeks? An ugly incident on the floor of a bathroom in a German beer garden. A careless step by an American seeking his German genealogy. After exiting the stall he forgot to clean the bottom of his shoes. A red eye flight back to the states. A cat's tongue licking the sole of his shoe. We bumped into each other at a restaurant in Chinatown. A piece here, another molecule there. Inevitability. One way or another we all became the same thing. Sooner or later it would be my turn to inhale that dehydrated microscopic morsel of the numerical knight.

“No.” The brunette shook her head. She was not convincing.

The dragon folded his ear in half with his middle finger and pinched the cigarette. He slapped it against his chops with a limp wrist and it stuck. His lips were dark purple

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and severely chapped. The bottom one was bleeding and a few jagged cracks oozed a nasty orange purulence. He let the cigarette dangle for a moment like he had forgotten about it. With a lascivious thrust he jerked his pelvis upward again and reached into the tiny front pocket of his jeans, pulling out a Zippo lighter and held it to his face like he was studying his features in the polished silver case. He was a wax statue for a moment then he squeezed the lighter between his thumb and index finger and the lid sprang off with a metallic ping. In one deft movement he snapped two fingers of the other hand against the wheel of the lighter like a magician and wondrously the wick was surrounded by a small yellow flame. He performed his trick with such a refined motion and skill that I thought about giving him a round of applause. He clamped down on the cigarette with his mouth and leaned into the fiery tear. He sucked in the flicker and drew deeply. His chest expanded as the tip of the cigarette glowed vermilion. I looked around at everyone in the audience. We were all waiting for the exact same moment. The dowagers shared the same unblinking, limpid eyes as the young businessman, the brunette and me.

This odd hulk of a man was doing the unthinkable, on a train, and for that brief moment, a few passengers on a southbound Amtrak experienced shared delay between sight and judgment. No one made a sound. We had witnessed the bombshell and it was now a matter of waiting for the fallout. We had seen an unmitigated act before it was rapidly shipped off to the cerebral tribunal. It struck me not because it was a rare event; it is actually the most banal thing in the world to stand among a throng of onlookers, mouth agape, eyes agog and brainless as a peculiar scene plays out. I was surprised I had never thought about it before. This time however, I was pleased to be aware of the silent lucidity before the storm.

Smoke poured out of the dragon's mouth and when it touched the seat in front of him, our collective fermenting impulse, swollen and frenzied, like an obedient dog waiting for its master's signal at the gates of the frontal lobe, burst forth with the message.

"Oh dear, that smells terrible."

"Ugh, that's just awful. Terribly inconsiderate."

"Umm, sir I think it's illegal to--"

"What are you doing? You can't smoke in here." The brunette stood with her back against the window. "No," she repeated more forcefully. She waited for a response, but he ignored her. "No, you can't sit here! Please, leave. Your smoke is bothering me!" She pointed ahead and I was directly in her line. A bad thought crossed my mind and I quietly switched seats with my pack, placing it next to the window.

The man looked calm and smoked without ashing. He seemed to grow more at peace with each indirect complaint slung his way. He propped his feet up and his zebra print thongs dropped to the floor.

"Hey, you can't *smoke* in here! Are you deaf?" Her voice grew shrill and pierced through the ineffectual half-hearted grumbling. "Sir? Excuse me!" Something not unlike fear crept into her countenance. The Beatrices stood and left the car in a fit of hyperbolic coughs. One of them used her straw hat to fan the smoke away. "Where's Joanne? This is unacceptable." The businessman fidgeted in his seat until he received an appropriately timed phone call.

Though I understood what was happening, I had several reasons for not interfering. I was quite capable of standing up and kicking out his legs and providing a

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safe egress for the auburn-skinned damsel-in-distress. I could have said something like: “Hey buddy, put your feet down. The lady wants to leave.” Both of those phrases sounded apropos in my head. But alas, this smoldering rhinoceros was quite insane and the thought of tangling with an asylum escapee over the honor of some anonymous maiden seemed beyond the scope of my responsibilities. I did feel particularly loathsome when I decided that this would have to be a job for Joanne.

