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## A Decent Second Option

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# A Decent Second Option

Senior Project Submitted to  
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of Bard College

by  
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He takes himself seriously . . .

Robert Ashley, *Perfect Lives*



It was not without some confusion that I navigated through the indoor displays of crab apples and raw nuts to find the small, alcove-like office in the northwest corner of the warehouse to interview for the position in Seafood. The office was hardly larger than a maid's room: a short rectangular space littered with various types of paper and curling electrical wire, much of which had burst through its plastic coating, tied up in knots beneath a fat keyboard positioned on the desk in front of the small monitor, snaking around the floor underneath a wide layer of duct tape. An exposed bulb hung behind the swivel chair, which the startled looking manager occupied, running his hands over his impeccably bald head to remove the unstaunchable coat of sweat, palpable as we finally shook hands.

At first, he didn't even notice me. His arms were perched on his desk as if it were a parapet, peering through the tiny square window that looked out onto the produce clerks, immigrants who draped rags over their heads, rags which hung down to their shoulders like pharaohs' headdresses. Drowsily, they sorted through a shipment of raspberries, throwing the unfit ones down onto the cement before closing the plastic containers to bring inside, since so many customers had complained about the swarm of flies cloaking the fruit, the market had no option but to find space inside. He seemed to not even notice the lulling Hudson or, beyond the raspberry sorters, the snippet of the George Washington Bridge.

After realizing that the young man sweating through his oxford shirt was not another employee barging in to fetch something or other, that the figure standing in the doorway might have actually been the body of that eager voice which had called four

times the previous week, the manager finally gestured for me to sit down on the warped plastic stool facing him.

“Experience in the field?” he asked me, firing the question so rapidly I thought for a moment he had only uttered one word. I couldn’t help but notice how his dark skin ran down his face like cheap foundation, how he had already seemed paler than before he waved me inside.

“Certainly Mr. Posada,” I lied, confirming his last name by glancing at the stubby nametag tacked onto his breast pocket. “After graduating with honors, I traveled to work as an apprentice for a fish-smoker in Poland in order to adequately prepare myself for a similar position upon my arrival home.”

“Adequately prepare yourself for a similar position? Poland? Look little man, I don’t know who’s in on this joke. Why do you want a job here? You want to freeze all day? Be my guest. You throw fish on a scale. You take a little bit off, or you throw a little more on, whatever the customer wants. She wants a pound of whatever, you give her a pound of whatever. You don’t need any international prep for that.”

He continued to run his hands over his head, promptly addressing the new coat as it formed, gazing through the square window, out toward the raspberry sorters. I was almost surprised to see them move, the morning light so hauntingly gentle that I almost supposed the scene was an unknown Hopper painting titled *Fairway, 8:00 am*.

“Mr. Posada, respectfully, I spent many hours in that cold room, taking one of the black quilted jackets that you so graciously supply to customers, draping it over me as I pushed the cart and scampered around as a boy. No one is more qualified for this position

than me, I assure you,” I said, ignoring his gross unprofessionalism. Mr. Posada rested his hand on a Spanish-language Bible, as if swearing in before testifying.

“No one is more qualified than you? I have no time for this. You wanna work in the cold? Be my guest. Minimum wage. 5 A.M. shift doing the display. I don’t have time for this man, my girl’s in the hospital, I gotta get back to the Heights.”

“I can start today if that helps.”

“I gotta get out of here.”

“Any papers to sign beforehand?”

“Signing any papers? What the fuck do you think this is?” he said, swiveling back and forth in his chair, taking his right hand off his Bible to join his left hand banging on the keyboard, which I then realized had never even been connected. “Oh I see you now sinvergüenza, you want to work to eat your fish, is that it?” and he began to cackle, quickly adopting this sinister expression as he removed his hands from his keyboard, opening his Bible, and for the first time, ignored the view entirely. He found the desired passage and exchanged his cackle for a bellow: “Con el sudor de tu rostro comerás el pan hasta que vuelvas a la tierra, porque de ella fuiste tomado; pues polvo eres, y al polvo volverás,” before slamming the Bible shut and pushing it away from him. “You started out as a kid here, and now you have come back from the fancy smokehouse, since it’s ice you are,” pausing to reopen the Bible, which I then realized was a bilingual edition, “and to ice, you will return.” He closed the book. “Out, get out. I gotta scoot, she’s not well,” and just then Mr. Posada somehow wiggled his way out of that swivel chair and walked through the doorway, leaving me alone in that office of curling electrical wire and that keyboard, which I didn’t bother to plug in, likely not compatible in the first place, and

after a moment I could see him through the window, grabbing one of the raspberry boxes from an especially gaunt sorter, holding one single berry up toward the sun to inspect for briefest time before hurling the raspberry down onto the hot cement and exiting the frame.

This is a network of whispers, as told by your trusted Seafood Clerk, recollections, which, in all likelihood, mean far less to you than me. Three shifts in and I'm still in training, shadowing Zeke or Jeremiah, depending on the shift. I huddle behind them as they hand the housewives their orders of EZ-Peel shrimp, watching from the moment Zeke puts on his latex gloves, throws shrimp on the electronic scale, tapes the price tag on the air-tight bag and hands over the order, just before Zeke tells me to 'stop standing so close to him. Shadow don't mean that close.'

