



AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title:

MASS ANTIQUITIES: A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF METAFICTIONAL  
NARRATIVE IN TWO PIECES OF ORIGINAL FICTION CONTEXTUALIZED  
WITHIN A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF POSTMODERNIST TECHNIQUES IN  
SELECTED SHORT FICTION BY DONALD BARTHELME, JUDY BUDNITZ,  
AND AMY HEMPEL

Abstract Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Postmodern literature developed as a response to the seemingly static state of fiction during the mid-twentieth century. A debate took place concerning the novel's relevancy as a literary format, and whether it possessed the capacity to advance beyond its well-worn artistic boundaries. These factors precipitated John Barth's seminal essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," which acknowledges the necessity for a departure from traditional literary forms, but proposes that traditional literary modes, such as realism, are no more or less effective than those of postmodern literature, such as metafiction. This discussion remains unresolved into the present, as evidenced by the continued production of both traditional and experimental fiction. This thesis examines both approaches in regards to the limitations inherent in narrative structure.

The thesis consists of two sections. The first is a critical examination of postmodernism and metafictional techniques. It provides a brief overview of each through analysis of critical pieces, including Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion," excerpts from Bran Nicol's *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Literature*, David Gates' introduction to Donald Barthelme's *Sixty Stories*, and Robert Scholes'

*Fabulation and Metafiction.* The critical portion also examines three pieces of short fiction: Donald Barthelme's "The Crisis," Amy Hempel's "The Harvest," and Judy Budnitz's "Scenes from the Fall Fashion Catalogue." These stories provide examples of metafictional literary devices, as well as a context with which to examine the thesis' original pieces. The creative section of the thesis consists of two original works of fiction: "Mass Antiquities" and "RV Cowboy and the Wi-Fi Kid."

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by

Eric Brendan Murphy

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Dean of the Graduate School and Distance  
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# An Examination of Postmodern Literature and Metafictional Technique in Short Stories

by Donald Barthelme, Amy Hempel, and Judy Budnitz

Beginning in the 1950s and continuing to the present, postmodernism has functioned as both product and producer in its relation to the rapid cultural evolution experienced by post-World War II society. A universally accepted definition has not been reached since the rise of postmodernism, but *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* outlines three tenets that can serve as an effective measure of a work's postmodernist qualities: "(1) a self-reflexive acknowledgment of a text's own status as constructed, aesthetic artifact, (2) an implicit (or sometimes explicit) critique of realist approaches both to narrative and to representing the fictional 'world', (3) a tendency to draw the reader's attention to his or her own process of interpretation as s/he reads the text" (Nicol xvi). The commonality among these features is the intent to interfere with the reader's temporary suspension of disbelief subsequently causing the reader to become apprehensive of the text itself. This technique creates a dialogue that prods the reader out of the role of passive observer and requires instead an active monitoring of the reading process. Postmodern literature's tendency to acknowledge itself as an artificial construct allows for the writer to consider topics that traditional literature is less equipped for addressing directly. Whereas traditional fiction must operate within the confines of a constructed reality, postmodern literature is free to operate simultaneously in the realms of fiction and reality, addressing themes in both. This thesis will provide a brief overview of postmodern literature and examine specifically the use of metafiction as a narrative technique.



Monitoring is a reoccurring theme in postmodern literature; the reader monitors the text, texts monitor other texts, authors monitor their texts in-text, texts monitor themselves, and so on. This creates an interesting binary when placed in context with the sense of self-awareness that runs pervasively throughout postmodern literature. Larry McCaffrey cites the rapid development of technology, particularly electronic communication devices, as having been significantly influential upon the development of postmodernism. His opinions are summarized in *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*: “McCaffrey suggests . . . that postmodern society has become increasingly ‘high tech’, saturated by products such as medical supplies, weaponry, and surveillance technology (which protects the interests of multinational corporations) and consumer goods such as mobile phones, computers, plasma screen TV’s” (Nicol 3). McCaffrey is also concerned about the content that many of these devices provide, noting the easily disposable and virtual nature of such media. McCaffrey states, “The consequence of living in a postindustrial, information-driven, media/culture-saturated world, according to theorists of postmodernity, is that we have become alienated from those aspects of life we might consider authentic or real” (Nicol 4). *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* discusses the effects these factors have had upon the cultural consciousness, drawing special attention to the amount of human interaction that is observed or performed through electronic modes of communication. The theme of monitoring within postmodern literature can be explained as a byproduct of the abundance of monitoring within postmodern society, and the pervasive sense of self-awareness then operates as a binary reciprocal to the concept of monitoring. It is the constraints of modern society with which postmodern literature is most concerned.

Societal influences aside, postmodern literature developed largely as a response to the literature that preceded it. John Barth's essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" examines the state of fiction at the time of the piece's 1967 publication, paying particular attention to the debate concerning the novel's capacity for evolution as an artistic medium. The essay acknowledges an array of artists and cites specific examples of their work in order to illustrate Barth's opinions concerning the possibility of advancing the conventions of fiction beyond its seemingly static strata. The phrase responsible for the essay's title, "The Literature of Exhaustion," is the term given by Barth to describe the process of identifying and employing the limitations of literature as literary devices in and of themselves. For example, the guidelines inherently set forth by a given genre are subsequently susceptible to potential manipulation, parody, omission, and outright defiance in place of obedient adherence to their prescribed parameters. When describing this term, Barth clarifies that "by 'exhaustion' [he doesn't] mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities—by no means necessarily a cause for despair" (Howe 267). This passage clarifies that Barth intends for the phrase to carry a positive connotation, which is further reinforced by his acknowledgment that art must be rebellious in nature in order to advance.

After a brief description of various works of art, which Barth describes as particularly rebellious in nature, the essay begins to examine the qualities that constitute a successfully progressive work of art. Barth points out that often art that is deemed challenging to the status quo is actually the product of social phenomenon and is lacking in terms of its ability to communicate the state of the human condition: "It's easier and

sociabler to talk technique than it is to make art, and the area of ‘happenings’ and their kin is mainly a way of discussing aesthetics, really; illustrating ‘dramatically’ more or less valid and interesting points about the nature of art and the definition of its terms and genres” (Howe 268). Again touching upon the social and somewhat sensational nature of such art, Barth notes that such aesthetic experimentations for the sake of experimentation, although often exciting, ultimately fall under the category of exercise in craft rather than the production and successful execution of art. Barth continues:

[B]eing of the temper that chooses to “rebel along traditional lines,” I’m inclined to prefer the kind of art that not many people can *do*: the kind that requires expertise and artistry as well as bright aesthetic ideas and/or inspiration. . . . I suppose the distinction is between things worth remarking—preferably over beer, if one’s of my generation—and things worth doing. (Howe 268-69)

This passage offers a general summation of Barth’s attitude towards what distinguishes high art from entertaining art. He admits to a desire for innovative aesthetic approaches to be present in art, but note how the phrase “aesthetic ideas” is coupled with the word “inspiration,” with an emphasis placed on a desire for the latter to be present, with or without the former. He also mentions that there is a degree of skill necessary to produce such a work, which most people do not possess, and the words “expertise” and “artistry” imply a devotion to a medium that extends beyond pleasure seeking forays in aesthetic acrobatics. Although such experimentations are necessary for the advancement of artistic form, the focus of successfully executed art is placed upon its ability to communicate subject matter in a manner that is decipherable to its intended audience.

Barth concedes that it is of importance that an artist remain aware of current trends within his or her respective field and states that “Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony or the Chartres Cathedral if executed today would be merely embarrassing” (Howe 269). Furthermore, he mentions that he finds the work of contemporary authors who write modern novels in the fashion of novels written in previous generations to be sub-par in comparison to authors who are technically up-to-date, citing Jorge Luis Borges, as well as Samuel Beckett, as an example of such an author (Howe 269):

Jorge Luis Borges illustrates well the difference between a technically old-fashioned artist, a technically up-to-date civilian, and a technically up-to-date artist. . . . [I]t’s dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or Flaubert or Balzac, when the real technical question seems to me to be how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka but those who’ve *succeeded* Joyce and Kafka and are now in the evenings of their own careers. (Howe 269)

Barth credits the contemporarily informed nature of Borges’ writing as being responsible for his ability to put into practice the central principle of Barth’s “Literature of Exhaustion,” which is rooted in the concept of ultimacies. Barth states that “in an age of . . . at least *felt* ultimacies, in everything from weaponry to theology, the celebrated dehumanization of society, and the history of the novel . . . [Borges] deals with ultimacy, both technically and thematically” (Howe 270). It is apparent at this point in the essay that Barth’s “Literature of Exhaustion” is based upon the essential elements of postmodernism, despite the total absence of term within the text. The societal and

cultural factors that Barth describes are often cited as influential factors upon the postmodernism movement, which was in full-swing at the time of the essay's publication.

Returning to Borges, Barth uses examples from the former's work to demonstrate the process in which "exhausted" literature can yield new results through re-examination and re-interpretation. Barth states,

[Borges] writes a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, or writing original works of literature. His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work . . . it's a matter of every moment throwing out the bath water without for a moment losing the baby. (Howe 273)

Barth's observations of Borges' accomplishments as a single author coincidentally serve as a rough definition for the aspirations of postmodern literature as a whole.

Barth then describes a literary device that Borges often employs and refers to as the "contamination of reality by dream" (Howe 274). Borges uses this term to describe his practice of creating fictional texts within fictional texts. Furthermore, these texts within text are not described as existing solely within the fictional realm, but rather are alluded to as existing within the realm of reality. They are presented in a manner that implies that the reader might even be able to locate and read the text, which in fact does not exist. Barth cites this practice as another example for his "literature of exhaustion," claiming that when Borges tampers with the border between fiction in reality, he is effectively overcoming the limitations of fiction existing as a separate entity or in another

dimension from the reality of the reader. Barth believes this to be an effective illustration of an author addressing and subsequently overcoming an ultimacy of fiction.

Barth points towards Borges' *Labyrinths* as a successfully executed example of creating fictional works within a fictional work as a literary device. Barth describes *Labyrinths* as "fictions by a learned Librarian in the form of footnotes . . . to imaginary or hypothetical books" (Howe 275). Barth also cites his novels *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy* as examples of such a technique and describes them as "novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author" (Howe 275). Although he concedes that he finds *Labyrinths* to be more interesting than his own work. This portion of the essay is essentially describing metafiction. The *OED* defines metafiction as "[f]iction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions (esp. naturalism) and narrative techniques; a fictional work in this genre or style" ("Metafiction"). The examples Barth provides, his own novels in particular, operate within the parameters of this definition, although the term itself does not appear within the text. In this case, its absence is not the result of omission on part of the author but because the term did not exist yet. William H. Gass is credited as having coined the term in 1970 in an attempt to describe the postmodern novel's often self-reflexive nature (Orlowski).

Barth acknowledges the seemingly decadent aspect of such self-referential literature, but he notes that the novel as a genre began with Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which can be characterized as metafiction due to its abundance of inter-textuality and its self-awareness as a work of fiction. Barth offers that "history repeats itself as farce—

meaning, of course, in the form or mode of farce . . . the imitation is something new and *may be* quite serious and passionate despite its farcical aspect” (Howe 275). Barth is asserting that although parody is dependent upon, or the byproduct of, an original work of art, the parody produces an original work which transcends the ultimacy of its prototype, subsequently contributing to the ongoing dialogue of literature as a whole. Furthermore, Barth asserts that fiction of this type is capable of communicating the human experience as effectively as the traditional novel. He states, “Such works are no more removed from ‘life’ than Richardson’s or Goethe’s epistolary novels are: both imitate ‘real’ documents, and the subject of both, ultimately, is life, not the documents. A novel is as much a piece of the real world as a letter” (Howe 276). Barth is asserting that any piece of fiction, regardless of its intended level of realism, is ultimately only a representation of reality. Subsequently, metafiction is effectively no less credible or authentic than traditional modes of storytelling in regards to its ability to examine aspects of human existence. Having identified some of the features associated with metafiction, this thesis will examine these features as they operate within three pieces of contemporary fiction. “The Crisis” by Donald Barthelme, “The Harvest” by Amy Hempel, and “Scenes from the Fall Fashion Catalogue” by Judy Budnitz are three short stories that employ metafictional narrative techniques in varying degrees of overtness. These stories serve to provide contextual basis with which to view the original manuscripts “Mass Antiquities” and “RV Cowboy and the Wi-Fi Kid.”

In his introduction to Donald Barthelme’s short story collection *Sixty Stories*, David Gates writes this of the author: “The parables of Kafka, the pastiches of S. J. Perelman, the monologues of Samuel Beckett, the swashbuckling absurdities of Rafael

Sabatini, fairy tales, films comic books- all these contributed as much to his sense of what a story might be” (Barthelme xi). Indeed, the stories contained within this collection are marked by ever shifting ideology, allusions to artistic movements, schools of thought, and worldviews of a historical cross section of characters.

The narration ranges from the daily observations of a public school teacher, the jive laden dialogue of jazz musicians, the improvised fabrications of a game show contestant, to the philosophical ponderings of Robert Kennedy. Furthermore, the narration is subject to interruption by way of the text temporarily breaking away from the framework of conventional storytelling. These disruptions appear in the form of lists, journal entries, lyric sheets, television schedules, and other documents formal and informal in nature, which are then duplicated in appearance within the layout of the text.