But fear was not the only reason I shied away. The voyeur in me was awakened. The scientist. The observer. The *journalist*. We were *all* Menckens and Meads aboard this train. This group was a behavioral psychologist’s wet dream as we sat-abject poltroons-cravenly cringing, waiting for each other to do something. B.F. Skinner would have paid dearly for a ticket.

“Put your feet down. I want to get out.” He puffed calmly from the butt. “Oh my God,” she groaned and dropped her head. She squeezed her eyes tightly and filled her lungs through a grill of clenched teeth. She finally exploded:

“Get out of my way you goddamn Jap! Move, move, move!”

She rushed into his bent knees and slapped at his legs with the sides of her hands as if she was shaking off some grime. Joanne and a bear-chested coach attendant from another car appeared from the front and walked briskly toward the action. The new fellow was bigger than the Vietnamese man. He wore a thick beard and a short sleeve shirt that strained against a pair of thick biceps. The brunette broke through the bony barrier and stumbled into the aisle. She squeezed by the big man and stood behind him, tremulous, rubbing her palms nervously with her elbows against her breasts.

“Is this man bothering you, miss?”

“Yes, he is. I don’t even know him and he’s really freaking me out. Look at his eyes. I think there’s something really wrong with him.” She shivered and rubbed her arms.

He looked down disapprovingly at the dragon, who expelled a blue cloud into the air. “Sir it’s a criminal offense to smoke on this train. You’re going to have to put that out right now.”

The dragon’s eyes flew open abruptly, like sashes, and he looked like a corpse suddenly reanimated. Silently, he peeled the speckled brown filter from his bottom lip. It had been there so long that skin seemed to have started growing around it. His lacerated lip protracted as he pulled it from his face, exposing a row of ugly brown teeth. The cigarette came away with a half inch strip of bloody skin glued to it. There was a collective gasp in the audience. He squeezed the smoking stub and held it up so that he seemed to be giving the OK sign. His pupils traveled across his eyes and met the cold gaze of his adversary. Locked into a stony stare, he extended his right arm and crushed the butt against the armrest. It left its ashy imprint with a sooty halo as he ground it into the black plastic. Then he shifted his pelvis in that uncomfortable way again and poked the stub into his front pocket. As an encore, he retracted the wounded lip up over his rotting dentures and bit into the flesh with two jagged incisors like broken beer bottles, gorging himself upon the lunatic lymph.

The engineer’s mousy voice was prefaced by the terse piano melody: *da dee da doo*. “Approaching the Ventura station, folks. This is just a quick stop so please have your bags ready.” We crossed a bridge and outside a glistening blond in a light melon sports bra and black bottom with the pink letters, J-U-I-C-Y, bouncing uniformly, jogged

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away from the train.

“You’ll have to leave the train at the next stop,” said the bearded man. He reached down with the intent to lead his prisoner away, but his move was precluded by the dragon, who jumped to his feet with a slight hiss. He swiped his hand, fingers locked tightly against one another and thumb reared back like a poised dagger, and knocked the sweaty paw away before it touched him.

“Not necessary. I’m through here. This is my stop.”

He shoved past Joanne, the attendant and the brunette without another word. The bearded fellow followed him and after the train was moving again he came back into the car and stood silently, awaiting instructions. Joanne and the brunette were talking softly. A layer of perspiration coated the girl’s forehead. “He’s off the train now, ma’am,” said the bristly whiskers. He rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand.

“We’re terribly sorry about that, Miss,” Joanne said audibly. “Ever since we lowered our rates there have been more people on the trains and every now and then we get a character or two.” She laughed uncomfortably through her nose. “We’d like to offer you an upgrade for the rest of your trip as a token of our appreciation for your business.” She inquired with her eyebrows and tried to form her most pleasant smile. “Would that be alright?”