I'm learning how to gut the porgies brought here in wax boxes, snatching them from the insides of their mouths and slapping them on top of my cutting board as the crusher wails on behind me, pulverizing huge blocks of dull ice into frost to lay under the day's selection. The chart is taped on the backside of the storage room's swinging door:

Littleneck	EZ-Peel	Craw Tails	Striped Bass	Sockeye	Zino	Blue	Sushi Grade Tuna
Wellfleet Oyster	Jumbo Shrimp	Squid	B. Bass	Wild Salmon	Red Snapper	Porgy	Yellowtail
Bay Scallops	Cajun Shrimp	Octopus	Chilean	Farmed Salmon	Monk	Flounder	Cat

Give the crazed ringer his belfry, let him rot away up there, breaking his crooked spine running down the winding staircase towards the pulpit, declaring to the priest how, up top there, yes, there is indeed another way of looking. No, I'm perfectly happy here, running my nails up their scales and humming whichever song begins to play through my headphones: *yit ga dal v'yit ka dash sh'mei raba*.

I'm holding the dull knife Zeke has left me, jamming it into a porgy's belly, producing a formless gash and jerking the knife up towards the head, like a frantic MTA conductor her emergency break. No, no, that's not how they taught me. What if I stick my hand inside the slit? No, well, that's another unusable porgy . . . might as well have some fun with it now, grabbing the innards, squeezing them like a stress ball before gently laying them away from me, laying them into the large white container filled with a few inches of water, setting them down as if in searing oil. One must have fun here, one must enjoy oneself in the cold storage room, and I happen to love watching the various shades of red and purple stretch out across the few inches of water like a constellation of veins.

It's five in the morning and I just found a yellow sticky note placed over the day's chart: WHITE BOY, DISPLAY DUTY. Who stacked all of these boxes of fish if I'm the only one here? Did the shipment come in last night?

I'm pulling out the aluminum stepladder from the far corner of the storage room, ascending each of the four rungs as I reposition my Philadelphia Eagles hat, which I had kept in my pocket up until now, preferring not to explain to whomever was riding the 1 Train at four thirty in the morning why I would ever put that dirty excuse for a football team's logo on my New York born-and-bred head, especially considering that today's forecast hasn't given any indication of this heat wave subsiding any time soon. I've grabbed the topmost box, clutching it with my left arm and extending my right arm to help keep my balance, now descending the four-step ladder, unable to hear any clam shells rattling against each other, or even the tossing of tightly packed fish, no, it really seems like there is only one item neatly packed inside of this box, now backing my way through the swinging door towards the wide expanse of the brightly lit, frozen storehouse.

I've already made a mistake. I need to spread out the crushed ice across the counter before I rest the fish in their allocated positions. I'm leaving this box on the ground for a moment, walking headfirst through the swinging door, back towards the small storage room, only to reemerge with two buckets of pulverized ice and dump the contents onto the near end of the counter, where the clams and oysters will soon be.

Driving my grossly long index nail into the box, I'm beginning to laugh as my finger shoots through the duct tape binding, remembering my father's endless criticism of how I refused to allow any part of my past to fade away gracefully, no matter how

insignificant, ridiculing me over how my ‘heinous nail must be cut to standard size,’ but also too busy remembering what I’ve been telling myself—that my time fingerpicking has long come to an end, and maybe its not worth maintaining this curling nail just to open boxes of fish.

But there’s no time to get caught up in this, anyway. I need to finish up, before the housewives begin to wonder why there are no EZ-Peel shrimp for sale.

Gone are the days when, as a middle-school chorister, a freckled tenor in the front row, I would sway in my heavy maroon gown and contribute my part to Handel’s *Messiah*, or Britten’s *Rejoice in the Lamb*. I can no longer look out past the limestone walls and vacant benches to spot the sine waves of my voice unfurl across the High Altar. Rehearsal in the stone echo chamber under eternal construction. Even the most obnoxious of us couldn’t help but succumb to that tender feeling. Mornings of *agricola, agricolae*. Gone too are the days when I first began writing music, just around the time my voice had begun to bleat and quaver, prompting my dismissal from the choir. I began with nylon-strings so I wouldn’t blister my fingers, graduating to steel shortly after.

Still laughing alone in this labyrinth of frozen seafood, I’m finally kneeling down to open the wax box on the ground in front of the counter. A coiled up monkfish. A colorless, leprous quality; its monstrous head so grossly disproportionate to its thin, underdeveloped tail; its sunken eyes and gray pupils, half-frozen and discharging a strange liquid; and I must mention its fat, fixed grin, at least a foot in width, exhibiting these jutting brown and crimson teeth scattered along the rim of its mouth.

My chest's beginning to spasm and I don't know whether or not to keep laughing, since I can only do so many things at once, and it's hard to maintain a sense of humor when you're rubbing noses with a creature like this. Still on my hands and knees, I'm crawling away from the box, headed back towards the counter so I can continue to smooth out the crushed ice on which the bastard will soon repose. Maybe I should try laughing again, if only to rival the monkfish itself, since its fat grin must still be on display inside of the dark wax box, perfectly content and likely mocking the inadequate employee who had chanced to open that box all alone at five thirty in the morning. I'm certainly not going to let that happen, now trying to stand up, but for some reason my right hand can't seem to hold as much weight as it should. It's almost as if these calloused fingers—which used to slide up maple necks and press down onto thick steel strings—have now regressed to baby's skin. I should only use my left hand . . .

I'm up, but half of my nail is dangling off my finger. I should try and have a sense of humor about this: I could rip off the whole nail, lay it into the white container with the few inches of water, and watch it float like a lily pad through a still pond. Maybe the bruised bit could even inflect the water with a nice purple hue.