Despite narration’s shifting point of view, these textual inserts are usually in accordance with the story’s sequential series of events. The plot typically operates on a linear timeline, although some of the inserted text formats imply an omission of time, while others imply a simultaneous occurrence of events. Therefore, the inclusion of these literary asides does not deter the telling of the story. Rather, they add dimension by directly displaying to the reader what might otherwise require complex and confusing description from the narration

The placement of a stylistically distinct text within a story’s dominant narrative is a literary device that would seemingly fall within the boundaries of metafiction; however, Gates says the following about Barthelme:



His own work continued to skitter away from any genre that seemed to spread its arms in suffocating welcome—including so called “metafiction,” the genre to which critics most often accused him of belonging. He protested against this, and pointed out that only rarely . . . did he explicitly make an issue of his fiction’s very fictiveness. (Barthelme xii)

Indeed, none of the work contained within *Sixty Stories* acknowledges itself or the process and author responsible for its existence. When the narration is in first person, it is the words and thoughts of a character and not the author. Furthermore, Gates states, “Literary historians call Barthelme a postmodernist, and he didn’t resist the designation as strongly as he resisted being called a metafictionist” (Barthelme xv). However, Gates notes that later in life Barthelme claimed to be “‘dubious’ about the term and ‘not altogether clear as to who is supposed to be on the bus and who is not’” (Barthelme xv). Gates points out that postmodernism is more indicative of a particular time period than an artistic approach, and instead suggests that

[i]t might be most sensible, then, simply to look at Barthelme as one more writer who came along after older writers had already done what he would like to have done—as Dante came along after Virgil who came along after Homer—and who had a hard time, as writers have always had, figuring out how to reconcile his admiration for his predecessors with his ambition to make something of his own. (Barthelme xv)

In short, the label of postmodernist is applicable to Barthelme’s work in regards to the period in which it was created. In regards to technique, Barthelme’s experimentations in

unconventional storytelling methods are not the result of adhering to the schemata of any specific genre. Rather, they are the byproduct of the author's pursuit to find a unique literary voice while maintaining artistic integrity. Much of Barthelme's work is keeping in vein with the postmodernist approach of revising pre-existing modes of storytelling in the attempt to produce art that is seemingly more authentic in its reflection of the society in which it is produced.

In terms of thematic content, the stories contained within this collection deal by and large with the trials of living in contemporary society: mismatched couples clinging to each other in desperation; the relative merits of capitalism; the military industrial complex; culture clash; the allusiveness of individual identity; and the enormous expectations of the individual operating within society, self-imposed and otherwise. Even the stories that are given historical settings are marked with a sense of cerebral fussiness and self-absorption, seemingly transplanted from contemporary society and projected upon the minds of our predecessors.

Several of the stories are narrated through the characters' thoughts, which range from logically ordered observations to freely associated stream of consciousness that are almost Joycean in nature. This technique allows for the construction of a narrative framework, which presents the characters' external and internal conditions nearly simultaneously. Often, it creates a sense of transferring life to print in terms of depicting the numerous thought processes that occur in the act of perceiving, interpreting, and reacting to an event or experience.

Barthelme's "The Crisis" suitably demonstrates the relative merits of this technique. Specifically, the story illustrates how the application of this technique can

allow a writer to densely pack a small amount of space for the sake of non-adherence to traditional story telling. "The Crisis" depicts an insurgent uprising, presumably in the United States, told from the perspective of a doubt-ridden white collar male. It is presented as a series of thought fragments indicated by a dash at the beginning of each. No indication is given as to the circumstance or time in which these thoughts occur, other than the sequence in which they appear. In the first fragment, the narrator relays news of the rebels' acts of civil disobedience, such as capturing a zoo, while offering critical observations of the movement such as, "There's more to it than playing guitars and clapping along. Although that frequently gets people in the mood" (Barthelme 318). The narrator's running mental commentary on the rebellion is interspersed with his introspective thoughts, which include mulling over a failed relationship, golf, evaluating his mental health, and other self-centered musings.

The coupling of the narrator's unspoken commentary on the rebellion and his mental self-analysis results in a juxtaposition of the individual's social awareness and self-centered interests. "What has this to do with you and me?" he wonders. "Our frontiers are the marble lobbies of these buildings" (Barthelme 320). Although the rebellion clearly has a hold on his thoughts, he knows it only through newscasts, and subsequently feels a sense of detachment as an aloof observer. "Three rebellions ago, the air was fresher. The soft pasting noises of the rebel billposters remind us of Oklahoma, where everything is still the same" (Barthelme 322). This thought fragment indicates that the narrator has observed similar scenarios and that his perspective is one of witness to, and possibly participant of, rebellions long since passed and largely ineffective.

The narrator's criticism of rebellion as being repetitive in nature and ultimately futile allows for an interpretation of "The Crisis" as a social commentary piece, and the irony of story set during a social rebellion featuring a passively involved protagonist might provide some inter-textual irony from a post-modernist reading. Furthermore, there is a quasi-metafictional quality to the story, beginning with the title. "The Crisis," as a title, initially seems to describe the social upheaval described within the first paragraph, which is also the first thought fragment offered from the narrator. However, if all the thought fragments pertaining to the rebellion are ignored, it becomes apparent that the crisis alluded to in the title is in fact a mid-life crisis suffered on part of the narrator. The rebellion then operates as metaphorical catalyst of, or companion to, the thought fragments dedicated to the narrator's neurotic self-assessment. At one point, the narrator concedes that "even a poor rebellion has its glorious moments" (Barthelme 322). In the thought fragment immediately following, the narrator resolves to contact the woman from the aforementioned failed relationship. This parallel positioning of these two streams of consciousness essentially tells two stories in the space of one, tying them together neatly with a multipurpose title.

This story provides a context with which to view the original short story "Mass Antiquities" in that it offers an example of pairing the plot's sequence of events with the thought process of a central character. In this case, the central character is the narrator, which allows for a direct comparison of the inner-monologue in regards to events to which it is reacting. In "Mass Antiquities," the thought processes of the central characters are presented, as well as the commentary of an audience who is viewing the main narrative as it is projected in a movie theater. This allows for the theater audience

to operate in a similar fashion to that of Greek chorus. By offering society's commentary upon the work, the piece itself becomes social commentary, demonstrating the various responses that are provoked by the more controversial social stimuli within the narrative.

Author Amy Hempel employs a more direct metafictional technique in her short story "The Harvest." The narrator describes her involvement in a motorcycle accident in which she suffers a severe leg wound. In her subsequent hospital stay, a lawyer confers with her about seeking legal compensation for the injury, placing emphasis on the cosmetic repercussions of the wound. The lawyer intends to use her disfigurement as a selling point in court, citing potential difficulties in employment and "marriageability" as damages incurred from the accident. Descriptions of the hospital and its patients are interspersed throughout this dialogue, and one such description yields the stories central metaphor:

There was sometimes, on the other side of me, a twelve-year-old boy. His lashes were thick and dark from blood-pressure medication. He was next on the transplant list, as soon as—the word they used was *harvest*—as soon as a kidney was harvested. The boy's mother prayed for drunk drivers. I prayed for men who were not discriminating. Aren't we all, I thought, somebody's harvest. (Hempel 105)

This passage illustrates the narrator's concerns about attracting a mate in direct correlation with physical injury. The harvest metaphor operates in the narrator's description of her physical surroundings, as well as addressing the narrator's internal anxiety in regards to her being chosen for marriage.

“The Harvest” is similar to Barthelme’s “The Crisis” in that it uses a traumatic event as the catalyst for the narrator undergoing a self-assessment of his past, present, and potential future. However, the narration of “The Crisis” is limited to the consciousness and commentary of what can only be interpreted as a fictional character recounting a fictional scenario, whereas “The Harvest” employs a truly meta-fictional narrative framework in that the narrator acknowledges herself as the creator of a work in progress. This is demonstrated in the story when she states, “The lawyer was the one who used the word. But I won’t get around to that until a couple of paragraphs” (Hempel 103). This passage, which is located in the story’s exposition, lends the story an element of its self-awareness as a work of fiction in that it acknowledges the fact that it is presented in written form.

Further adding to the story’s metafictional framework, the narrator’s initial telling of the event is followed by a two-line break, after which the narrator describes the process of creating the narrative that has seemingly just concluded: “I leave a lot out when I tell the truth. The same when I write a story. I’m going to start now to tell you what I left out of ‘The Harvest,’ and maybe begin to wonder why I had to leave it out” (Hempel 106). The narration then goes on to describe the details that were altered, inserted, and omitted in the initial event narrative, noting that these alterations were made with an audience in mind. At one point, the narrator states, “‘Marriageability’ was the original title of ‘The Harvest’” (Hempel 107), thus adding to the established theme of physical damage, as well as emotional damage in regards to attracting a mate.

This portion of the text does not operate as a traditional postface but is rather presented in a manner similar to that of an author explaining a piece in a workshop

setting. Furthermore, it is not clarified whether Hempel is inserting herself into the text or if a fictional character is providing a fictional deconstruction of a fictional piece. An interpretation of the narration as delivered by Hempel as author rather than character allows for a suspension of suspended disbelief on part of the reader, as well as adding a sense of immediacy or intimacy in the author's relaying of the story through the text. An interpretation of the narration as belonging to a purely fictional character establishes the secondary, explanatory narrative, and subsequently the entire story, within the framework of fiction deconstructing fiction. This technique is employed in "Mass Antiquities" during the scenes that depict the author taking a break from writing the central narrative, contemplating the surroundings of his writing environment as he does so. Similar to "The Harvest," this provides a context for the story's genesis, or a link between reality and the fictional realm. Also similar to "The Harvest," the author is not named or identified as the actual author of the text, but rather ambiguously suggests the possibility that the author is as much a fictional character within the story as any other character.

Judy Budnitz employs a neatly structured approach to metafiction in her short story "Scenes from the Fall Fashion Catalog." This story uses the format of a mail-order women's wear catalog to frame multiple scenes within a single piece of short fiction. The narrative point of view, scenery, and characters are seemingly unrelated, although each scene features a female protagonist who is struggling with prescribed gender roles. The story begins,

Our new fall collection has something to suit every woman. We've reinvented the fashions of the past to create clothes that never go out of style. Our catalog contains everything today's woman could possibly

need, from lingerie to shoes to jewelry and accessories, as well as an easy-to-use order form on the back page. (Budnitz 31)

This passage not only establishes the organization of the story, but mentions that the catalog is aimed at the modern woman, despite the antiquated nature of the mail-order catalogue in the digital age, even at the story's publication in 1998. The various styles of dress are then presented in numerical order, with occasionally obtuse titles, and accompanied by a brief description, often ironic in tone.

The first scene is titled "PRAIRIE DRESSES" (sic) and begins with the archetypal scenario of a woman tied to railroad tracks. At this point, the narrator states, "I should add, I suppose, that her hair is golden, her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are blue. But I think you know that; you have seen this picture before" (Budnitz 32). This passage is of dual significance because it not only acknowledges the narration's awareness of the archetypal nature of the scene, but also reveals an awareness of an audience, as well as the similar pre-existing expectations of the audience. The plot then advances in accordance with the usual sequence of events associated with this setting. A train speeds towards the restrained woman as all involved look on in horror until the living embodiment of Western masculinity rescues her at the last moment, of course. The couple is immediately married, and there is much rejoicing.

However, the narration then changes abruptly in tone, signaling a twist in what was until this point a predictable plot. The narration challenges the audience's expectations of such a traditional plot line by stating, "Everyone knows the ending of this scenario. The funny thing is that almost no one knows the beginning of the story" (Budnitz 34). The narration shifts in time and location, presenting the rescued damsel in



her earlier in life. She is a vision of domesticity. “Her mother has trained her well” (Budnitz 34). Her father attempts to offer her hand in marriage in return for three cows. She runs away in the night. She moves from town to town, which are all the same. All the men are crass and sleazy. They care only about money and cattle. They proposition her with the first and treat her like the latter. The women tell her to try harder to land such a man. Finding no solace among the men and women, she ties herself to the railroad tracks. The narration has now returned to its point of origin. The story of the dramatic rescue is retold but with added detail: “No one hears her scream at him to leave her alone, to just let her be. He tears her loose in the nick of time. The train crashes past, cheers and confetti pour from the windows, and as he holds her triumphantly aloft, she watches her own hands rise and reach for him, not in a grateful embrace, but to rip his eyes out” (Budnitz 36).

The narrative technique employed in this section could be used effectively with a similar type of stock scene with archetypal characters. It allows the author to add dimension to the narrative and depth to otherwise flat characters. Also, by inserting unpredicted or conflicting details in regards to the audience’s expectations of a character, room is opened up to comment on various social norms or assumptions based on stereotype in regards to expectations of the characters personality.

The next section of the “catalogue” is titled “II. CIRCUS EVENING WEAR” and begins with the following description “We took our inspiration from the circus, to bring you everything from sequined thongs to tent dresses” (Budnitz 36). Both are ridiculous enough to assume that they are employed as parody. The narration describes a baby sitter who takes the children for which she is responsible to the circus. They observe as a knife

thrower's assistant catches his cutlery perfectly in her fake teeth. They watch as "The Lady Who Hangs by Her Hair" plummets to the ground. The children are distraught, and when the babysitter returns a few days later to check on them, their mother turns her away. This section might be a useful model for a story which toys with the expectations of a live entertainment setting.