The girl nodded without looking at her and they turned to leave. “It’s only another stop, but okay, I guess.” She followed them to the end of the train, but before she passed through the gasping doorway and out of general population to a safer land, she let her fish eye pass through the cabin. The broker and I were the only ones left. He was smarter than me and kept his eyes averted, but I, a foolish mosquito, careless after a giant meal, was blinded by her truculent glare and flew directly into her ocular netting. We locked eyes for an instant and I grimaced as she somehow let me see that she knew I was a very, very bad man.

A minute later, Jessie Corn emerged from the bathroom with strip of toilet paper stuck to the bottom of his shoe. He had been trying to wash the coffee off his dungarees, but had only increased the size of the dark wet spot on his crotch. I was feeling introspective and the thought of interacting with him made me uncomfortable. I slid down like a banana hoping he wouldn’t see me and watched his reflection in the opposing window. He ventured into our car and snorted: “Hmmp. Too damn cold in here,” and stamped back into his hot box. Two peaceful hours later, I awoke with a start as Joanne’s fingertips gently nudged my shoulder. “This is Union Station, sir,” she said in a motherly tone as I tried to blink away the muscae volitantes.

“Right,” I said to her blurred double on the right. “End of the line, I guess.”

“Mmm, no. This train goes all the way to San Diego. Better hurry, though. You don’t want to miss your stop.” She stepped aside as I made for the door. I was waiting for the diaphoretic man from before as he struggled to remove his luggage when I felt her standing behind me. “I think you left this behind.” It was the legal pad with all of my notes. I took it and silently thanked her. The beefler finally corralled his suitcase and its momentum toppled him backward into the lap of a frail codger with blanched furze growing out of his ears. A thousand apologies, sir. Entirely my fault. So sorry. So sorry. Somehow, Joanne seemed to maintain one pupil on me while the other moved across her eye, assessing the situation. The trampled man would live. “Have a nice trip, young man.” We shared three-quarters of a look before I was able to pass through the allium

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aura of the hefty torso ahead.

My flight wasn't until the next morning so I wandered around looking for a restaurant I had heard of that was famous for their French dip. I spoke with a woman idling outside the station and she knew exactly where it was. I walked there and considered leaving when I saw the line, but since I was in no hurry I took my place in queue. I stood behind a retired police officer who regaled his new friend about his days on the force. They discovered that they both went to the same high school. "When did you graduate? You're kidding. Do you remember when the school bus caught on fire at our commencement? Well, I'll be damned!"

I had resolved to get moderately drunk, so I ordered a beef sandwich and three beers from the alpine Scandinavian cashier. She took my money with a twinkle in her eye and directed me to the side to make room for the eager family behind me. A short, rotund Mexican woman brought out the sandwiches and asked about the beers: "Tres cervezas?"

I nodded and her eyes darted in search of the rest of my party. "Son mios."

"Oh, okay," she said knitting her forehead. "You want bottles?"

"Si."

I asked her to leave the tops on and grabbed the bottles by their necks and thanked her. She hurried back to fetch another order and "Nada" came from a view of her tight ponytail as she wiped the back of her hands against the soft bulge just above her hips.

I sat down near a big screen television and watched the cop and his long lost acquaintance relive their glory days on the opposite side of the room. It was family style seating and I found a small space next to a whale of a man with six sandwiches in front of him. I tried to eat, but found it impossible as the moist clicking sounds escaping his jaws were unbearable. He seemed perfectly unaware of my leer as he systematically chipped away at the mountain of beef. In between bites, he grasped a giant pickle and chiseled off chunks with his remarkably small teeth. Every time he cracked into it, a mist of green brine sprayed out of his mouth and coated the bib around his neck. I finished a beer and moved to another table across from a Mexican man in a black suit.

I watched the game like I was in my own house and soon the Mexican and I were talking basketball like we had known each other for years. He kept asking me if I knew players from forty years ago. "Ever heard of Oscar Robertson? He could play a little." We went through a dozen players who could "play a little" until we reached the present day. "What about Chauncy Billups," I said, nodding up at the screen. "You like him?"