Back to the storage room, two more buckets of ice. Anything to busy myself with, as long as it doesn't involve other terrible, decomposing creatures stacked up in that rank Tower of Babel. Back to spreading out ice across the display, easy, but where is that blood coming from? The monkfish? I'm palming handfuls of ice over the topmost layer, hoping the red will soon turn a watery pink and could easily be mistaken for some fishy residue, for that strange discharge oozing from the monkfish's eyes, but each layer is getting bloodier than the previous one. This really is coming from my finger, isn't it? I

didn't see any blood on my nail before, but after bringing my finger closer, I can now see the culprit. And look, there is even a tiny piece of tooth jutting out. Which of those brown and crimson teeth got me?

This bleeding should stop soon. How long have I been holding my finger out under this faucet? Or maybe I should be asking myself why I should have expected anything different, since the job I so desperately wanted entailed either standing over a blood-drenched cutting board, mutilating each and every porgy, or cutting my finger on a rotten monkfish without anyone there to laugh it off with me? This shift feels different without anyone else around. It's only a matter of time until I begin my Arts & Crafts wing in one of the corners by the white container: snapper scale bracelets; monkfish tooth pendants; I'll set up a whole line in here, only to rake into the white container the moment anyone enters through the swinging door: 'Oh yes, I'm coming along just fine, I'll be ready for the counter any day now,' and without even a place to sit down? Maybe I could sit on the stepladder, but what would happen if it broke under me, if I cut my head and begin to bleed out? Sure, people will arrive in a couple of hours, but aren't the boxes so large that they might not even see the dying body on the ground in front of them? I could sit right there, in the corner by the white tub, but I haven't even started to fillet any of the porgies yet, since I need to follow the order of the chart. I'll have to wait a while longer before I can watch the various shades of red and purple unfurl. So what to do? What should I do when the only two options are to continue on reaming the bream, as Zeke likes to say, or to sit crouched in the corner and watch how the vapor from my breath reaches further into the storage room, yes, that sounds tempting, especially

because my voice can no longer reach for the limestone walls and vacant benches of the cathedral. What to do?

I'm descending the four-step ladder again, and I can now hear the rattling shells tossing, relieved to know exactly what's inside of this box before driving my now bloodied nail through the duct tape. All of the shellfish had been packed in together, which surprises me as I begin to separate the Wellfleets from the Littlenecks. What a perfect task, what an easy way to soothe me; no flashbacks brought on by that grinning monkfish, which nobody will purchase, since the complimentary garnish positioned at bottom of the sixth column of the case always ends up in the trash anyway. So like a monk focused on his mandala, I'm removing each clam from under its neighboring oyster, each EZ-Peel from its veiny counterpart, until halfway through I realize that I need to pack all of the shellfish back into the box and wash away the blood that has smeared the tails of the shrimp, that has clung onto the shallow rifts of the iridescent shells, because my finger has begun to bleed even more vigorously than before.

I'm running back to the storage room, sucking on my finger. No Band-Aids anywhere, and I certainly can't be gallivanting all around the market trying to find one. (Imagine the new employee, running down the aisle of cold-pressed oils, bleeding.) Imagine if I hide behind the case of seltzer by the main entrance, waiting for each employee to stumble inside: *Do you have a Band-Aid by chance?* No, that's not even an option, and by the time I would have found someone the bleeding likely would have already subsided. And what would Zeke or Jeremiah think? They hardly know me. What if they came in to see the white boy, the one who took the word 'shadow' a bit too

literally, sucking on his bleeding finger, and consequently scraping the inside of his mouth with that curling nail he really ought to have cut long ago. What if they came in to witness this abhorrent display of melting pink ice and one EZ-Peel survivor? No, I but still need to find something to help, now surveying the room for supplies, still holding my finger under the surging industrial faucet.

The sticky note maybe? I could rip a piece off of it, preferably the part that had BOY written down—or rather just OY—on it, grab the tape dispenser there on the shelf and tape the paper to my finger before putting on the latex gloves. What a terrible idea! No, there is really nothing to be done now, it is really impossible, the most I could hope for is that one would confuse my blood for the fish's still, so, yes, it's best to continue, removing my finger from the faucet, reentering back into the main cold room, and pouring the assortment of shellfish back out onto the counter again, after a brief rinse. The Littlenecks and Wellfleets in their corresponding places, yes, everything is now going as planned. But what are the tails of the shrimp now doing? Why are they perking their tails up, as if they are watching me, curling their tails upwards, almost as if protesting not their ensuing fate, but rather their current state, for which I alone am responsible.

'You are responsible,' my employer had e-mailed me. I'm recalling that moment as if I have just received his message, a message I wouldn't even be able to read, since I'm a bit preoccupied right now, holding baby squid by their mantles, their tentacles and suction cups swaying like extensions of my hands. 'You are responsible for this failure. Attached is an invoice for the amount back. All you needed to do was confirm either the

word Walter or Benjamin or anything remotely resembling Walter or Benjamin. *Wal, Benji, the bespectacled youth*—anything. That’s it. You didn’t need to learn German for that. Didn’t I make it clear? Didn’t I specify that this really had nothing to do with Pichler? I couldn’t care less about Pichler. To be honest, I didn’t even know who he was until David messaged me about the diary in the first place. Respond immediately. Your silence will not help you. Your silence will only aggravate this.’