The third section is titled "III. KITCHEN WEAR" and is described as "Aprons for every occasion." These carry obvious connotations of gender roles. It is told in second person, which works effectively for the story it contains. However, despite it being told in second person, the narrator assumes that the listener is a female. The narrator guides the listener through memories of her mother cooking in the kitchen, which are paralleled with memories of her aunt who goes out dancing at night:

Your mother's tools are called *savory*, *relish*, and *sage*; your aunt's are *rhythm* and a roll of her eyes. . . . They are hunters: Your aunt's war paint is the red on her mouth; your mother's is a dusting of flour. . . . The trap is set: the sprightly meal, the spicy dance. Afterward, your father pats his stomach. A man on the dance floor pats your aunt's hip. Your mother, your aunt, neither goes to bed alone. (Budnitz 40)

This section is a useful example of presenting two characters in a parallel manner. This allows the reader to draw clear cut comparisons and contrasts between the two, and the story is tied up nicely when the two are linked by the same description in the last line.

The final section is titled "IV. TRAVEL WEAR" and is followed by this description: "Versatile cotton and linen separates for the girl on the go," which is believable language for that of a clothing catalogue. It is told in first person by a female

narrator who is boarding a plane to go on vacation. She describes her fellow passengers; a troop of girl scouts, a shoe salesman, and a stewardess. The plane is seized by hijackers. After raping the stewardess, one of them leads the narrator into the baggage hold. She proceeds to delay his attack by pretending to seduce him. After removing her clothing, she begins to remove cosmetic items, which reveal aspects of womanhood that men often pretend don't actually exist. She continues to remove things from her person: "blobs of cellulite, breast implants like two clear disks of Jell-O, Scars, tattoos, an IUD" (Budnitz 44), until she is no longer shedding physical materials, but is actually spilling her emotional baggage in the baggage hold. "Barbed memories, secret thoughts, hair hands, thickened skin, dirty secrets whispered drunk late at night. Abortions, braces, blood tests . . . I am throwing them down in a flood of tears and mucus and menstrual blood" (Budnitz 44). By the time her true self is exposed, her attacker is terrified and retreats. The hijackers are thwarted, the passengers throw a party, and the words "*The End*" (sic) appear in the clouds. Then, the cheerleaders suddenly parachute out the door, holding hands in their descent. This section delves significantly further into surrealism than the others, which allows the central metaphor of "baggage" to reach fruition in its physical manifestation within the story's climax.

As a whole, "Scenes from the Fall Fashion Catalogue" demonstrates how the presentation of multiple stories within a uniting framework enables the story's thematic similarities to be easily identified. Also, the changing of narrative point of view and setting between stories allows each story to have a unique place within the context of the uniting frame work of the fashion catalogue. This story provides a context with which to examine "Mass Antiquities" in that both pieces place multiple stories within the artifice

of a fictional pop-culture artifact. Whereas “Scenes from the Fall Fashion Catalogue” uses a printed artifact of consumer culture, “Mass Antiquities” presents one level of the story’s narration within the format of a film. The text in “Mass Antiquities” also simulates the typeset of a record label, which is similar to the technique used in “Scenes from the Fall Fashion Catalogue” to present the text with similarities to that of mail-order magazine layout.

Of the stories examined, Hempel’s “The Harvest” best meets the qualifications of metafiction. The story not only acknowledges itself as a work of fiction, but the author is inserted into the text in order to deconstruct the process in which the text was constructed. It is particularly effective in that the initial telling of the story is in traditional first person format, which subsequently produces an unveiling of the curtain effect, so to speak, when the second portion exposes the various untruths and exaggerations of the first. Most of all, it shatters the illusion of suspended disbelief and does so in a manner that is inclusive towards the reader as opposed to alienating.

In regards to metafiction as a narrative technique, it operates best when the delineations between its individual narrative components are clearly drawn. In order for the reader to complete a comparative interpretation of multiple narratives with one text, they must be able to identify them without much work, if not immediately. Otherwise, the ability to draw meaning from, or even read with relative ease, is lost, and so then is the reader. In his book *Fabulation and Metafiction*, Robert Scholes states:

When extended, metafiction must either lapse into a more fundamental mode of fiction or risk losing all fictional interest in order to maintain its intellectual perspectives. The ideas that govern fiction assert themselves

more powerfully in direct proportion to the length of a fictional work.

Metafiction, then, tends toward brevity because it attempts, among other things, to assault or transcend the laws of fiction—an undertaking which can only be achieved from within fictional form. (Scholes 114)

Essentially, metafiction is affected by a sort of Icarus syndrome. It functions best with an awareness of its limitations and fails when stretched beyond its means. The original manuscript “Mass Antiquities” demonstrates such shortcomings in regards to the fact that the numerous asides and meanderings through the musings of the characters cause the plot to become neglected. Its relatively short sequence of events is stretched over a considerable amount of space, at the sake of the narration’s often microscopic attention to detail in regards to physical description. Although this technique creates a sort of cinematic effect, which might be initially enticing to the reader, this process of simulating the film experience through text eventually becomes burdensome to the telling of the story itself. This relates to Barth’s comments concerning aesthetics and successful art. Although initially interesting, if not fun to read, the tightly written and alliteration-heavy text of “Mass Antiquities” ultimately creates an alienating effect upon the reader. In short, its aesthetic qualities interfere with the successful communication of the story’s thematic content. The story attempts to comment on society’s desire to claim authenticity through the consumption of pop culture materials. This is addressed most effectively during the Tramps’ dialogue with The Scholar in the “Used Books” section of the Antique Mall. When placed in context with the description of the living texts and the defunct author, this verbal exchange delivers a message that places importance on creating art for the sake of contributing to culture, as opposed to only consuming the

work of others. This message could be further strengthened with the use of a mimetic device that takes advantage of the story's surreal quality. For example, The Scholar could be depicted as physically consuming the texts that surround him, perhaps eating their pages one at a time.

“Mass Antiquities” displays several of the features of postmodernism and metafiction discussed within this thesis. The narration is self-referential and self-aware of itself as a piece of fiction; furthermore, it aware of itself as a work in progress. The shifts in setting, tone, and narrative point of view are all indicative of metafictional literary technique, further supported by the insertion of the author into the text as a character. The combination of the story's narrative structure and setting allows ample room for specific instances of social commentary, which is perhaps the piece's most successful quality. It addresses themes and subjects relevant to a contemporary audience, such as pop culture, surveillance, literary theory, the effects of technological advances in society, and so on. The piece was originally conceived as a series of individual stories, each being centered on a particular stall within an antique mall and rooted more in the realm of realism.

“RV Cowboy and The Wi-Fi Kid” is included in this thesis for the purpose of technique comparison for the writer who wishes to examine popular culture. As an original example of realism, the story contains many similarities to “Mass Antiquities” in terms of thematic content and subject matter, particularly in regards to consumer culture and the strive for authenticity. Despite their structural differences, the narrative voices of “Mass Antiquities” and “RV Cowboy and The Wi-Fi Kid” share a similar vocabulary, and some of the physical descriptions of character seem almost interchangeable between

the two stories. “RV Cowboy and The Wi-Fi Kid” is presented in this thesis as a companion piece to “Mass Antiquities,” with the intended purpose of providing a context between the realms of realism and metafiction. Since its setting and characters are rooted in realism, this story might carry a greater sense of familiarity for readers, subsequently speaking to a larger audience than “Mass Antiquities.”

Although more accessible to the reader, the traditional narrative structure of “RV Cowboy and The Wi-Fi Kid” is limited in its capacity for direct social commentary, instead requiring the reader to draw conclusions based upon descriptions of character and setting. For instance, the reader must observe Ernie’s obsessive consumption of over-the-counter medicine and evaluate this behavior in regards to Don criticizing their relative health benefits, whereas the narration in “Mass Antiquities” is allowed to comment directly on pharmaceutical medication. Overall, both stories illustrate the obsessive self-awareness that is associated with postmodernism and comment on the effects of technological advancements and pop culture on contemporary society. The societal issues addressed by postmodernism are present to this day; and although it did not replace the literary forms that it rebelled against initially, postmodernism’s innovative approaches to storytelling, such as metafiction, have provided a valid alternative to traditional narrative structure. The self-reflexive and paradoxical nature of postmodernism allows the writer to point out the artificialities of pop culture. By exposing the artifice of traditional narrative construction, the writer can attempt to elicit in the reader a questioning of other social constructs, especially in regards to the manner in which narrative can shape reality. Challenging these social constructs subsequently

allows the writer to challenge societal constraints and the apparent ultimacies that they impose upon postmodern society.

### Mass Antiquities

The blinking battery light eye of the surveillance camera takes in the tip of a thick index finger extended towards the lens. The pointer of said pointer explains the finer, well, points of positioning such devices. The pixilated black print on the grocery chain name tag, which states “Dave” and “Assistant Manager,” expands and contracts, asserting the authority of the hot air: heaving, hairy, and barrel-chested within a faded green polo. The owner of the antique mall, and his wife, sit across the counter and nod patiently as they flip through their inventory lists as Dave spends his lunch break telling them how to run their store. He has spent every lunch break of his three month reign as Assistant Manager at Dillon’s Grocery, just down the street, in this manner. The owner and his wife have operated Mass Antiquities, formerly Antiques on Mass, with no hired help for the past fifteen years. Thanks, Dave.

The door-bell dings as two tramps materialize from a cloud of vaporized body warmth, and odor, trailed by a blast of Mass Street Merry Christmastime air, exhaling the steam of stale cigarettes while shaking particles of dandruff and contraband from their oversized army surplus coats. Two silver notes from a Salvation Army bell make their way through the door as it swings shut. An angel gets its wings. Four blinking red eyes reciprocate the stare of the similarly hued electric oracle mounted above them before lowering themselves to their organic sentinels. The smiles of the owner and his wife say, “Hello, come in from the cold a little while.” The smile of Dave says, “Lunch.” The



tramps stand at attention, clunk the heels of their combat boots together, and undeterred, march forward, rattling rock salt onto the hardwood floor, headed for the Eagle's Nest.

The first level of purgatory is reserved for the short lived reality, yet everlasting limestone corner post of the collectiveculturalconsciousclusterfuck. Approaching Vendor Stall #6, the scent of ass sweat soaked saddles assails the nostrils, curling the cilia within them, and causing tawny tufts to sprout on the back where there had previously been none. One of the tramps pulls a bandanna over his nose and mouth. At Vendor Stall #12, a Howdy Doody Doll jug band blows dust devils from whiskey bottles into the aisle as a Roy Rogers cardboard cutout plunks high and lonesome notes on a pastel plastic guitar. The other tramp pulls his hunting cap visor down, tying the earflap strings securely beneath his bearded chin.

As Bandanna Tramp is taking his first step past Vendor Stall #13, something bonks his kneecap, sending funny bone vibrations down and out along his femur. He stumbles, surprised. Hunting Cap Tramp unsheathes and expands his plastic light saber.

“Whooooooaaah there!” a gruff and mustached voice hollers as a lasso flies up and into the air, suspended for a moment as it slides through a red cloud of Oklahoma dirt released by the abrupt slamming shut of a frightened book of Dust Bowl photographs, before falling and cinching about the neck of a rocking horse. “I said Whoooooaaah there!” The horse rocks forward once, then reels back as the pull of the lariat brings it crashing into a band of similarly carpentered equestrian creatures. They lumber to and fro menacingly. An obscenely obese man stands amidst them with a wooden riding horse, fashioned with sock puppet head, snuggled securely into his crotch below a belt buckle shaped in the great state of Texas, sans northern counties and panhandle lost to

overcast skies due to a high pressure system moving in from the abdominal hemisphere. The man eyes the plastic light saber, illuminated from the base and purring distorted sound effects replicated from its cinematic prototype. Hunting Cap Tramp catches the gleam of a cap gun holstered at the man's upper leg/lower torso region. Forgive vagueness of definition due to vagueness of definition. (The audience waits with bated breath as the camera angle zooms in, alternately between the increasing intensity of the two men's eyes, and then boos and throws popcorn when Hunting Cap Tramp deactivates his weapon, letting his arm fall passively to his side. "No one dies? What a rip off!" exclaims a red headed and freckled Rockwellian looking lad two rows in front of you.) The TEXAS TRUCK sized man grabs the saddle horn and leans forward with his thick eyebrows furrowed inquisitively, "Do you have Dyuhbeetus?"

The tramps answer in two stoic stares. The man mustaches on about cheap testing supplies. Bandanna tramp gives the double guns and a wink gesture to his comrade declaring the confrontation officially diffused and neutralized. Thick rubber soles smear skid marks across the floor as they turn in an about face. White plastic bottles are retrieved from the depths of patched fatigue coat pockets. Raised hands squeeze the vessels and eye drops drop simultaneously. Dirty tributaries cascade down crow's feet. The reddened veins recede from the dilated pupils and irritated irises. Indicator needles quiver upon the faces of their paranoia meters as they return to a relatively healthy level of uneasiness. The pilgrimage continues.