"Oh yeah, he can play a little."

I finished off the beers and went back for more. "Don't stand in the long line. Just go to the short order line," he told me, so I visited my girl and ordered three more with much alacrity. "Tienes mas?" she said, fishing out another trio of my brown-skinned amigos from the cooler. She returned my change on a little plastic tray with a two balloons and the word: *Merci!* printed on it. It was slower now and she watched me saunter away with her knuckles resting on her hipbones.

When I got back my friend was gone. I looked over and the whale was shoveling a fruit cobbler into his mouth. I looked for the policeman and his friend, but they had probably gone to have some drinks at an appropriate establishment. It was after ten and the staff was cleaning up. I slammed the first beer and winced in pain as the icy effervescent beads attacked my brain. My head throbbed for a moment and I dropped it

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against the table top and clenched my teeth until it passed. When it subsided, I exhaled with relief and saw that the cetacean had swum away, too. I was the only loafer left. I picked up my two buddies and found the bathroom in the back where I euthanized one of them and stuffed the other one in my back pocket. When I emerged, a man with a broom was sweeping up sawdust and I wobbled past him toward the door. I yanked on it a few times though it was locked and he quickly came over and held me back while he twisted the key, turning me loose into the blaring angelic nocturne.

Despite my outward appearance I was in good spirits. I managed to navigate the crosswalks without incident and soon I was back at Union Station. I sat down in an oversized wooden chair and furtively nursed the last soldier while watching a blank screen that should have announced the departing Amtrak schedule. I was pleased to be on my own time, owing nothing to anyone. My flight left at eight the next morning and the shuttle ran all night. I dropped my conscript's cadaver in the trash and thanked him for his service; a good man who served his countrymen proudly. He would be missed. The station was still crawling with travelers desperate to bore through each other, yet simultaneously oblivious of one another. Where were the windows in this teeming festinate depot? It was dark, so it didn't matter anyway. In a cavern of such colossal size there is no time, there are only deadlines. The single finger upon the watches of spoffish rovers reads only early or late. I was the sole possessor of time. I let fleet-footed stewardesses in high heels pass me on the left. Ambassadors clad in Hermes's winged sandals flit past like nimble little cherubs. An alpha wave was born in my head and I quietly hummed along as I entered the long tunnel bathed in sallow light.

I knew he was following me because his curses bounced off the walls of the tunnel. In retrospect, I suppose I knew our paths weren't meant to diverge just yet, though even in my nightmares I could hardly have come across a more wretched travel companion. I ducked into a side chute and looked at my watch. One minute. Two minutes. I walked back out and he was a hundred feet back, standing against the concave wall of the tunnel with his arms folded across his chest. His left leg was bent at the knee and for a moment he actually looked like an old cowboy as he tapped the tip of his leather boot against the yellow tile.

I walked briskly to the bulletproof kiosk and bought a one way ticket to the airport. I wondered if Jessie Corn would make it before the next shuttle. I sat next to a gangster with blue shoelaces who was smoking a sweet smelling cigar. I watched him engender large donut rings with his puckered lips like a blowfish and they grew larger and larger until they dissolved into the aromatic purple heat of the night. I moved over and made room for a shapeless adolescent girl with a silver face who peeled off the cuticles of her nails with her front teeth and spit them out with little popping noises. I took a lap around the concourse. There was no sign of Jessie Corn. Maybe he wasn't following me, after all. Perhaps his hip had blown out leaving him sprawled in the middle of the tunnel, screeching like a madman. Maybe I had just imagined him. A tiny Asian couple stood motionless holding hands beneath a streetlight like a pair of orchids. I passed a security guard aglow from some type of topical ointment. Her skin's luster matched the obsidian sheen of her scalloped weave. She was on the radio and I heard a man's voice come crackling through: "Come on, girl. You gonna make me axe you again?" She was smiling, but when she saw me beside her she dropped the speaker from her mouth and gave me a dirty look. I jammed my hands into my pockets and pushed on.