I had been tasked with the acquisition of an old diary belonging to the writer Moritz Pichler. A one-man regiment, I was deployed by my superior officer: a senior archivist who had recently parted ways with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, since he had, according to gossip which had begun to circulate—gossip which he himself suspected of originating from his assistant conservator—‘gross differences pertaining to the accuracy, honesty, and integrity of History and its corresponding Artifacts,’ a rumor which in fact his old colleagues celebrated, since they were the ones subjected to hearing his twist on the Kiev pogroms of 1919, the ones assailed when he slid into their booths at YIVO’s nearby Hollywood Diner, chewing their plastic straws in agony, when all they wanted to do was enjoy their souvlaki in peace. But my employer wasn’t all bad: his fear of flying left me to deliver his future archive’s inaugural item to its new home in a moldy Riverdale basement.

Wasn’t it only yesterday that I was circulating within a publishing house, calling the number written on the REQUEST-A-MESSENGER notecard, handing over galleys to whomever showed up that day from infinite cast of bicycle messengers, or even mailing them off myself to the critics who had migrated up river? Yes, that must have been a day

or two after I could finally admit that music had abandoned me, that literature was a decent second option and I had sat perched on that stiff memory foam in my bedroom, playing Caedmon Records' 1954 release, wearing out the waxen banks that held the stream of William Faulkner's quavering drawl: *anguish and travail*, before the record skipped over to *love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice*, his voice quietly sounding out of my speakers. I remember how my religious listening of Caedmon's *TC 1035* was an active effort to resist music. A decent second option, a passable shiksa mistress, until I had quickly realized how foolish I was, that the sequence of words and sounds Faulkner uttered had escaped the straight jacket of language into the panorama of pure sound, pure music: a gentle aria sung by the small farmer with the white pocket square and little mustache, accompanied by the din of Stockholm's Concert Hall.

An old professor had forwarded me the mass email my employer had sent out to his library of addresses, which I imagined was vast, considering my professor never even had met the Riverdale recluse. The e-mail detailed a freelance job opportunity for any 'adventurous and promising students or recent alumni.' My professor also included an extensive report detailing the archivist's recent scandal. I didn't care. I rushed to compose a cover letter: two paragraphs of flowery prose, detailing my passion for world literature and all its components. No matter that his reputation had dissolved utterly, that his colleagues could now feel justified in swatting away any of his overtures. Getting paid to fly to Germany to collect an old writer's journal? Why the fuck not? And to my impressionable mind—how remarkably literary!

The crawfish tails came tightly packed in sealed plastic bags, a frozen cube of marbled red and white. Just how David Pichler's face looked, when he opened the door to greet me. I'm still haunted by his terrible reserve. The muscles within his face hardly contracted, yet his complexion seemed to be in a balanced state of flux, his cheeks reddening and paling at regular intervals on both sides of his long, downward pointing nose. His pompadour collapsed due to a poverty of resources. Two wide, deep pockets of gray bulged out underneath his dark eyes. His fingers stayed white too, devoid of blood; perhaps this had something to do with his enormous height and spare frame. His blood had to settle on the most economical routes, leaving his pinky numb, which might just happen to my index finger if I don't find something to stop this bleeding.

He was a freelance timpanist eagerly awaiting his callback from the Berlin Philharmonic—a bitter bachelor in his mid-thirties who, due to infrequent employment, discovered innovative ways to cover the cost of the Turkish nurse who cared for his wheezing father. After the death of David's mother, Pichler repurchased his childhood home on Waltharistraße—a low, white two-story villa in Wannsee—from a married couple: transplants from Rockville, Maryland who moved to work as fellowship coordinators for the nearby American Academy.

How should I thaw out these crawfish tails without bleeding on them? Run the marbled cube under cold water? Breathe on it until it melts, leaving me with hundreds of tiny wet tails? If only it were yesterday. If only I had cut my finger on that antique letter opener. It was in the shape of a crucifix, resting next to an old, printed draft of the cathedral's annual fundraising e-mail. There was a small stack of letters written by elementary-school students at the time, sent to us in the wake of 9/11. If it only it were

yesterday, then I wouldn't have hesitated to leave the small, secondary office the Chaplain has been letting me to use.

A few weeks ago I loitered outside of the main entrance of the cathedral, swiping through a PDF of the Book of Revelation and waiting for Chaplain to finish the Eucharist. Dressed for the occasion—the same shirt I wore upon meeting Posada, a pair of khaki pants worn only during family events, and black dress shoes—I began to plead: *Please Chaplain, do you have an open room, any space at all? Anywhere where an old alumnus could work, a recent college graduate, an aspiring short story writer—since music had failed him—don't you remember the pitchy chorister? Preferably a room with decent natural light, where one glimpses the peacocks, especially the white one that perches on the six-foot basketball rim, something like that, I don't remember.* I was too preoccupied explaining who I had once been.

“But so many of the choristers are pitchy.” Before she could say any more, the Chaplain cupped her hands over her eyes because the contrast in light from the cool High Altar and the blinding August morning was too much to handle, not to mention the strange man manically recounting memories of past evensongs.

“Lets go in and chat,” she said, already pushing open the heavy door to readjust her eyes as quickly as possible. I followed her long, salt-and-pepper hair back inside, trailing her as she lead us up a staircase I had never noticed before, en route to her office on the second tier of the cathedral. Her office felt more like a family's living room than a Chaplain's quarters: there were framed photographs of small children who didn't resemble her at all, book-crammed shelves filled with novels and children's books, and even a gold trophy in the shape of a tennis racket. “A space to work, then?” she said,

blinking furiously, “a space to work . . . are you in divinity school now?” a question she needed to repeat, since the organist had begun his glissando, gliding up and down his keyboards.