Approaching the entrance of Vendor Stall #14, the borderlands of the Great American West Room, they spy a solitary Aztec. Bandana Tramp pulls down his soiled veil and with chapped and cracking lips reminds Hunting Cap Tramp that "How" is not a

proper introduction, ever. (He once mistakenly assumed in a previous installment of the serial that the sense of irony inherent in this greeting would endear him to a Pawnee who was hunting taxidermied bison in a national history museum). They instead nod in silent appreciation as the Aztec presents an enormous potato. Hunting Cap Tramp holds forth a crinkly wrapped prophylactic, and speaking in the manner with which ones speaks when confronted with one of a foreign tongue says, “YOOOU WILLL NEEDED THIS. CORTEZZZ. SYPHILISSS!” The native tucks it into the sinewy band of his loin cloth, and with the universally friendly gesture of raised right hands they part ways leaving the territory relatively untamed. Groaning windmills held fast at the base by calloused Caucasian hands propel tumbleweeds in the wake of our drifters as they ride off into the sunset, or further into the storm, depending on your point of view, metaphorically speaking either way of course.

A century old staircase stands in for the Rio Grande. They must emigrate before the border patrol is bestowed with armored all-terrain vehicles from the deficit building military machine, and the populous places the faults of a failing health care system upon low wage accepting, working jobs most of us would gladly choose unemployment over, illegal immigrants. (“NO FREE RIDE!” rings out from a few rows behind you) Our soldiers shudder, having long gone AWOL from truth, justice, and the American blame. Knowing all too well that in the event of their capture, after a totally inappropriate tazing from the guy no one remembers from high school come law enforcement officer, of which surveillance footage will be spread virally on ThemTube by the Propagation of Reverse Propaganda Agency in order to spike the paranoia meters of counter culture enthusiast and conspiracy theorists across the country, they will be dragged by the

unwashed and frayed to the follicle locks of their “let your freak flag fly” hair down the stairs, combat boots thumping away at a funeral march cadence, to the subterranean bunker wherein is stockpiled an arsenal of our most sinisterly successful weapons of zeitgeist destruction. Television sets.

Yes, they will surely come-to bathed in the ever-fluctuating seizure-inducing fluorescent light waves of the employee restroom (“So that’s what they do in there.”), and be force fed a diet consisting of Hardee’s Thickburgers laced with anti-depressant/ADHD/anxiety medications for approximately 30 days. (“May take up to one month for effects to become noticeable is what mine said.”) They will then certainly be duct taped to beer can condensation mildewed recliners at the foot of High Def flat screens as Burgess doesn’t roll over in his grave. (“Whoah, dude called it, maaan.”) Finding themselves comfortably numb, highly focused, and no longer wary of the human race, they will be subjected to thirteen-hour-a-day viewing sessions of reality television series, beginning with seasons most recent, working backward to the date that TV got a little too real for most of us. (“Never forget!”) Yes, with the think switch stuck securely in the “OFF” position, they will learn the merits of overbearing behavior in event planning scenarios, the fullness of self-provided by frivolous material possessions, the rewarding life choice that is teenage parenthood, and a deeper appreciation for the hardships celebrities must endure, such as learning to dance. They would then be thankful, no doubt, that these programs keep news headlines and daily conversation free from the cacophony clutter of lesser, trivial topics...in the event of their capture that is.

However, this thought avenue paved in grey delusion with red dotted lines of paranoia running up the middle is abruptly broken open by the earthquake tremor of

footsteps descending the stairs above of which they have no view. After a momentary shared delay of synapse firing, the Tramps flop, belly down, face first into the baseboard of the first step. The steps stop. The dust clears from their less than Olympic dive/tumble routine. The fuzzy brim of the hunters cap tilts back like a satellite dish designed by cats to detect signs of extra-terrestrial furtelligence. A pair of loafers give way to a pair of khaki pants which draw attention to suspender clamps that run up the length of an unbuttoned robin's egg blue cardigan exposing an Easter-yellow shirt with white buttons that run up into the sagging chin of an old man's face where a dry mouth hangs open panting tuna salad sandwich breath as a small dribble of snot begins to slide towards the lips from the round nose upon which thick rimmed tortoise shell glasses are perched.

“Hello boy o's.” He pants, licks his lizard-tongue across his parched lips. The Tramps rise to their knees. They take him in. He totes a trombone case with one arm while the other cradles a bundle of record sleeves school-book-style, enveloping them into his 1970's sweater pits. Hunting Cap Tramp faces Bandana Tramp, envisioning the concealed smile, noting the position of Bandana Tramp's ears have risen just shy of an inch in relation to the rest of his visage.

“Goob pooow?” The syllables swim unsuccessfully through the bandana dam.

“Eh?” The old man replies. The Tramp sputters his lips into the bandana as if to blow it away, but only adds to its adhesiveness by splattering bold strokes of saliva into the cloth as if he were attempting to duplicate a Pollock with his tongue, using humid cannabis comprised compost pile breath as a fixative. He tears the bandanna away.

“I said, “GOOD PULL?” Now Bandana-less Tramp reiterates in the manner with which one speaks when an elder asks one to repeat one’s self.

“OH, it was a pull alright.” The old man glances nervously back up the stairs. Their paranoia meter needles jump slightly.

“Well?” Hunting Cap Tramp asks.

“Well what? Are you going to let me through or aren’t you?” The old man grows anxious. The meter needles rise into ORANGE: GENERAL RELUCTANCE TO HUMAN INTERACTION.

“Well what’d you pull?” The Capped Tramp asks again enthusiastically.

“Pull? Pull? I’m think I’m the one getting pulled. I think my leg’s getting pulled right now. Are you going to let me pass?” He begins to amble down the stairs, raising his arm, the trombone case gaining leverage. He pauses halfway.

“Sure thing old man. We’re here for the same thing you are.” Hunting Cap Tramp is sympathetic sounding. The needles drop to zero for a moment before spiking into RED: HOSTILE.

“Well I sincerely doubt that!” He half steps, half slides the rest of the way down. The tramps each grab an arm as he nearly collapses into a pile of osteoporosis at the foot of the stairs. “Get your damn hands off of me! I fought two wars for God-damned punks like you and this is how I get repaid?” He wrenches his limbs loose. “Can’t an old man hold on to anything these days?” The trombone case strikes Bandanna Tramp in the knee. (The audience erupts into triumphant laughter!) It is the same knee the rocking horse hit earlier. (Uproarious celebration of the short-term attention span!) He proceeds to sort of cradle one knee while simultaneously straightening and squatting the other like

a human pogo stick with rusty springs. The old man heads for the border. (“Oh man, that was hilaaaarious.”) Bandana Tramp holds a pose that he is sure he saw in an oversized coffee table book on sale at the chain book brothel inside the strip mall during a Reconnaissance mission. He is not entirely sure, however, that it is called “Sleeping Flamingo”, but notes that aside from the injured knee, he feels pretty okay in this stance and will try it again sometime under different circumstances. (“Hippie.”)

“Did you see what he had?”

“Mmm, Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, there were more.” Cap Tramp replies somberly.

“Explains the trombone, I guess.” Bandana tramp lowers his self into a full squat on the one good leg and pulls the bad knee further into his chest. “Standing Clam,” he says softly (“Queer.”) while silently toying with the idea of abandoning all convictions for writing captions in coffee table books destined to find themselves adorned with large yellow discount stickers immediately after publication. (“Oh, I just LOVE coffee table books.”) Hunting Cap Tramp’s eyes follow the old man’s flight towards the frontier with a much practiced in the mirror, but still none the less amazingly appropriate, Siddhartha stare.

“Go west, old man.” he says. The indicators of their paranoia meters sink to an acceptable level of post-interpersonal-interaction agitation. Bandana Tramp procures a ballpoint pen and parking ticket from his coat pocket and inscribes this message, “Future close encounters of the geriatric kind are not be taken lightly. Also, include Trombone in List of Potential Semi-Passive Weaponry –low, sliding notes may serve to illicit comedic

relief, diffusing and neutralizing potential combat scenarios / distract elephants.” He then renders himself erect and raises his newly arthritic knee to ascend the stairs.

“Refrain!” Hunting Cap Tramp commands as the lug sole of his comrade’s boot lands with rattle and wheeze upon the shipwreck-esque lumber of the warped first stair.

Bandana Tramp turns with eyebrows raised in mock inquisitiveness. “He was frightened,” Hunting Cap Tramp states matter-of-factly. “There is something up there.”

“He was senile, and obviously deep in the throes of cognitive dissonance brought on by Alzheimer’s disease. A dweller in the clouded kingdom of Dementia,” retorts his veiled companion.

“Is that your official diagnosis?” asks Hunting Cap Tramp with quarter notes of sarcasm.

“Knock, knock,” offers Bandana Tramp in baited onomatopoeia.

“Who’s there?”

“Freud.”

“Freud who?”

“I’m a Freud so.”

(The audience boos and pelts the screen with multi-colored confectionary projectiles. A face bearing the likeness of either Jesus Christ, Jerry Garcia, or the Geico Caveman, enters your frame of vision; smiling softly, head tilting slightly from side to side as it passes your seat, winking, from where it has miraculously appeared in the soda stains soiled about the buttocks region of the popcorn butter-perfumed sweatpants waddling down your row, worn loosely around the waist of a man whose very essence of existence seems to say, “No, not funny.” as he shuffles along, ass a mere inches away



from spectators' faces, stepping on first dates' newly painted toenails, all the way to the aisle and on to the fire exit, where he throws open the door, unleashing harsh midday sun upon bespectacled old women, suspending suspended disbelief, blinding infants, without apology, unable to withstand any more narrative confusion, annoyingly apparent alliteration, uninformed socio-commentary, near total ignorance of proper punctuation, and lengthy divergences of plot such as this, which seem to serve no purpose beyond allowing the author, a first year grad student no doubt, to rant at will, while simultaneously struggling to demonstrate his capacity for abstract thought, and otherwise attempt to establish intellectual superiority over his peers through near-clever word play, to be read enjoyably only by himself and a selective audience of "hip" thinkers. Give me a fucking break. Never the less, Jesus/ Jerry/ or the Geico Caveman smiles from the hindquarters, surrounded in a heavenly halo of light reflecting from the mid-summer strip mall parking lot, as Spongebob Saviorpants passes through the fire exit, headed home to punch out his review upon a Cheeto-encrusted keyboard for his widely un-read blog. The crowd contemplates the meaning of his departure. A waste of seven bucks? A missed opportunity to view someone injured, seriously mauled, and with any luck, brutally murdered? Or is it the un-ease of observing one willingly leave the air-conditioned confines of the communal living room orchestration of thought process swimming synchronized under the direction of the demographic minded director of archetype and iconography? Patrons shift in their seats. Soft drink buckets sweat uncontrollably. It was so fun in here. "What an asshole!")

"You failed psychology," asserts Hunting Cap Tramp.

"On account only of the research points." Reminds Bandana Tramp.

“The gopher who heedeth the mower blade liveth long and prosperous ‘neath the golf course glade.”

“The caddy who feareth unseen toil and strain stands by whilst those with balls and clubs take aim.”

“You sir, are a scholar and a gentleman.” And they commence to crawl army style upwards along the stairs. Elbows driving the slave drum sound of advance against non-prerogative. Thump. Thump. Thump.

{The author retreats to Qwik Shop -

“Flick your Bick.” Cloud of carcinogens. “Cold and crusty, old and dusty/ Winter’s wind cuts slow and trusty,” texts to self.

Cop in parked cop car.

“Look normal like you’re not having fun. Look normal like you’re not having fun.”

Roller Items Two-4-One! Abstain.

“Lord, lead me not into constipation.”

Fiber One Bar

Green Tea, decaf

“Fuck it.”

Two taquitos

Soda, diet, shot of cherry syrup. Sobriety’s Boilermaker.

“Two packs of Camel Filters please. Gettin’ cold out there. Credit. Thanks, have a good one.” Casual acquaintance of nightshift clerk.

Cop in parked cop car.

“Look normal like you’re not having fun. Look normal like you’ve never had fun.”

Male nod of acknowledgment.

“Haven’t seen him since high school. They gave that guy a gun?”

- The author returns most triumphant, feasts victoriously, slumbers in the great one bedroom of the apartment complex apartment. }

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{The author awakens following an approximate one year interim in which the days played out redundant as a broken rec-redundant as a broken rec-redundant as a broken

record labeled:

### **FEDERAL DIRECT LOAN RECORDS**

The Graduate Studies -The Debut Album!

Side A:

1. Alarm Clock Blues
2. Cold Coffee Blues
3. Ain’t No Mo’Clean Jeans Blues
4. Flash Drive Done Up and Left Me Blues
5. Low Down Library Printer Failure Blues
6. Talkin’ Textuality and Canonicity Blues (featuring Growlin’ Gut)\*

Side B:

1. Punchin’ the Clock But Not Yo’ Boss Blues
2. Burnt Coffee Blues
3. Warm Seat in Yo’ Favorite Bathroom Stall Blues
4. Co-worker Conspiracy Against You Blues
5. Night Class
6. Annotated Bib Blues/  
Low Down Library Printer Failure Blues (reprise)
7. Tossin’N’ Turnin’ All Night Long Blues

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\*Growlin’ Gut Appears Courtesy Minimum Wage Records

Played at the speed of 15 ML (minutes late) on the turntable of wasted time, producing, in a frequency nearly inaudible to the human ear, this message...

“You are fifteen minutes late.” “Your credit card is for gas and groceries.” “Incunabula are not insect larvae.” “Beer is not gas.” “Attempt bathing daily.” “Cigarettes are not groceries.” “Incunabula are not furry spiders.” “You really should call your mother.”

“Sometimes not doing something is as much of an act as doing something, or something.”

“Whistle while you work.” “Cubicles lead to Carbuncles” “Whistle while you work.”