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When I was far enough away I heard the beep of her walkie-talkie as she resumed the conversation.

The shuttle arrived, but the driver locked the door and disappeared. Upon returning, he lingered near the lambent guard and gestured about something with his fingers as if he was a wizard conjuring a lightning storm. This made her laugh and she smoothed her eyebrows with her little finger. He circled around her like a lion and rocked back and forth on his heels until the gangster shouted to him. "Hey, I gotta catch a plane, fool." That broke his spell. He came over and unlocked the door and plopped behind the wheel. "Tickets, I need to see your tickets." The girl wandered away and he called to her over my head: "Hit me up tomorrow, alright?" She wiggled the tips of her fingers and trailed away, her hips swaying to some distant rhythm. He shook his head and started the bus. After another two minutes he shut the doors put the vehicle in gear. We had barely moved off the curb when I heard a dull thud at the front. He stopped and opened the doors and Jessie Corn, sweaty and panting hard, slowly pulled himself into the bus.

"I'm gawn tuh--"

"I just need to see your ticket. You can tell me what airline at the airport."

Jessie Corn produced a crumpled square of paper that sufficiently resembled a ticket and came down the aisle unsteadily as the driver sped away. He looked surprised when he saw me and threw his bag on the seat behind me. "What'd ya do with that land anyway, Man-Well? I bet you let all them strawberries die off, huh. I knew you never was no farmer." He listed against the window and his skull tapped lightly against the glass.

"No, sir," I said. "That was damn fine fruit I bought from you, mister Corn. We put both farms together and now there's nothing but strawberries on the entire property. Sweetest I ever tasted."

The side of his mouth turned upward a little. "Santa Maria was a byooful place, and I ain't a violent type. Your wife knew I--" The shuttle hit a bump and he lurched in his seat. "-loved them. Just made a mistake. Once people get it in their head, you're a killer, they cain't never see you as nothin' else." His chin fell against his clavicle and his face settled into a moue. He was asleep, but a steady stream of words dribbled out of the side of his mouth.

"Fye gen'rayshins uh Corns...Pa said I's gonna change things. Said I got a good head on my shoulders. 'You kin help yer family, son. Jes' be smart an' take care of yer bidness.' Goddamn drink rune erathang. I'm jes' weak, I guess. Thought maybe I'd make a good rancher...always liked cattle. Eyedin wanna go, but he made me...said they be awright if I lef'. 'Gotta do it fer yerself, son...edgacayshin gonna change yer life.' All them Ainem schools is the same, I said. Cain get no edgacayshin in no classroom. How you gonna learn about animals 'n agriculture behind a desk, but he said I gotta go. I'm sorry, Pa...pissed that money away on whisky n' girls...tried to tell that dean I's gonna shaypup, buh he din believe me...said I ain't collige material...said I was trouble. Sen' me home broke after a quarter. Pa ne'er got mad, though...jes put me back in the field, pickin' berries. I know it hurt him real bad I failed...shoulda quit the whisky right there...tole 'im I's gonna quit...woulda ne'er happened then...everbody woulda died like they's 'posed to...not like that."

We hit a pothole and he jolted awake and coughed violently. He made a sound

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like a bullfrog and I heard him pound his chest several times with the side of his fist. “Goddamn ticker’s ‘bout ta go,” he muttered under his breath. He sighed deeply and settled back. He was quickly asleep again and he resumed his cryptic rambling.

“Naw, I ain’t drunk, officer. My head jes’ hurt. My whole body feel like it’s gonna explode. How kin I talk to you right now? Everbody’s dead! What the hell you wanna know? Naw, I ain’t do nothin’ las’ night. I tole you that I quit drinkin’. My maw and sister was sick and went to bed early. Jessie Corn Senior and me sat on the porch and talked about how we gonna pick all them berries with jes’ four people. He went to bed firs’ and I jes sat there listnin’ all them crickets and whippoorwills. Then I was tired and I went to bed. Naw, I didn’t hear nothin’. I jes’ woke up this mornin’ and everyone’s dead! They all pale and dead! Oh Jesus, what I’m gonna do?”