“Not yet,” I said, unsure how to follow up, “it’s so nice that Tim can practice in the greatest cathedral in the world,” doing my best to be as charming as possible, which seemed to succeed, because I noticed that as soon as I uttered the name of the organist the Chaplain began to treat me differently. “Yes, I agree! I love Tim, he’s family to us,” she said, blinking still. “You know there is actually a second room in the crypt I don’t use much, why don’t you try that out? It’s right by Tim’s office.” I was shocked by how loud the E-minor arpeggio the organist had then begun to play sounded, almost as if the pipes themselves were hidden behind one of the children’s photographs. “But I do have a second room that I don’t use much, why don’t we go check it out?” and before I could even respond, we had already flowed out of her office, now walking side by side, as Tim trilled away on his organ, us walking down the same staircase I never knew existed, down into the crypt towards her office. “Yes, I don’t use it much,” which was more than evident from the Spartan décor—a chair, a desk, the draft, the letters, the letter opener—save for one large poster of *The Unicorn in Captivity* tacked up on the white wall facing the desk. “It’s always open, so feel free.”

Yes, if I cut my finger yesterday in the cathedral I could have walked down the hallway of the crypt to Tim’s office. And in response to that same question (“Do you have a Band-Aid by any chance?”) I’m sure the organist, who frequently seemed to busy himself with nonmusical matters—leaning back in his rolling chair with the high mesh

back, confirming, slowly and not without great joy, that everything he had filled in from yesterday's crossword perfectly matched the words printed in the bottom left corner of the *Arts, Briefly* section, under *Answer to Previous Puzzle*; another perfect score, yes, he would be occupied with that, or he would be wiping up the crumbs of the poppy seed hamantaschen for which he was known to inhale; for years he would buy at least two from the Hungarian Pastry Shop, walking up the wide flights of stairs and to enter the main hall of St. John the Divine, flicking off stray poppy seeds from the corner of his lip into the crevices of his sharps and flats; yes, this I remembered from years ago, an affable man who would have gladly handed me a box of Band-Aids if he had any. And if he didn't have any, I'm sure that he would have escorted me through the maze of British or German-styled chapels, through the Scandinavian-styled Chapel of Saint Ansgar, searching for an administrator to clean up this matter. Not that I would have asked for his help anyway. Whenever I saw him these days I cringed, quickening my pace as I passed the threshold of his office. Truthfully, I had no relationship at all to Tim, the organist, no desire at all to refresh his memory of the young freckled tenor in the front row, who once accompanied him on the Great Organ, miraculously restored after that terrible fire had swept through the cathedral. I vaguely remember it. Best to not tell him anything at all, unless of course he would punish me for my silences like my employer had done.

If it had only been the letter opener that gouged my finger, I might have even been able to meet The Very Reverend Dean himself, since the Chaplain who has been lending me her room is only the Chaplain of the Cathedral School, but not the Dean of the Cathedral itself. That was a figure whose office I still had yet to locate, but whom I

actually saw yesterday morning for the first time in years, tugging at his detachable collar as he leafed through the selection of post cards in the cathedral's gift shop. He was probably cooling off, considering that the gift shop was right inside the main entrance. Yesterday was hot too. Anyone there would have wanted to help the bleeding Jew, the silently self-proclaimed 'writer in residence' who had spent the majority of his two week tenure (and counting) there at the children's outdoor basketball court, chest-passing a dodge ball against the fissured stone of the cathedral's wall, and driving undefended to the six-foot rim.

And to toast to another long day of chest-passing the magenta dodge ball off the wall of the cathedral, to roving between the chaplain's secondary office and the Hungarian Pastry Shop—somehow I still received a discount there, shockingly enough, since I bore little to no resemblance to the young boy only paid only a dollar for a croissant every day after school—to bring back iced coffee, which I foolishly thought would help spark some germ of thought, something that could push pen to paper, or rather finger to keyboard, I decided yesterday to meet my friend Yannis, an aspiring poet, my companion who also found literature a decent second option, since our musical endeavors—his, too—had come to an abrupt halt, and for no good reason—we could toast to that too, certainly, and arranged to meet at the nondescript dive conveniently located across the street from St. John the Divine, a bar which I had passed endlessly en route to grade school but never bothered to consider, a bar so nearby the Close that I couldn't have backed out on our plans if I had even wanted to, plans which I myself had initiated out of anxiety and loneliness. I had recently begun going there a lot with Yannis.

He had shelled out enough cash there as an undergraduate at Columbia, and certainly had no interest in stopping now.

We were sitting in one of the green leather booths, which lined the north side of the bar, sipping on headless pints of Yuengling.

“Let’s hear about the maestro’s progress,” Yannis smirked, glancing up from his cell phone.

“What do you want to know?” I was in no mood to be condescended to. And by my only friend left in the city! I had more than successfully severed any relationships with high school classmates, who all lived downtown anyway.

“It’s a joke, maestro. What did you do today?”

He could tell that I was on edge, perhaps since I was tapping the table with all of my fingers as if still trying to type an opening sentence I had yet to render, a sentence which could breed some virulent germ of thought that the iced coffee had failed to. Yes I was on edge, as I certainly am right now, kicking that box with the monkfish back towards the storage room.