“Cubicles lead to Carbuncles” “You should work whilst you whistle.”

“Cubicle/Carbuncle” “Whistle/Work” “Cubicle/-----” “-----/Work.”

“Cubicle/Work” “You are fifteen minutes late. Go to work in your cubicle. Do not whistle.” as Stylus drug Needle into a concentrically diminishing dance through the typically silent canyons of innermost album grooves. Until having run all out of grooves to groove on, Needle became irritable, and Stylus, like a good little piece of outdated automation, lifted them both up, and then away, from the shiny vinyl audio pizza, to rest on the bleachers in a corner by the door, where they will stay, until someone pushes them unwillingly into a conga line. New news headlines and social upheavals aside, the world outside the author’s window is essentially the same, if not unseasonably warm for winter. Legally addictive stimulants are brewed and consumed. A quick scan of the online periodicals renders an appropriate state of paranoia for the self-centered artistic endeavor to continue. Folk music plays at a meditatively moderate volume. “Excelsior!”]

Upon accessing the summit of the stairway leading to the second floor our tramps are enveloped in an intensely charged atmosphere which smells of glue and silverfish. Despite the objects which adorn their boyish features in an attempt to appropriate a sense

of world worn raggedy haggardness, the tramps' olfactory senses are assaulted with these stimuli which produce an unwarranted sense of self consciousness, eliciting intimations of intellectual inferiority, and the notion that despite speaking not a word, they are somehow saying something stupid. Their freezer burn fringed eyelids crackle back like the first windshield wiper swipes of a Minnesota morning. An icicle laden stenciled sign swings on its historic hinges denoting an outpost nearly Antarctic in its obscurity, "USED BOOKS." ("I watch movies so I don't HAVE to read!" "Someone get these guys a couple tweed jackets and some pipes! Ammirite? Ammirite?" "Left-wing, college-learned, liberal, intellectual, socialists, climate changin', baby killin', evolution preachin, pissin' away all my tax money in colleges across the country, tell you what.") The tramps tread the threshold cautiously, careful in the way a child is upon traversing a virgin snow. A Robert Frost fuzziness permeates this place, lovely, dark and... ("Whoah, deep man.") In a state of heightened sensual awareness, our tramps become acutely aware of a muted murmuring which the mind is unable to register as real, or imagined.

"Black Elk," Hunting Cap Tramp asserts.

"Speaks?" Bandanna Tramp gropes for the synaptical syntax connection.

"Spoke. He spoke of the real and imagined as one."

"So does every author that the Wasichu celebrate in the search of spiritual unpavement."

"The voices of those gone before, now long gone. Look. Listen."

Bandanna Tramp surveys the surrounding shelves, observing that their contents' lack of clarity is indeed undue to optical interference, but rather a subtle shifting of the

low-volume volumes themselves. The writings writhe, print pressed, hard back to back and bound together in a game of inter-textual telephone. Philosophical discourse drones, critical editions contradict themselves, poetry gatherings posture for ponderatory prominence, mythological anthologies morph in accordance with the ongoing self-revisions of a brief history of winners, epic narratives shake hands with screenplays, fiction first editions feel invisible, and short story collections self-mutilate spilling their castrated content onto a glossy dogpile of dodgy men's magazines on the floor.

“Yes,” Bandanna Tramps whispers in hushed reverence. “I hear them now.”

Just then, a different, distant sound works its way into the audible spectrum of our heroes (and subsequently the speakers of the dilapidated surround sound system in the theater). A foghorn like familiarity harkens granulated visions of a misty early morning Dublin street scene, black and white, noir, at night. Our heroes suddenly feel as if their huddled position beneath the shelter of a tenant housing stoop overhang has been compromised, they advance along the walls accordingly, avoiding the glowing glare of gas lit street lamps, on the run, seeking the foghorn's promise of a ship and safety. Informants. They negotiate the various shelved enclaves, sidelong and silent, deliberately indifferent to the divergent diatribes of the theological texts, their ears deaf to the yelps and whimpers emitted from countless dying dogs in children's' books, intently ignorant of the babbling brook which streams from the spring of outdated psychology textbooks. Rounding the final corner, they face a gaunt young fellow garbed in a scholar's robe and cap. Limber limbed and frail, the lad extends a skeletal appendage towards a shelf upon which are housed a number of illustrious titles, tilting and shifting in a state of decompositional

decadence. Tentatively, an index digit traverses their spines. He appears oblivious to our outlaws' intrusion.

Bandanna Tramp sniggers and whispers, "GET HER!" through his teeth.

"Offer the universally accepted gesture of camaraderie and brotherhood."

"No, no. 'GEEEEET HERRRR!"

"Yes, I know you are good at quoting *Ghostbusters*. Now offer the gesture."

Bandanna tramp shrugs and sighs, then raises his right arm, palm open. "Gooooooood mornin' guv nuh'." Hunting Cap Tramp furrows his brow in perplexed disapproval. "Looks like an Oxford lad to me." Defends Bandanna Tramp. "I'll try again. HEY FINDING ANYTHING GOOD THERE?"

The skeletal scholar turns his head and body in a singular motion and stares upon them with a thoroughly un-startled countenance, arm and index finger still outstretched. "Forget your chains there Jacob Marley?" Bandanna Tramp jests in good hearted jollity. The scholar's arm retracts in an arachnid like manner; the spindly digit repositions a pair of wire rimmed spectacles upon the bridge of the scholar's genetically gentrified ski slope nose.

"Pardon?" enunciated the scholar.

"Uh, any good books in there?" Bandanna Tramp offers again.

"Are you inquiring as to the relative literary merit of the texts catalogued within this particular section of the library?"

"It's an antique mall," muttered Cap Tramp.

“Most assuredly!” Proclaimed Bandanna Tramp, simultaneously thrilled and self-conscious in regards to the seemingly verbose tone of the exchange. He has, as of late, been occasionally killing it in Words with Friends on his iPhone.

“Indeed. They are the collected works of the single most important literary figure of our time. They demonstrate a masterful crafting of language which transcends the barriers which have henceforth limited the novel as a form in regards to its ability to authentically communicate the essence of the human condition. They display an unprecedented level of artistic integrity, unwavering in the cathartic search for universal truth, and unsurpassable in sheer scope and breadth of subject. They are incapable of subjugation to any debilitating demarcation of genre. Although collectively monolithic in nature, it is widely agreed that the degree of labyrinthine complexity embedded within the text will require centuries of scholarly study to produce any sort of unified critical analysis. They...”

“Jesus, did you read the damn things or just memorize the jackets?” Interjects H.C.T.

“They will no doubt rise to prominence as the most significant written work of all time, second only to The Bible.”

“Shut the front door already! Who wrote these things anyway?”

“He did.” The skeletal scholar again shifts his self in one singular motion, his moldering gown aloft in a current of celluloidal cacklement as his index finger is fixed upon a bulbous and bilious figure appropriated disproportionately upon, underneath, within, and without the fatigued framework of what was surely once a luxuriously accommodating arm chair. The tramps suddenly became aware that this amoeba-like



specimen was indeed the source of the foghorn like sound which served as the sonar-like signal resulting in the circumnavigation to the present scenario in which the skeletal scholar celebrates this amoeba's literary output in solitude. Furthermore, upon un-objective observation of the amorphous amoeba man, they conclude by way of the scientific method, that the sound produced was in fact snoring.

"Who is he?" asks the Bandanna Tramp with the bewilderment one possesses when viewing a National Geographic sketching of a newly discovered deep sea creature.

"He is an undisputable genius, the greatest of our time," states the scholar.

"But who is he?"

"I dare not speak his name aloud."

"Oh, killed your ma' and papa' did he Meestah Potter? Heyooooohhh, ZING!"

Bandanna Tramp is just full of them today.

"For fear he will awake and find...."

"And find what?"

"Find that his work is still not as widely celebrated as a literary masterpiece of its merit warrants." The scholar's glasses glide gloomily down the gallant slope of his grey and greasy nose. ("Well, that man should try to get on Oprah's booklist. That's when you know you know you're a real writer, don'tcha know? She puts alcoholics on her show too. Double whammy, if you ask me.")

"I see. By 'widely celebrated', what you really mean is read by someone other than yourself."

"Society is all too often slow in recognizing a visionary," retorts the scholar.

“BLLLOOOOOOOWWWWWCH.” The visionary has at present emitted a release of gaseous matter from an orifice which we can only assume is a mouth. (The crowd erupts into laughter! “Awww man, never gets old now does it son?”)

“Was that a quote from one of his books?” Bandana Tramp resorts again to sarcasm. This means of communication is typically employed in scenarios which register little or no activity on their paranoia meters. Although usually meant in jest full jollity, Hunting Cap Tramp pulls his comrade aside and reminds him that when conversing with someone of equal or greater intellectual capabilities, sarcasm is often interpreted as only slightly more polite than saying, “I think you’re a F---in’ idiot!” He also notes that sarcasm is second only to irony in the arsenal of their adversaries (Ominous music implying foreshadowing). Hunting Cap Tramp approaches the amoeba man, knocking over several bottles of moderately price merlot containing merely dregs and preserved insect carcasses in the process. He leans over the would-be literary giant, observing the intricacies of the varicose veins which appear to flow in some sort of cirrhosis-fed system of tributaries, snaking their way across rolling fields of rosacea before culminating in an arrestingly arranged bouquet of gin blossoms. He lingers momentarily, before remarking merely, “Glorious specimen.”

“Why don’t you come with us?” Bandanna Tramp addresses the scholar with newly recaptured maturity.

“Thank you for the offer, but I must refuse nonetheless. I must look after him.”

“He’s not going anywhere,” states Cap Tramp still in observation of the specimen.

“Even if he does come to, I’d wager it’ll take nothing short of dialysis to ease the pain he’s got coming to him.”

“Yeah, if anything he’ll read one of his own books and crawl back into a bottle again,” sneers the Bandanna Tramp as he leafs through a volume. “Do you ever do any writing of your own?”

The scholar’s glasses slide further down the resort worthy slalom course schnoz. “I, I thought about it once. I stared at the page pen in hand for four hours, but ultimately found I have nothing of any worth to write about. How could I when artists of his caliber have set the bar so high?”

“It’s art man, not sports. You’re only competing against yourself,” conjectures Hunting Cap Tramp.

“No, my talents are better served studying and spreading the work of one superior to myself. I will remain here, hermetically sealed in scholarly seclusion.”

“Well, how are you going to have anything to write about unless you go find your own story? You really want to write about some obscure shit you found hanging out in an Antique Mall? Boring. (“No f---in’ joke!” The audience produces applause and agreeances)

Hunting Cap Tramp continues, “You don’t get to decide if people will hate what you write man.”

“I am not interested in prostituting what limited intellectual and aesthetic capabilities I possess. I do not wish to find my mind’s place on the market. My conversation is concerned with the collected works of mankind.”

“Ah, a watermelon man,” observes Bandana Tramp.

“Pardon?”

“You’re trying to shit a watermelon, son,” replies Cap Tramp with a colloquial calmness. The scholar contorts, visibly upset with such shrewd vulgarity.

“You’re pissin’ in the wind,” Cap Tram continues, revealing a fondness for the words and work of Jerry Jeff Walker, bemused that such a supposedly learned man is devoid of any of the world weary knowledge all too often worn on the sleeves of under-celebrated troubadours across the southern states.

“What he means is,” Bandanna Tramp takes his turn as voice of reason, “You’re thinking of the ocean instead of seeing the river right in front of you. Your ship has not yet sailed, yet you are lost at sea. You sift through water logged wreckage, sucking stale air through scuba tanks, only to find the chest chiseled open, and treasure long since taken by hand of man or salt of sea. You commemorate the corpse of the captain, well decorated, and thoroughly deceased. In his quarters you read his watered log, clutching your compass and limited knowledge of cartography, yet your headlamp illuminates no predestined course, there is no X to mark some secret spot. Calligraphy is all you see, and a rough estimation of where the world ends.” The three young men stew in a poetic silence. Hunting Cap Tramp breaks the spell.

“You really are going to work at Barnes and Noble aren’t you? What he means is you’re scared of getting DeCaprio’ed on the Titanic, when there’s a perfectly good aluminum canoe with a Coleman cooler full of ice-cold Busch floating right in front of you. Life’s a garden, DIG IT.” Hunting Cap Tramp is ready to leave.

“Come with us, we’re on an artistic endeavor as well. We could use you.” The scholar repositions his spectacles before stating, “I appreciate your offer but I am afraid I must refuse nonetheless. I am incapable of joining your party, but I wish you the

best of luck on your sojourn, wherever it may lead you,” with absolutely reserved resolve which registers with our tramps as containing only the highest level of utmost sincerity. He revolves uniformly to his wire rimmed worldview upon the bookshelf, extends his spidery appendage and tentatively traverses the spines of the assembled volumes with his indexing digit.

“Suit yourself,” replies the Cap Tramp. “Don’t count on anyone else to come in here for a while; they’re all getting Kindles for Christmas.”

Our heroes exeunt and make their way back through literary laden landscape of the second floor. Shortly before reaching the staircase landing, a loud belch erupts across the cavernous conclave, “DEEESPPAAAIIIIIRRRRRCHHH!” knocking loose stalactite-like icicles from the stenciled sign swinging upon its historic hinges, subsequently falling special effects slow motion style, smashing into innumerable shards of crystalline shininess across the splintered floor, mere moments after the soles of our heroes heavy boots had skidded across, on their way and on the move.