The vestiges of inebriation evaporated from his face as the driver began announcing airlines. Jessie Corn woke up and suddenly seemed very sober. He cleaned the gunk out of his steely eyes and wet down the mutant hairs which sprang up above his eyes. He was very alert and nervous as he hissed through the space between us. “What’d you hear, boy?”

If I had been myself, I might have been startled by his new snakelike demeanor, but at that moment I was shackled by a treacle torpor that rendered me impervious and quite useless. Years of fatigue fell on my shoulders like sheets of rain and beat upon my face mercilessly. I managed to open my eyes and look out the window. A school of fish swam by and their scales glittered as they performed a perfectly choreographed ballet. Their movements were natural and precise, like tiny iron shavings under the control of a powerful magnet, rotating somewhere in the distance. Water rushed in through cracks in the glass and quickly filled the inside of the bus. I grabbed on to the tail of an elapid as it swam through an opening in the windshield. It rose through the murky black water and to the surface of the sea, where a hurricane was raging. I fought against the waves and the rain, but I was engulfed by a giant frothy fang and lost in the roiling waters.

I stared at an electronic check-in kiosk. It was past midnight and the airport was closed until four. I pressed on the screen unable to understand why nothing happened. I felt very old and tired. I went away and found an open seat next to a well-groomed young farmer in a checkered flannel and denim overalls. He was sitting up alertly with his legs neatly crossed at the knees, reading tomorrow’s newspaper. I stumbled into the chair and bumped against him. He looked crossly at me and shifted to the other side of his seat. Beneath a thin veil of twitching eyelashes, I watched the cleaning staff sweep the dirt around the cold colorless tiles. A giant fan’s whirring drone echoed off the vapid white walls of this terrible bleached tomb. The air was a pale shroud. I watched the semaphore-red dots on a square board, stacked like numbers, change shape as the seconds, the minutes, the hours, silently ticked away.

At five I slid my credit card through the black lips of a machine and retrieved my boarding pass. I stood at the front of the security line watching a mob form behind me through a chalky gray filter. I drew no attention as I passed through the metal detector. The fuzzy blue shapes watching, let me go and, like a rain cloud, I drifted shapelessly across the freshly lacquered floor of the terminal. At the gate I stood in front of the window and watched the sun rise, but the yellow fulgor irritated my eyes so I sat down across from the farmer and fell asleep.

In the dream I ate strawberries with my father on the front porch. They were

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beautiful and red and overflowed out of a deep wooden bowl. We both sat in rocking chairs with the bounty between us. It was the dead of night and the air was sharp and clean. Every time my chair tilted forward I could see a flickering star under the lip of the awning. Though I saw his lips move, I couldn't hear him, but I nodded anyway and smiled, knowing that he had everything under control. He kept putting his hand on my shoulder and shaking his head. When the berries were gone he patted me on the back and went inside. I sat quietly by myself thinking of nothing for a while, then I went upstairs to my room and closed the door. I lit a small candle on the dresser and watched its shadow flicker on the wall like a silent film. I tiptoed to the closet and removed a panel from the back wall. Out of the dark crevasse, I pulled out a large bottle of golden liquid and a glass. I tilted it back against my lips and opened my throat. The stream burned as it ran down. My stomach felt good and I stepped out of the closet and placed the bottle on a small roll top desk next to some receipts and a contract. I shut off the light and sat down and filled the glass. Once. Twice. Three times. I lost track. I stared out the window and the glass filled itself until the bottle was empty. I replaced the secret panel and lay down on my bed. I awoke an hour later feeling sick.