Yannis really is the only person who knows how to calm me down, and he could eventually tell that I needed help, sitting there in the green leather booth, because after a minute or so, he slid his phone into his pocket and stopped trying to make eyes at one of the two bartenders whom he used to sleep with, always tipping her excessively as if he had money to spend, as if he wasn’t still sharing a bunk-bed with his fifteen year old brother in a remarkably small room—an actual maid’s room.

Yannis straightened his back and began to swirl his beer lightly in his hand. His face was strangely illuminated by the small electric candelabra screwed into the wall next to us.

“Nothing you wouldn’t already know, nothing new to report. Woke up, walked Dante, who insisted once again on sniffing every dog’s asshole down Riverside, especially that toy poodle on the top floor of my building, that Israeli novelist’s dog. I’m telling you, I don’t know any of these dog owners’ names. I must see them three, four times a week, and it’s always ‘Here’s Dante!’ and I smile, say hello, and tug on Dante’s leash to go back home. I made some breakfast and eavesdropped on my Mom talking to this new cleaning lady, another Polish woman, whose head was entirely in my hamper when I opened the door to my room, and that made me uncomfortable, naturally, so, as I’m sure you already know, you could have guessed it, yes, I told her about Kraków and she just nodded her head as she hopped around silently from the hamper to my bed and started to rip off my dirty sheets, with no interest at all about hearing someone like me talk about *Polska*, no matter how much I milked the great-grandparents Warsaw connection, and then before I knew it I was standing in the living room, yes, I had followed her without even realizing, more or less speaking at her about my love for *Dekalog* and *Blue* and Schulz, while she proceeded to wipe down my grandmother’s porcelain greyhound in the hallway, half-nodding at my spiel to win her over as the child full of endearing obliviousness, which I tried to maintain as I even followed her to the outside landing because she needed to, per my Mom’s order, clean the mezuzah—”

“People clean mezuzahs?” Yannis asked, which made me realize that I had never in fact seen anyone wipe down a mezuzah before, least of all a Catholic Polish stranger

wiping my family's own, a poor widow who had been bombarded by my annoying presence as if I myself were her own toddler, unable to be pacified. It was a good question indeed, but I couldn't even pause to respond

“Mezuzah, yeah. But listen, when I entered the Close just before noon I wanted to walk around a bit and let some ideas percolate, first circling that statue on Amsterdam, walking around it, until I ended up exactly where I started. And I spent a good deal of time looking at the curvature of Michael's wing, the details on it so subtle, growing more and more mythic as the bronze ages, especially the wing pointing outward towards Amsterdam, towards that dusty square garden nobody ever sits in or even seems to acknowledge, so I thought why not go sit down on that bench in the back corner to brainstorm, since any garden, no matter how ruinous it might be, deserves at least one inhabitant. So I went to cross the street there, but not before finding out the sculpture's name, which was also cast in bronze on a plaque directly in front of me: *The Peace Fountain*.”

Yannis's head began to pitch in different directions, and I couldn't tell whether his outlandish motions stemmed from his eager listening, or whether the beer might have gone to his head, since he had already finished his pint of the headless Yuengling well before I came to tell him about the sculpture he had doubtless seen hundreds of times, as he grew up in the same neighborhood. He then pointed his finger at me, gesturing for me to pause what I was saying while he wiggled his way out of the booth, the LED light of the candelabra now without a subject to illuminate, and went to fetch two more glasses of stale headless Yuengling—which many people had begun to in fact boycott because of their quiet endorsement for our new President, but it was the cheapest beer on tap, there

really wasn't another alternative, especially considering that Yannis would tip at least two dollars per beer, because as I've said, he had dug a hole this deep over the past six years and had no interest in stopping now. More importantly, I realized that his brief absence signified that I was lagging far behind, neglecting my own pint there on the table, which was truly a peculiar and rare occurrence as we have always gone sip for sip for the better part of a decade now, yes, I ought to take a minute to catch up while he was over tipping the second bartender, an older Dominican guy named Ray, whom I then imagined standing in the same exact place, behind that wooden countertop as I passed him on my way home, dragging my rolling backpack with me towards Broadway, yes, I ought to shut up and drink.

Yannis moseyed back to the booth with another round in each hand, slamming the two glasses on the table before sitting back down.

“*On continue*, please!” Yannis exclaimed, reaching his arm across the table and positioning his fist in front of my mouth like an interviewer shoving a mic in his subject's face. I downed what was left of my first round, tried to burp, failed, and continued to tell him about the rest of my day.

“*The Peace Fountain*, right. So I turned to cross the street and tried to remember if I had ever seen water pouring out of it, but I don't think I have. Have you?”

“No,” Yannis said, now beginning to survey the rest of the space. He turned around to see who else had decided to come to this non-air conditioned bar at four in the afternoon, during one the worst heat waves New York had seen in years. The only other patron was an older man wearing an off-white t-shirt with our zip code printed in huge

black numbers across his chest, and since he wasn't nearby any of the electronic candelabras lining the wall, it really looked like he wasn't wearing any shirt at all, that those numbers really were inked directly across his chest: 10025. He was gently tapping one of the striped balls with an excessively chalked cue.

“Right, neither have I. Well okay, then it's a dried up old fountain, but more beautiful now than ever before, or at least that's what I thought as I crossed the street to sit on that dirty bench in the far corner of the garden. Why not try some antiquated way to nurture a scene or two, why not sit in that neglected square of weeds and dirt,” and it seemed like Yannis might have finally been intrigued by what I was saying; perhaps he thought I was leading up to an outrageous encounter, hopefully one involving the many names and faces we had logged and archived over the years, names and faces I had obliquely referenced in lyrics to old songs we had written together. Listening, his face vacillated between total bewilderment and an expression ready to erupt with terrible laughter.