Regretful to have left a good man behind, yet relieved to have resumed their mission, our tramps ascend the staircase to the third and final floor. Temporary trepidation meets them as they pause on the landing which precedes the final flight of stairs. Bandanna Tramp turns towards his comrade, removes his saliva spackled accessory, and swipes it across his exposed and oil slicked forehead. Hunting Cap Tramp directs his gaze upwards, eyes wide and all seeing in the flicker of the fluorescent light. He brushes his cracked and crevassed knuckles against his gnarled facial curls.

“I know this place. I’ve been here before.” His words float gracefully upon the warm ozone waves of air wafting from the dust encrusted air ducts.

“Okay General Patton, what’s the battle plan.”

“Proceed with caution. They may have laid traps.”

“Pungi pits?” inquires the temporarily de-Bandanna’ed Tramp. He breathes deeply, raises one arm directly vertical while rotates the other jerkily around an invisible circumference. “Ticking Clock,” he exhales quietly.

“Poisoned fair trade espresso, restrictive denim legwear, vision obliterating oversized eyewear, reality altering Apple products, contaminated cans of PBR, I could go on...”

“I pick up what you’re putting down,” Bandanna Tramp replies with resolution as he re-snorts and knots his makeshift scarf.

(The synthesized string score escalates in pitch, entangling tones of heightened tension and fear frequencies across the movie theatre audience. “Yessss, finally, kill someone!” Super-sized sodas are gulped, someone sneezes. “Bless you.” The music reaches a crescendo of creepiness at the very moment our tramps strain their thighs upon the final steps to the summit. Someone sneezes. “Bless you,” Sniffles, “Thanks.”)

The tramps dark rimmed and deeply socketed eyes simultaneously survey a scene which they had until then known only through the stories of geriatric garage sale hosts and stoned stereo salesmen. Eyes seeking widely, they take in this Eagle’s Nest of Audiophilia, this Hi-Fi Fortress of Solitude, this Atlantis of the Amplified, this vinyl Val Halle, this multibanded Mount Doom of equalization, this Quadrophonic... (The crowd directs the remaining kernels of corn and contents of smuggled king size candy containers towards the screen. An elderly gentleman, retired and a fan of the golden era of radio, smiles silently through his gums.)

The scene laid out before them is one of indescribable, incomparable, all encompassing, endlessly engrossing, nerve shattering....(more cries of unrest, ice makes contact with screen)...mind numbing, normalcy. They blink, doe-eyed and Bambi-like. The third floor, it seems, is atypical of any “Records, Tapes, and CDs” section in any proprietary establishment of secondhand wares. The sign is multi-colored, the medium is magic marker, and the obligatory quarter notes border and corner the text. The light is dim and projects a pastel hue which renders the room with a polaroid-like picture quality. The combined scents of stale smoke, mothballs, and old people hangs pleasantly like former fine first days of a spring, preserved here in this room, since the glorious year of 1972. The two tramps consult their paranoia meters only to see still needles settled soundly upon “O – Seems Cool.” Their boots advance delicately and deliberately in step with each other.

Half-lacquered book shelves lean like drunken sailors, milk crates sprawl in shanty town fashion, sprung up from corners, pillars, and the odd pieces of once desirable lima bean green cocktail party furniture. This is a housing project. Its tenants are the remnants of an industry which once surpassed even Hollywood in its sales, profits, lust, and luster. A monument to a war once fueled by milk money and part-time paychecks. The mausoleum of a market dependent upon suburban sprawl, consumers of counter culture, and the now dying notion that the general public has interest in purchasing audio in a format which is produced and packaged with some sense of artistic integrity.

The surviving soldiers wear tattered sleeves and water damaged jackets, warped from the sun (don’t leave your records in the sun), thirsty for isopropyl alcohol, and awaiting their next deployment. Some will spin and scratch beneath the effeminate

fingertips of an anorexic art school student, dehydrated from designer drugs, and dead set on getting “lazer crunk” at an abandoned warehouse rave somewhere in the West Bottoms of Kansas City. Some will sit in suspended animation, vacuum sealed on the shelf of some reclusive collector, systematically situated amongst specimens of similar species and genus, alphabetical order is for amateurs, of course. Some will become martyrs, crucified upon alters of asbestos, pseudo-Saints enshrined and entombed within garages, basements, shared rehearsal spaces, and any other place of worship cheap in rent and semi-sufficient in sound proofing. Some, with any luck, will simply be taken home, listened to, and enjoyed.

With relative uneventfulness (Bandanna Tramp toppled a stack of eight-track cartridges while attempting to extract a copy of the Grease Official Motion Picture Soundtrack) the Two Tramps circumnavigate their way towards the rear of the room where it is rumored that somewhere between Vendor Stall #35 and Vendor Stall #37, and more or less beneath the partially lit and subsequently entirely profane SCHLITZ BEER neon bar sign, sits the softly spoken of and seldom viewed Vendor Stall #36. (In previous episodic adventures of the Two Tramps, this location was oft cited by the seemingly more eccentric of the oft eccentric breed of vinyl enthusiast as containing a “buncha’ good, clean, cheap, an’ rare records. Only thing is you gotta’ get to it first see? And then, and then you gotta’ get back out see...” The dialogue was delivered in a hushed and hurried manor, accentuated by the soundtrack composer holding down some low notes on his Kurzweil keyboard while adding an ominous wavering effect by twiddling around with the pitch bendy control knob thing.) The tramps stop, stand still. They seem to be taking a moment to mull things over. An unsettling gurgle gives way



from Bandanna Tramp's esophagus before working its way towards his mouth in a series of guttural stops; he tugs away his bandanna, puffs his cheeks, puckers his lips, and then deposits a highly concentrated dollop of darkened mucus upon the floor.

"Sorry, throat oyster."

"Well, this is..."

"Anticlimactic. I think I was more freaked out at the front door!"

"We cannot be sure yet."

"That Dave guy looked MEAN!"

"He is of no worry to us." Hunting Cap Tramp has obviously re-centered his chi since the second floor.

"He was mean muggin' us! Talk about a stare bear. I bet he's watching us through HAL 9000 up there right now." He studies the cold unflinching circumference of surveillance perched above their heads, bird of private property protection. Several questions enter his mind at once as he locks, uh, eye, with the closed circuit Cyclops, mostly questions concerned with plot discrepancy and narrative framework, but they seem to fade further away with every illuminated blip of the battery light, he synchronizes his blinking with it, the light appears now not in a series of blips but as an undisrupted beam, his autonomous system follows suit, heart beating in time, he thinks how his heart is like his own battery, he looks deeper into the recesses of the lens, having somehow obtained telescopic vision, he cannot tell if he is looking into the camera, or if the camera is looking in to him, he thinks how the camera is great, he thinks how it's great that the camera is watching over him, he thinks how it's great that the camera doesn't have to feel, he thinks how it's great that the camera doesn't have to rest, he

thinks how it's great that all the camera has to do is show what it sees, he thinks it's great how...

(The audience sits in an unsettling silence. Omniscience, it seems, can be a lot to take in all at once.)

Hunting Cap Tramp had enjoyed these past few minutes or so. There was no rush to raid the bins. The records, unlike the books, were inanimate. He soaked in the silence, a rare occasion given the jovial jollity with which his comrade would so often jest. He broke the silence only to tell a joke he'd been holding onto for quite some time.

"You know, I pray to God a doctor never does fix those damn sinuses of yours."

"-----." Bandanna Tramp is thinking how the camera's great. Hunting Cap Tramp takes his partner's pause as an open invitation to the punch-line party.

"Because my ears hear more than they can handle when you have the damn bandanna ON! HOOOOOOOOO!!!.....Whoaaa you havin' a seizure or somethin' man?" Hunting Cap Tramp has become aware of the situation.

"----- \*blink\*-----\*blink\*-----\*blink\*-----" A rather impressive stream of snot and saliva has sprung from somewhere beneath Bandanna Tramp's bandanna and has actually drizzled some pretty psychedelic fractal-like patterns on his shirt but Hunting Cap Tramp would feel kind of bad if he stopped to take a picture at a time like this, and plus he could never show him the picture anyway because then Bandanna Tramp would find out he's been secretly packing an iPhone this whole time and using GPS to get directions instead of celestial navigation. He removes his flannel

lined headwear and proceeds to beat Bandanna Tramp about the face with it rather heavy handedly.

“HEY. HEY. HEY. HEY. HEY. HEY. HEY.

I know you're thinking about selling out and getting a job at Trader Joes! HEY. HEY. HEY.

HEY.” Strings of snot stretch and snap, betwixt their trademark winter wear as the

Mollywhop intensifies. “HEY! HEY! HEY! HEY!

That's cool no one's gonna ready your stupid pseudosurrealist postmodern antique mall adventure lo ganyway. HEY. HEY. HEY. HEY. HEY.” A particularly sinewy strand of Bandanna

Tramp's nasal secretion becomes airborne and plasters itself upon the camera's lens with a sound similar to that of hand tossed pizza dough landing upon a newly mopped floor.

Hunting Cap Tramp refrains, follows his befuddled friend's line of sight to the camera

mounted above him behind him before quickly averting his eyes and drawing into a

crouching position. In a single fluid motion, he springs, unsheathes and activates his

light saber, strikes the camera upon the weakest section of its mounting, lands silently

upon the floor, and covers his face to deflect any shards of glass or live electrical

components. Crouched and covered, he begins to wonder if he is suffering temporary

hearing loss due to his light saber arcing upon some sort of shielded surface something or

other. He re-exposes his remaining senses. The camera still hangs. The battery light

blinks. Bandanna Tramp is still thinking how the camera is great.

Having never viewed any of the *STAR WARS* films himself, Hunting Cap Trap

had initially been reluctant to wield a weapon so whimsical in nature, but Bandanna

Tramp prevailed with demonstrations of how “the sounds it makes in battle causes

everything you say to seem really profound in context”, and how “Siddhartha Gautama

would have totally carried a light saber, probably only to make cool sounds and stuff though”, and “I got a Wal-Mart gift certificate from my Aunt. We can get them now for free, and if you don’t like yours, we can just take it back and get a Super Soaker or whatever.” Hunting Cap Tramp makes a mental note to log more hours in field research for potential inclusions in the arsenal of non-violent weaponry.

“You win again George Lucas. You always do.” Hunting Cap Tramp broods a bit, his fur bordered brow furrowed to its fullest. Suddenly, he is startled by the very sound he only moments before anticipated. The camera’s carcinogen packing plastic exterior shatters in an explosive display of faulty foreign craftsmanship. (“Shoot, can’t buy nothin’ ‘Merican made these days!”) The defeated samurai of surveillance spills its shoddily soldered guts and glue upon the ground in an act of synthetic Seppuku. The ever present eye smolders amidst the curling copper wires and acrid stench of alkaline; its blinking now ceased. Volume Thirteen of the *Oxford English Dictionary* slides to a stop ten or so steps past its newly dismantled target.

“DIG IT.” A voice traverses the room with monotonic familiarity. The Scholar stands motionless except for his scrunched cheeks which indicate either a “no fingers” attempt to stall his perpetusliding eyewear, or a smile, maybe. In any case, Hunting Cap Tramp is so happy to see The Scholar that he finds himself feeling uncharacteristically over talkative. He wants to tell The Scholar how grateful and thankful he is for showing up when he did.

“What’s up?” is all he can muster.

“Riding the river my friend.” The Scholar approaches languidly, his stature and gait suggest an acute self-awareness, resulting no doubt from his having discovered the

phrase “easy saunter” much too early in life. He extends his fantastic phalange towards Bandanna Tramp. “Your companion is discombobulated.”

“Oh shit, right. Forgot.” His gaze turns toward the Bandana Tramp; still standing, still stationary, although swaying in the same subdued manner which often bestows upon a drunkard the semblance of having an invisible hula hoop spun in slow motion around their waist. Hunting Cap Tramp then surveys the short circuiting circuitry strewn about them as it sparks and sizzles its way into the realm of technological irrelevancy. “Nice throw, by the way. Not bad for a bookworm.” The Scholar only stares in return.

Hunting Cap Tramp begins to feel a little “not cool.” He begins to worry faintly that The Scholar might actually be “super-cool,” or possibly even “ultra-cool” – both are levels of cooldom which cannot be reached intentionally. In other words, one must abandon the concept of cool altogether in order to transcend the generally agreed upon, and subsequently not cool, consensus of what is cool. Most of the “cool kids” in high school are in fact “not cool”. The Hipster is by default not cool, for the sole reason that the moniker in and of itself suggests self-aware and self-appointed superiority in the realm of cool-dom. Cool people simply ARE cool. They care not if you are. They care not if you think they are. They shoot the shit, and they sit in silence. They are glad to see you, but do not mind when they are not seen. They are happy to hang out, but are not hurt when you don’t have time. They like what they like. They are where they are. Having no social agendas or hidden intentions, they live free from suspicions of being sniffed out. Their actions are oft-rooted in altruism. They are seldom self-conscious in social settings, and their inter-personal relationships are by and large conducted with little to no

regard for the potentiality of yielding some sort of sexual activity. In short, they are keepin' it real.

Hunting Cap Tramp apologizes, "I'm sorry man. I was just givin' you shit."

The Scholar stares momentarily, and then says, "Your swordsmanship was impressive," in the most monotone tone of voice he has of yet spoken.