The room was spinning and I needed the bathroom. I couldn't use the one upstairs since the toilet was broken, so I crept down the groaning staircase and into the laundry next to my parents' bedroom. They were converting it into a real bathroom soon, but for now we still did the wash there. It was cluttered with clothes and cleaners and tools. I hiccupped and vomited a little on my shirt. I ripped it off and threw it in the washer and covered it with some other clothes. There was a big five-gallon bucket of detergent on the floor so I put a scoop in, but I didn't turn it on because I didn't want to wake anyone. Then I was sick. I lurched for the bowl and knocked over a bottle of toilet cleaner. I heaved painfully until it was all gone then I sat with my head bowed for a few minutes. My head started to hurt and I thought I might go again, but nothing came. My headache got worse in a hurry and I felt dizzy so I stood up. I flushed the toilet and heard stirring in the next room, but then it was still again. I wiped down the rim with a rag and listened to my parents' room. It was quiet so I stumbled out of the house and onto the front lawn. I fell to my knees and I couldn't stop coughing. The dog ran outside and licked my face, but I smacked him and he ran away. There was blood in my spit and that scared me a little, but it wasn't the first time that had happened, so I went back on the porch and sat in the rocking chair and soon I felt better and I fell asleep.

I woke up early on Sunday feeling terrible. The headache was still there and I couldn't see straight. I walked inside and almost passed out it smelled so bad. It smelled like rotten eggs everywhere. I ran out and yelled everybody's name, but no one answered. I wasn't wearing my shirt so I took off my pants and tied them around my mouth and ran into my parents' room and it looked like they were still sleeping, but their mouths were open and twisted and they didn't wake up when I yelled at them or shook them. I ran across the hall to my sister's room and she was on her stomach. I took her in my arms and shook her, but she was dead, too. The fumes were really bad, but I picked her up and carried her outside and laid her on the grass. Then I went back for my mother and father. I couldn't go back inside to call an ambulance so I ran to the closest neighbor's house, a family whose mailbox said Ortiz, which was more than two miles away to use their phone. My lungs felt like they were going to explode when I busted in through their door. I screamed for help and Mrs. Ortiz came to the door in her nightgown

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and she kept trying to calm me down. I just yelled at her, saying that I had to call an ambulance. After I hung up I heard her call to her husband upstairs: “Manny! Manny!” she kept saying then he came down in a hurry and they spoke in Spanish for a while and she kept pointing to me as he rubbed his chin and nodded. She tried to put her arm around me, but I shook her off. After he got dressed, they gave me a ride back in his truck and just stood there, really quiet, staring at the bodies and me and speaking softly to each other while I waited for the police and cried.

The paramedics and policemen and firemen and all came running out of the house wiping their mouths and spitting on the grass. No one went back in until six strange men wearing white suits and gas masks came and after they went inside with some instruments they told me everybody died from sulfide poisoning. Then everybody asked me how it could’ve happened. That’s all they kept saying. I told them the truth. I didn’t know anything. I just got sick last night and my head hurt so I came outside to sleep. They asked why I didn’t wake anybody else up and I just said that sometimes I got stomach problems and headaches, but it wasn’t anything to bother anybody about at that hour and how could I know anything about sulfur or sulfide? Then they looked at me funny, like it just occurred to them that I was lying and they asked me why I wasn’t wearing any pants or a shirt. They asked if I got along with my family and I got really mad and told them to go straight to hell. Then they backed off and left me alone and I just went and sat under an oak tree while they searched the house. The coroner came and took all the bodies away that day and said I couldn’t go back into the house for a long time because it was so toxic in there. A man with a pair of glasses and a tiny mustache came over and sat down next to me. He told me that someone had accidentally knocked over some cleaner into a bucket of detergent and that had made toxic hydrogen sulfide gas. Laundry detergent? I said I didn’t understand and he explained it again, but I just shook my head and cried. I just couldn’t stop crying. He was really sorry. Didn’t I have a dog, he asked? I nodded. He saw. It was a terrible accident, but he told me that since they were sleeping, they probably didn’t feel anything. Because there was so much of the poison gas, it acted so quickly that it knocked them out before they could feel anything. He said I was really lucky to be alive. He couldn’t believe how lucky I was. I started crying again and he put his hand on my shoulder, but I swatted it away. Then he apologized and left.