“What is it? Stop! Okay, so I go to open the door to this rusted out gate, which of course let out this heinous squeal of a creak, then closed it after me and stepped over enormous piles of shit and bits of shattered light bulbs. There was an old lampshade, tons of trash, I can't even remember of all of it, chicken bones and broken plates, all kinds of shit, and when I reached the bench in the back, I couldn't help but notice some dried up residue on the seat, probably shit or something equally as bad; but the iron arm rest, which only looked a little bit tetanus-y, seemed okay, so I sat on the arm rest, which as you could imagine was not the most comfortable seating arrangement, really just miserable to tell you the truth—but I couldn't have backed out then, not just because

there wasn't some chaise-lounge to sprawl out on or some booth like this one to settle into. I don't know why, but I was so resolute in this decision to try out this outdated means of inspiration, at least once. So while I was sitting there, on hot iron arm rest stationed in my ass, I thought, as you might have guessed by this point: Well this isn't all that different. This garden is really the same garden I had expected, but now drained of any aura, no, coming here really hasn't altered anything. The familiar shadows gliding by on the sidewalk don't look any different from before. That emergency medic carrying her burrito bowl back to St. Luke's really does look a lot alike the medic I have seen hundreds of times before. Maybe just a little different."

At this point, Yannis couldn't help but to make it painfully clear how tortuous listening to all of this was. But I wasn't going to back down now. I didn't care that he was mooning me with the pinks of his eyes, pulling down on his cheeks in agony, no, I was determined to finish speaking.

"Yeah, maybe just a little different. That's what I came up with instead of an idea for a new story.

"Please, no mo—"

"Exactly! I thought the same thing. Please! Throw me a fucking bone, God please. But that is how I felt. Everything was pretty much the same, just a tiny bit different."

"Is this a fucking joke?"

"What?"

"Unbelievable."

"What?"

“You take my copy of that Ben Lerner book I found on the floor of the Pastry Shop, read only the epigraph, the Hassidic bit thing about ‘the world to come,’ and now have the nerve to tell me that that’s what you came up with instead of an idea for a new story? Butchering an epigraph to a book you haven’t even read?” Yannis took out his phone and recited the epigraph: *The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says there will be just as it is here,*” Yannis skipping over some it so he could quickly recite the ending, *“Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.”*

“Fuck. Can I at least talk to you about my walk to the bus station in Kraków?”

“You want to tell me about your walk to a bus station in Kraków? Who the fuck are you, Robert Walser? No, I will not be this silent head for you anymore, not again, with you stuck in your triangle of Berlin and Kraków and Auschwitz. And while I’m at it, why the fuck are you working at Fairway? You should be writing music,” Yannis said, holding his finger to his temple like a Russian roulette player his gun, “You haven’t even asked me how I’m doing. You are way too happy sitting here blabbering about nothing to me, which, truth be told, started the moment when you threw your Jazzmaster in storage. And you know what else?”

But this time I raised my finger, gesturing for Yannis to stop, which he did, likely understanding that my raised finger did refer to the sound of the approaching footsteps, since Yannis was facing me, and only I could see the oncoming dust cloud of suspended blue chalk the pool player had brought with him to our booth. He sat down next to me, and I scooted further into the booth, by the electric candelabra. He placed his hands flatly on the table, as if happily supplying us with fingerprints, utterly innocent, and then grabbed his plastic cup of water. I looked at the two sets of prints, perfectly preserved on

the table, while he sat there next to me, smiling, eager for our conversation to go on. After a few moments, when he realized that Yannis wasn't going to continue, that he couldn't in fact listen to my only friend degrade me while I sat there absentmindedly, he gently asked: *What about Kraków?*

Save for the flattened tuft of combed back white hair, he must have looked like our younger brother to someone entering the bar, his head at the exact height as my shoulder. I couldn't help but be immediately charmed by his watery blue eyes, enlarged by his tortoise-rimmed glasses. He brought his fists up towards his face and began to circle them like a boxer waiting to jab, quietly whirling them around for me the way a child would, whirling on behind that warm affable face.

“So what about Kraków?” he said again, now widening his eyes without relinquishing that boyish smile.

I caught it the second time. The drop in pitch on the second syllable of Kraków, the way he just couldn't fully adapt to a w-sound, so close, but Yannis and I could hear how his front teeth pushed against his bottom lip: Krahhkohfff.

“Yes maestro, please tell us!” Yannis was equally as charmed by him.

“Oh, I have nothing to say about Kraków, besides that my family's new cleaning woman grew up there.”

Either the old man did not care for my distasteful comment or he had already stopped listening, because as soon as I started speaking he began to stare absently, as if he were counting the shards of crushed ice melting inside his plastic cup of water, nowhere near the two young men sweating over their glasses of headless ale, now with traces of blue chalk clinging to the rims of their glasses, and him gazing at the shards of

ice before they dissolved into the water, now just a little higher than before, all while holding onto the pendant of his gold chain which had slid out from under his shirt, rubbing the symmetrically opposing triangles between his fingers.