"Well, thanks man." Hunting Cap Tramp starts to feel a little cooler again.

"For a fully grown adult yielding a child's toy in place of a legitimate weapon."

The tramp's pupils enlarge, his ears burn red beneath their protective flaps, his tongue stammers silently behind his teeth as he returns The Scholar's stare. Then, a toothy white smile spreads across his face. "Are you just givin' me shit?"

The Scholar's cheeks suddenly scrunch, his glasses slowly slide, maybe he is smiling.

"You ole' sideswipin' sonofabitch!" the Tramp has surrendered his self-consciousness.

"What is his ailment?" his stare shifts towards the Bandanna Tramp, swaying slowly, lost in gentle gyration.

(At this point it is worth mentioning that a significant portion of the audience, approximately one-fourth, has left to obtain a refund, or simply to salvage what is left of their evening. Their vacant seats and open armrests are welcomed by those remaining. They provide extra cup holders, coat racks, and an overall increased sense of comfort and coziness for those who seeking refuge from the workaday world and spousal disagreements concerning the setting of the thermostat. Some sleep, some have settled in for their second round of popcorn and soda, some suck absent mindedly on old-maids, children squirm and crawl, teenagers illuminate the aisles intermittently like LCD

lightening bugs, elderly couples hold hands or don't, and some mothers and fathers are just happy to get away from the kids. There are several statistics and figures proven to be relatively true in regards to an assemblage of people this large, such as; X number will develop \_\_\_\_\_ disease, X number will be involved in a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ accident, X number will be convicted of a(n) \_\_\_\_\_, etc. . . It is important, I suppose, that those statistics and figures be tracked and recorded. However, it is more important, I propose, to note that persons affected by such a broad set of circumstances still wish to sit by total strangers in the dark and hear someone tell a story.]

“Acute Surveillance Psychosis.” Hunting Cap Tramp’s eyes squint as he speaks, the crackle of their crow’s feet nearly audible.

“I am not acquainted with such a condition.” The Scholar, for all his accumulated knowledge, is actually pretty cool about admitting when he doesn’t know about stuff.

“I had a less severe case a while ago, back when I got my iPhone.” Hunting Cap Tramp’s paranoia meter jumped slightly at the thought of telecommunication device nestled snugly within the folds of his fatigewear.

“Please, explain further.”

“I didn’t set out to get one or anything, but the way they pitch it to you they make it sound like you’re getting a better deal,” the tramp grumbles with the hindsight that accompanies the impulsive purchases made by the restless consumer.

“Pardon me, let me clarify. I was inquiring as to the nature of the con...”

The Tramp cuts him off. “I got ya. So I get the thing and its pretty fun right out of the box anyway. Takes cool pictures, surfs the World Wide Web, tells me what restaurants chicks will dig and shit. Got all the social networking sites goin, getting

messages all the time, getting directions, making life easier, making me feel better, helps keep track of the chicks, ya' know”

The Scholar stares.

“Yeah, guess you might not know. Anyway, then I start to think about how messed up the whole thing is, like some real life *1984* shit. You've read that, right?”

“Yes, during my eighth year.”

“Jesus. No wonder you posted up in here with shit ton of books. Eight years old? Woof. Anyway, I realize they track my purchases, can track my social circles, track where I eat, and pinpoint me anytime I'm carrying my phone and receiving a GPS signal. Like I was saying, it's basically *1984* but I fucking signed up for it! Big Brother figured out peer pressure and consumer market trends will do all kinds of dirty work for him. On top of that, Huxley was warning us back in the fifties that they'd use technological entertainment to make us all illiterate and fry the kids' brains before they even get to grade school!”

“I'm familiar with those predictions, yes.” The Scholar states with utmost matter-of-factness.

“Anyway, so I start deleting all the apps and everything to where all have left on my phone's just the phone and the GPS, but even that was still freaking out so I just started leaving the thing at home. Tried to use it like a land line.”

“That seems reasonable.” Interjected The Scholar.

“An interjection? Coming out of your shell their kid. Anyway, one day I head out for work, leave the phone at home. I figured I'd probably end up with antsy pants a few



times throughout the day because I like to get my busy fingers on texting during break. Anyway, I brought a book and some extra smokes.”

“Novel plan,” The Scholar stated.

“Look at you, droppin’ puns on the dime!” The Tramp continued, “Anyway, I didn’t end up with antsy-pants. I ended up with full-blown anxiety attack pants. Like someone severed my corpus callosum or something. You know what that is?”

“I am vaguely familiar with it.” The Scholar was actually fully familiar with it and all other apparatus cerebral in operation.

“Connects the hemispheres in your brain, looks like the Nike Swoosh. Anyway, I figured it was just first day separation anxiety, but I kept having panic attacks for the next two weeks. Like, afraid I’d die if I went to the grocery store alone panic attacks. So I’m looking at the phone one night while I’m caught in this conundrum, and I’m thinking about all this shit, and for some reason I start staring into the lens for the camera. And as I’m staring into it, I started to feel real safe again. I started thinking about how all the *1984*, *Brave New World* shit was just me being paranoid, and then I started to wonder what the hell I was so paranoid about in the first place. I’m a law abiding citizen for the most part, and that shit’s almost legal anyway. Cellphones and Facebook saved a bunch of people’s lives when that tornado hit Joplin. That rock climber wouldn’t have had to saw his own arm off if he had an iPhone on him. Started thinking along those lines of logic. Basically decided they’re only a threat to your well-being if you’re a threat to society’s well-being.” The two remain silent for thirty seconds or so. Bandanna Tramp continues doing his invisihula thing.

The Scholar breaks the silence, “What are your thoughts on the subject now?”

Hunting Cap Tramp removes his haggard head gear and slaps it squarely across his thigh, dispensing a fishbowl-sized dust bowl in the process. “Shouldn’t be like that, but it already is. That’s what happens.”

“I see. Could you explain to me more clearly what the potential dangers of this Surveillance Psychosis are in regards to your companion’s well-being?”

Hunting Cap Tramp lets out a sigh, “Well, surveillance gives people a sense of security. Like if anything happens to them anywhere that’s at least halfway civilized, the cops will show up within five to ten minutes and be able to if not apprehend, at least identify, anyone involved in the incident. Makes people feel like their property’s safe, kids are safe, all that. Helps them sleep easy at night. So imagine being so sucked into the whole surveillance trip to the point of avoiding places without it. Imagine being so reliant on that machine to watch out for you all night that you can’t sleep without it. The big thing is, the real big problem is that if you’re way far into the whole surveillance and location technology trip, you don’t see a problem with subjecting other folks to it, or worse, forcing them to participate, because why would they resist? Unless they have something to hide, ya’ know? Problem is that people oughtta have a choice. That’s, uh . . . .”

“Constitutional.”

“Exactly. That.”

They gaze again upon their bewildered companion. “I want to take a picture or video of this so I can rub this in his face when he comes to, but then he’ll know I’m still packin’ 4G on our pulls. Would you mind lying and saying we took it on your - you don’t have an iPhone. Who am I kidding?”

The Scholar scrunches his cheeks as his frames traverse the slope of nose. He is smiling.

Hunting Cap Trap replaces his still heavily soiled hat and begins to walk slowly towards his compadre.

“He does not approve of them?” asks the Scholar.

“Ohhhhh, he’s got one, not addicted though. Rarely carries it, lets it die all the time. Says they have no place here. Says that’s why places like this exist, to house the things that take a little patience, the things that ask you to work a bit to see their beauty.”

“That’s why I came here. That’s why I stayed.”

“And now you’re crawling out of the ole’ art cocoon! What about your pal? The wino with a writing problem?”

“He will remain in a state self-imposed purgatory, safely preserved in ethanol and self-absorption.” Some sort of trained specialist, or maybe his mother, might have detected some slight discrepancy in the speech or facial countenance of The Scholar which might’ve suggested sadness. Anyone else might find him slightly more emotive than a default voicemail greeting.

“Well, maybe he’ll get lucky and kick the bucket before too long. Then people might actually buy his books. Heyoohhhhhhh! Actually, the guy’s so damn self-defeating, I bet he couldn’t even get die right if it was for his own good!”

[The audience is reaching their threshold for dialogue and bad jokes. Some sharp young lads in the front have figured out that, “usually if there is a bunch of talking this far in, and especially if a character from earlier shows up out again of nowhere, then the awesome end fight is probably going to start soon.” Valuable information when you are

nine-years old, have consumed sixty-some ounces of soda in less than an hour, and your social interactions for the next week, at least, depend on your ability to discuss, recite, and re-enact the film at will. The boys use this point in the film to make a mad dash for restroom. They return relieved, with refills, and a basic understanding of the elements of screenwriting.]

The Scholar stares.

“Sorry, that was bad.” Hunting Cap Tramp feels not cool again.

“We should evaluate his well-being.” The image of the Bandana Tramp, still doin’ his thang, reflects in the oval lenses of the slip sliddin’ spectacles

“Oh shit, forgot.” As they approach Hunting Cap Tramp holds up his right hand in the universally accepted gesture of friendly greeting. “Hey, Howdy, Konichiwa.”

The Bandana Tramp spies them and the stupidest post-dentist drill nitrous oxide smile spreads slowly across his face. “Oh, hey Warren.”

“Who is Warren?” The Scholar asks.

“Ichabod Crane!?” Bandana Tramp is stoked.

“Easy with the “W” word Rainbow Bright. Your shit’s all fucked up. He’s here to help.”

“How do you feel?” Scholarly inquiry.

“Uh, I feel. I feel. Like.”

“Like what?” Hunting Cap Tramp is getting antsy pants.

“Like someone wants to hurt me.” Bandana Tramp whispers for no apparent reason.

“He is suffering paranoid delusions.” The Scholar passed psychology.

“I’m gonna hurt you in two minutes if you don’t start looking sharp in three shakes!” Hunting Cap Tramp is losing the cool battle today.

“Refrain.” The Scholar saunters away momentarily, returning with Oxford English Dictionary.

“There you go, Mollywhop him with that thing.”

The Scholar stares. He opens the book and holds it up to Bandana Tramps face until he clasps it with his own hands. “Read.”

“Read?” Bandana Tramp seems a little unsure about this whole read thing.

“Read.”

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh my Gooooood, what’s that supposed to do?”

“Reading prevents the behavior of stupidity.”

“Ennter, enter, enter diss uh plin airy studeyes.”

“Again.”

“Entter, Interdisuhplinary studs ee.”

“Again.”

“Interdisciplinary studies. Interdisciplinary studies. Interdisicplinary studies!”

“I’ll be a with’s tit.” Hunting Cap Trap is pretty sure The Scholar is probably ultra-cool.

The Scholar’s cheeks scrunch just a little. “Yes. Interdisciplinary studies. Wonderful, aren’t they?”

“Interdisciplinary studies!” Bandana Tramp seems to be a little better.

“Alright Rainman stick close. Time to hit the bins.”

“You’re name is Warren isn’t it?” The Scholar inquires.

“Interdisciplinary Warren!”

As they round the shelving which protects the fabled stall they shocked to find a short, jaunty, curly haired young man holding a Woody Guthrie inches from a sharp hooked nose. He looks up, not startled, but maybe a little surprised.

“He a relative of yours?” the Hunting Cap Tramp says to the Scholar, rather rhetorically.

“Howdy.” The young man sounds like he has a case of the sniffles.

Bandanna Tramp smiles wide, “Heyyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

The jaunty stranger shifted his weight, “Uh, hey.”

“What’s your name kid?” Asked Hunting Cap Tramp, despite the stranger being well into his late teens?”

“Uh, Zimmerman sir. Robert.”

“Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!” Bandana Tramp is real happy looking.

“Nope, no way. I can handle all the other weird shit, but nope.” Hunting Cap Tramp proceeds towards records.

“You’re Bob Dylan.” The Scholar actually seems a little confused, a little.

“Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

“Uh, hey there again. No, Zimmerman, but there was a fella’ named Dylan up here earlier.”

Hunting Cap Tramp snorts, some snot gets in his beard, but he’ll wait til later when no one’s looking to get it out.

“Yup, ‘bout my height, had boots on though. Wearin’ all black. Real skinny. Real nervous. Kept talkin’ about the weather.”

“Let me guess, said something about blowin’ in the wind?” Hunting Cap Tramp is thumbin’ through the spines.

“No, did say something about wind and not needing a weather vane or something like that anyway.”

“Weatherman kid, learn your own songs.” Hunting Cap Tramp is trying to be cool, just in case.

“‘Spose so if you say so. Said something about hard rains, bucket of rain, hurricanes. Like I said, talked about the weather a lot.”

“He really does.” Hunting Cap Tramp actually thought about that one for a minute.

“Anyway he went on his way about, oh, can’t say how long ago actually, but he said something about revolutionizin’ the radio then he went right back to talkin’ weather and went on his way.”

“Like a Rolling Stone.” Hunting Cap Tramp is trying to be disinterested.

“Pardon? Anyway I’m Robert, friends call me Bobby. My folks own the hardware store down the street.”

“Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!” Bandana Tramp just smiles, and smiles.

The Scholar who had remained silent since his initial statement politely asked, “Do you enjoy Woodie Guthrie’s music?”