They said I could go back in the house after a week, but I never slept there again. I stayed in the barn for a few days until I had all of the bodies cremated. I scattered the ashes in the strawberries and walked to the train station and bought a ticket for the next train. When it pulled in I was the first one aboard even though I had no idea where it was going. I don’t know what happened to the dog. They didn’t find him in the house and I never did see him after that night.

A thin bony elbow in between my ribs brought me out of the dream. It was an hour before the flight and there was an abnormally large crowd at our gate. The culpable olecranon belonged to a skinny child who was sitting next to me, unattended. “Look...That man...Ambulance...Heart attack.”

I saw him through the rouge filter that always accompanies extreme fatigue. “Hey, come on. Put that elbow down. Can’t you see I’m...”

“Oh, sorry sir. But look at that guy. Do you see him? I never saw a dead man before.”

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I blinked furiously until I had a line of sight and then I turned and looked at the boy. He was clutching the armrest, mesmerized, peering straight ahead with googly eyes. “What are you talking about?” I said. “I’m right here. I’m not dead at all.”

He turned and looked at me like I didn’t understand. “Huh? No, not you. Him.” He pointed ahead at Jessie Corn whose brown boots and spindly blue legs were barely visible through a swarm of paramedics, airport police and gawkers. “That man there, he’s *dead*.” He elbowed me again.

“Alright, enough already.” I sat up and shed my stupor. “What the hell’s going on here.”

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked in an exasperated tone that didn’t fit him. He pointed ahead and when he saw I understood he jumped out of his seat and disappeared into the swell growing around the heeled boots. I left my bag on the seat and pushed through the crowd to the front. His eyes were wide open like he had just had a revelation the second before his heart burst. I pushed past an airport cop who was idly talking into a walkie-talkie. “Whoa, you can’t go up there,” he said, suddenly springing back to life. He grabbed me by the shoulder, but I jerked free. “It’s fine. I know this man. He’s my...” And for a moment I did know him. The nascent sunlight struck Jessie Corn’s face at an oblique angle so that one half remained in the dark. It was wizened and wrinkled; hard and ugly and chiseled into a stony grimace as if it was concealing a horrible secret beneath those dusty furrows. The other half, smooth and white and younger, was relaxed in the light. It had the innocent, yet pained expression of youth. His head was tilted toward the source and a small rivulet of clarion spittle formed at the side of his mouth. A woman with a stethoscope noticed the opalescent reflection of light suddenly emanating from his face and she pressed her ear against his heart. After she was convinced that he was dead, she wiped away the iridescent smear collecting on his chin.

“Sir, you have to step back. You can’t be here.”

“But he’s just a kid,” I said staring at the chimera. But in the early morning the angle of the rising sun is always shifting. Moments later, that ephemeral beam no longer hit him at the proper angle and his face was a gnarled old root again. The paramedic stared at me like I was crazy.

“Please go back to your seat, sir. We need to clear the area. People have flights to catch.”

I backed up slowly and continued to stare at his petrified countenance until I was convinced that it would remain that way forever. It had a sooty anonymity and when I was back far enough he was just a pair of limp legs again. I watched as the paramedics shooed everyone away and loaded the body into the front seat of an electric car so it actually looked like he was going golfing. It drove away and everyone segregated into their own little exclusive cliques to discuss the unbelievable events. The kid and his mother sat down next to me and she was very focused as she calmed him down. Their voices were hushed and she stroked his blond hair with her palm as he cupped his whispering lips into her ear. She nodded solemnly pressing his head into her breast. The long-legged stewardesses arrived like cranes on stilts, with aluminum eyes and taught skin. They towed their tiny luggage behind them and passed through the sibilant waves without hesitation. Soon, a lispng voice instructed me to board and I waited at the mouth of the giant albatross. I was at the head of a long line of unnerved torsos following me to

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wherever the hell I was going.

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