Hunting Cap Tramp laughs hysterically. “SPLLLLLLAAAAAAAAT” His laughter his cut short as he instinctively hits the deck. He opens his eyes to see disemboweled Starbucks cup bleeding over roasted joe and pulp upon the floor. His left earflap sizzles. His nostrils sting. He uses this opportunity to wipe the previously

deposited snot from his beard. He rises to a crouch, peering alongside Robert Zimmerman over the dollar bin. A gang of a dozen or so emaciated and androgynously dressed youth approach West Side Story style for the stairway across the room. Some of them are identifiable as males solely because of the patchy prepubescent resembling attempts at beard growth sprouting beneath their solar panel sized designer thick framed glasses, non-prescription lenses of course. They twirl cellphones like switchblades, they eat Xanax like Sweet Tarts, they STILL GET ALLOWANCE.

“They some kinda’ communist?” Zimmerman asks.

“Close, but worse. Hipsters” Hunting Cap Tramp spits.

“What do they want?”

“They want the records. All of them.”

“All of them? They really like music that much?”

“Nope.” Hunting Cap Tramp spits again.

“Then why they want all of them?”

“To be cool.”

A can of PBR splits open on Bandana Tramps forehead. He drops like a sack of potatoes. Hunting Cap Tramp grabs the can and swallows something fierce, choking down its remaining contents. “How do they drink this shit?”



## RV Cowboy and the Wi-Fi Kid

Ernest bent over the side of the hood of the newly acquired used Winnebago, pulling up and replacing the wiper blades repetitively as the back of his silk floral print shirt reflected the Savannah sunlight back towards the atmosphere from which it came. It had rained yesterday on most of the drive up Florida's east coast and had continued on through the night as they had passed into the swamp stench of Georgia.

“Son of a bitch didn't even put new wipers on.” The said son of bitch being Frank Fuzzy, the New Jersey native who owned Century Motives; the large and questionable car dealership from which the vehicle had been purchased. There had been confusion over the paperwork which left Ernie to converse awkwardly with a large and loquacious Irish man who knew the dealer from their firefighting days in New York. As the dealer gave Ernie a complementary beach towel along with the keys, he felt adequately compensated for his troubles and that perhaps he had dealt with a respectable business after all. The wipers and the slight wobble he became keenly aware of in the late hours of yesterday's drive now caused a re-evaluation of his purchase and this trip.

Ernie was a newly retired advertisement representative for a Kansas City newspaper. His wife, Jane, had displayed increasing amounts of schizophrenic behavior and dementia throughout the last ten years of their marriage and had recently been placed in a group home for treatment of these disorders. The house in which they had shared but

lived separate lives in over the past ten years now seemed to Ernie, and he had contemplated selling it and relocating to a condo. The window of hope for Jane's recovery was dim, but still led him to instead purchase the Winnebago, in which he would live the life of a nearly geriatric bachelor, indulging in the outdoor activities that had given him pleasure as a young man. Jane's brother in law, Don, was a major instigator in this purchase, and although he would not say it aloud, was the only person that Ernie could apply the word "friend".

Donald Pound emerged from the sliding glass doors of the overpriced, but still modestly luxurious, hotel with a complimentary cup of coffee raised to his mouth and an apple turnover crumbling in the other. He paused to observe Ernie doubled over the wiper blades, before advancing towards the temporary parking zone where the Winnebago was being prepped for further expedition.

"Mornin Ernie, whatcha lookin at?"

"Oh, Mr. Fuzzy didn't even put new wiper blades on this thing. I'm going to call him."

"What are we gonna' do, go back and get new ones?" Don laughed. "Maybe have him overnight them to Nashville?" Ernie looked up from the reflective surface of the hood to see himself in the reflective surface of Don's sunglasses. Don was smiling.

"Well it'll be funny if we get more rain today and I drive us off a bridge into one of these sewage infested tributaries."

"Not supposed to rain today. I can always drive ya know?" Don was still smiling as he bit into the stale turnover. Ernie watched as apple filling dripped perversely from Don's mouth onto the hot pavement below.

“You’ll probably want to smoke after you eat?”

“Yeah?”

“We’ll let’s just stay out here until I finish with these.” Ernie proceeded to wipe down the blades and windshield. He then lifted the hood and checked nothing in particular. After he was satisfied that all the components under the hood were in fact connected and not leaking any fluid, he walked around the vehicle, kicking at its’ tires in the process, convinced that the dealer had not put on new ones, and that furthermore, they needed to be rotated. Don smoked and sipped his coffee in the mounting morning heat.

“How’d you get it out of the garage?” Don asked.

“The desk called the valet and he brought it here.”

“Did you tip him this time?”

“I’m not going to tip someone for a service I don’t want.” Ernie replied.

Don laughed, “It’s not like he has any say in the matter. It’s his Goddamned job, Ernie.” The night before Ernie had told the desk clerk that he preferred to park the vehicle himself. The clerk said that it was hotel policy that the valet park all guest vehicles, and that there would not be any other secure parking nearby. Ernie followed the Winnebago as the valet drove it into the cavernous garage, shouting directions from the side. After the vehicle was parked, the Valet handed Ernie the keys. Don watched as Ernie searched through his pockets, trying to find the valet ticket that was handed to him at the front desk. He found it and handed it out to the valet.

“You keep that.” The stoic valet said.

“Well than what do you want?” Ernie replied.

“Nothing.” The valet walked off towards the elevator.

“Jesus Christ Ernie.” The two of them walked toward the elevator where the valet held the door open. The ride up was silent. At their floor, Ernie left the elevator first. Don apologized to the valet and gave him a five-dollar bill. Upon entering their room, Ernie discovered that one of the two bathroom sinks was partially stopped-up, and promptly called the desk to demand they be moved. Don went back to the lobby to handle the key exchange himself and apologized to the manager. Don had slept soundly and awoke to the sound of Ernie swiping the complimentary soaps and shampoos into a plastic bag.

“Ernie, how ‘bout you let me drive this morning?” Don flashed his predominantly artificial teeth as Ernie un-hunched himself from over the car hood. “You drove all yesterday, and I know you didn’t sleep for shit in that hotel room because I heard you turnin your computer on and off all night.” Ernie surveyed the new Winnebago from front to back.

Once Don had finished his cigarette and Ernie had situated his girth in the passenger seat, Don turned the ignition and eased on down the massive gas pedal. The vehicle didn’t move.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ernie became stiff and shaky. “Take off the goddamn parking break!”

“Jesus, Ernie.” Don began to laugh heartily, causing phlegm to rise from his tar coated chest cavity. “You put on the parking break for ten minutes in front of a hotel?”

“It’s better for the transmission.” He shifted awkwardly in his seat, the roll of fat about his buttocks adhering itself to the upholstery. His hands frantically crossed over Don’s lap and pulled the break release. “Everyone knows that.”

“You are the only sonnofabitch I know that puts on the parking break in an automatic transmission outside of San Francisco.” Don’s sunglasses reflected Ernie’s mouth as it hung agape.

“It’s better for the transmission. Everyone knows that.”

“The only sonnofabitch. Poor Jane, I’d go fuckin’ nuts too.” Then Don quit laughing. His lips remained in a slight sneer. He did not view his sister’s illness as a tragedy and was settled with the explanation that various mental disorders had reared their heads in the minds of his kin throughout a typically dysfunctional family history. Ernie looked at his reflection in Don’s sunglass, glad that they revealed no sign of hurt to his self. He turned and faced forward, way beyond the windshield. Don put the car in drive and began to navigate out of the temporary parking with one hand on the wheel. “Just givin’ you shit buddy. Shit, she’s my sister and I can laugh about it.”

The mammoth travel lodge rolled slowly out onto one of the main Savanna streets. Don smiled as he watched the young art students in flower print sundresses march down the sidewalks with their parents. Don unbuttoned the top of his floral print shirt to expose a cheap gold necklace, tan chest, and patch of grey hair, already sweaty in the morning heat.

“Must be graduation eh?”

“Eh?” Ernie fumbled through the various bottles of pain relievers and antacids he had already assembled in the glove box.

“Must be graduation for the art school. Poor kids, won’t find any jobs in this economy.”

“Uh huh.” Ernie began to read the dosage directions on one of the bottles.

“You and your pill popping. That shit’ll kill ya’. It really will. I don’t take any of the shit and look at me. Shoot, I bet I could probably still pick up one of them young skirts promenading up and down the sidewalk there.”

“Uh huh.” Ernie didn’t look.

“You’ll toughen up once we get you out with a fly pole in your hand. That job really did a number on you. Hunched over a keyboard staring at a screen all damn day. No wonder your backs all messed up and you get two migraines a day.”

“I always have.” Ernie replied, which was the truth.

“Yeah well, we’ll get you out and about now. This vehicle is your second chance to salvage your machismo. You know what machismo is? It’s Mexican. It means when you’re driving one of these sons of bitches and a goat is in the road, you go ahead and hit the damn goat, then mount the bastard’s horns on the grill. Maaaaachiiiiiiismo. Fishin, huntin, sightseeing, drinkin’, cookin’ steaks. Yes sir, Ernie, back in the saddle. Ernie opened his lap top and activated the GPS unit. They had planned to drive on to Nashville, neither had been.

They were to eat dinner and observe the various country music tourist traps. Tootsie’s; have drinks on the same bar stools where men like Hank Williams had done the same. The drive went without incident, for the most part. They stopped at a barbecue place just off the interstate in Chattanooga, which had apparently been featured on the Food Network several times. When passing through the Appalachians, Don had monetarily neglected the vehicle’s blind spot and had nearly merged into a small fuel efficient car. Ernie who had been dozing was jarred from his sleep by the car’s horn.

“What the hell was that?”

“Nothing, go back to sleep.” Don’s gently heaving chest indicated laughter.

“There’s a blind spot on this thing you know?”

“No shit? Go back to sleep.”

They arrived in Nashville just after sundown and pulled the behemoth directly onto Broadway. Ernie shouted commands at Don as they navigated the flood of tourist traffic and the close quartered hotel parking lot. After checking in, they walked the length of the street, but the steady stream of children and street performers had caused Ernie to suddenly experience stomach unpleasantness, which led them back to their hotel room without entering one of the historic eateries or drinking establishments.

They arose early the next morning with the plan of stopping at one of the many suburban outdoors mega stores to stock up on tackle and camping gear for a proposed stop in southern Missouri, before returning to Kansas City.

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The Winnebago accelerated up the on-ramp and onto the interstate, the squares and dome of the Bass Pro Mark Twain shopping center shrinking quickly into the horizon in the rear view mirror. Don craned his thick, vein-laden neck around to the driver side window and cursed the driver of a Japanese made car as he merged into the left lane. Ernie was fumbling through the cache of over-the-counter medicines kept in the glove box.

“Would ya shut up and hold still for minute while I get us out of this clusterfuck?” Don spit drops of saliva on the window as he said this. Ernie closed the glove box with a shaky hand, readjusted his seatbelt, and then remained more or less still and quiet, as Don navigated them through the suburban shopping district. The interstate exits became less

frequent and no longer bore the names of semi-well known streets of commerce. A light drizzle began to tap on the windshield and the veins in Don's next shriveled back to their normal state.

"What the hell happened in there anyway buddy?" Don removed his blue-blocker shades and glanced at Ernie quickly with his right eye. Ernie seemed to have a spout that dispensed sweat mounted on his widows peak which irrigated his entire body from that point. "Eh? What happened in there buddy?"

"I didn't want to wait anymore." Ernie did not sound frantic.

"Wait for what? It's not like we we're standin in line. I didn't know we were waiting on anything."

"I didn't feel well. I didn't want to be sick in there."

"Well I didn't see you get sick in the parking lot or in here. You couldn't have just waited a few minutes or at least handed all that camping shit to me while you went outside instead of just setting all down and walking off?" The red was slowly draining from Don's face back into the Hawaiian shirt from whence it came. "I knew you was gettin weird Ernie, but Jesus. You're a hard fuck to figure, and getting harder every day. You spend forty-five minutes carefully going through your list of camping crap, comparing all the brands to each other, checking SPF's, square feet, flammability, and whatever else, just to drop all of it in the middle of the goddamn store and walk off."

"I had to go outside." Ernie opened the glove box again and began reading the labels of various bottles.

"What, you had a life threatening headache?" Don said laughing as he thrust his large right forearm at one of the bottles, snatching it from Ernie's hand. He glanced at



the bottle, “Oh, you were feeling extremely irregular in the bowels and just had to get some fuckin Fibracou in there right away?” Phlegm rattled in his chest as he laughed. Ernie closed the glove box, activated the GPS unit, and opened his laptop. Don’s laughter settled down as he eyes traced these actions. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry. I was just givin ya shit.” They both sat in silence aside from the sound of the drizzling rain and wiper blades for some time. “Hey Ernie,” Ernie looked up from his laptop. “Watcha’ lookin up on that thing?”

“The weather.”

“Again? That’s the fourth time today. bub.” Don stifled a laugh.

“It wasn’t supposed to rain.”

“It’s only a drizzle. It’ll be gone in another ten miles.” Don peered up through the massive windshield of the Winnebago. “Hey Ernie, what happened back there, bub?”

“The packaging all had pesticide sprayed on it, and the fluorescent lights were giving me a migraine.” Ernie stared silently at the dull glow of his computer screen.

“Alright, it’s all wavy-gravy now though, right bub?” Don actually sounded a little concerned. He watched Ernie watch out and beyond the windshield and squeaky cadence of the dull wiper blades.

“It wasn’t supposed to rain.”

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