After a long silence, Yannis asked something like: *Are you from Kraków then?* or maybe it was: *Is Kraków home then?*

Both of us were so engrossed by this old man with the watery blue eyes, who soon introduced himself as Jack, which I found slightly disappointing, because I saw that the name imprinted on the his credit card read YAKOV, after he had pulled out the blue card from his pocket so he could close out his tab, of which the amount due was \$0.00, because after all he had only asked for a cup of ice water, a request that made me think that he too must have come here often, that maybe Yannis and I just hadn't noticed him roaming around by the pool table. I imagined him and Ray, who I then realized looked like Yakov's Dominican avatar, settling on a long-term contract: Ray never charging Yakov for whatever he chose to drink, water or headless ale, the bill always \$0.00, and he, Jack, Jack or Yakov, whichever you prefer, he later said, I go by both names, would write down the number 100 above the horizontal line indicating the tip amount, 100, a similar looking number to \$0.00, the amount owed, just a little bit different.

Yannis must have the second question, because I remember Yakov response, saying something like: *Riverside, my palace is Riverside*, neglecting the question entirely until Yannis had further pressed him: *Come on*, Yannis said, and Yakov, smiling all the while: *not Kraków, my parents, yes, but not me, no. I was born in a small medical barracks in a displaced persons camp somewhere in Germany. Then the Bronx But now Riverside is my palace. And you fine gentlemen?*

This part I remember perfectly. Yannis and I both: “New York Presbyterian,” uttering the name of the hospital as if we had spent hours perfecting our synced delivery.

“Wonderful,” Yakov said, rubbing his hands together like a surgeon sanitizing before an operation, “wonderful,” and he grabbed my elbow, which immediately turned blue from the mixture of chalk and sweat, before standing up again, pinching both of our cheeks blue, and leaving the bar to waddle on through the heat wave, back to his palace.

I'm positive that if I had cut myself on that letter opener yesterday, then I would have found a Band-Aid within a few minutes, giving me ample to roam around the Close and at least give myself the impression that something was percolating in the young writer's mind, any moment now, a first sentence would materialize, comma placement and all, and some indescribable force would pull me back into the square room with *The Unicorn in Captivity* tacked to the wall in front of me and I would type out that first sentence onto a blank document: *Moritz Pichler died today*, no, that wouldn't be accurate at all, I thought, now holding an octopus to my breast, descending the stepladder once again. That is not what happened at all.

The document will be handed over soon, David assured me as I first entered the house in Berlin two months ago, stepping over a thick stack of cardboard boxes and registering the stench of old skin. Any lingering eagerness that had survived the jet lag was turning away, vanishing with each step I took.

"Please help Ece for the time being." He vacillated between Eton and Cockney accents, depending on the word, the syllable. It had been only three or four hours since my passport was stamped at Tegel, and one hour since I dropped off my single suitcase at the Neukölln sublet my employer had already paid for through a Western Union transaction, wiring money over to the scrawny old man—standing outside the building in a denim vest, tears forming behind his thick glasses, smoke persisting behind his lenses—who might have been instructed to wait for the perplexed loiterer by the entrance door.

I remember Ece in the kitchen, freshening her breath with an old bottle of raki, the name of the distiller indecipherable from the faded label plastered on the dark bottle.

“You need to learn how to change his oxygen,” she said without any prior greeting.

“How does he expect me to do this all myself? Mr. Pichler said you work at a hospital in America.”

“My father does, I said, “don’t know how much help that is.”

Ece sat on an unfinished pine chair from Ikea, crossing her arms behind her head as she recovered her standard expression after taking a sip of raki. Exhausted, she pulled out a pocket-sized mirror to look at the blackheads protruding from the tip of her nose, speaking to herself about what she would soon eat, about the proper selection of today’s pills.

As soon as we heard the front door shut, Ece kicked off her white sneakers, placed her feet up onto the kitchen table and crossed her ankles. She rolled up the hems of her black sweatpants, balancing herself on the back legs of the chair and scratched at her enlarged pores, which trailed up toward her kneecaps. I watched her untie the white apron, resting flatly on her thighs like a front-facing cape, and pull it over her curly mass of black hair to throw it in the corner. No rush to show me how to change the oxygen, apparently. Sighing, Ece finally stood up, kissed me twice on the cheek and slowly walked over to the sink. She cupped her hands under the faucet, violently swished the water around her mouth, and spat back into the sink. “OK, we go now.”

We left the kitchen and walked down the shallow corridor into the parlor: a shadowy room, due to the thick, light-absorbing vines that covered the solitary window.

Old copies of *Berliner Zeitung* were scattered out on the carpeted floor, which emitted a sourness that became more indomitable the closer one came to the shivering figure tucked into the sheets of the cot. On the wall across the cot was a photograph of Gustav Mahler, and underneath the photograph was an empty bookcase, save for one Gershom Scholem volume on the top-right corner.

*So it's the drip that makes him smile, the drip that makes him nod in the dusty corner.*

Ece squatted down and began to loosen the valve to replace the green tank, using a washer to remove the regulator from the empty one, bringing the new washer close to her, placing the pins of the regulator into the corresponding holes at the top of the tank, and finally attached the cannula. “If it hisses too loud,” she whispered, “then the regulator isn’t attached properly.”

“Hospice care places a strong emphasis on comfort,” Ece said like some kind of recruiting officer, “the smell of the smoke reminds him of his youth, of his creative peak, according to David . . . You need to roll them exactly as he did—without a filter. He will know if you don’t.” And so my day’s work laid ahead of me, Ece thrilled to hand this chore off to somebody else, but not before pointing toward the oval night table on the right of his cot, directing her finger toward the ash-smearred oyster shell, the thin strips of paper, and a pouch of tobacco with the words *Rauchen bedroht Ihre Potenz* printed across it. “When you blow out, don’t aim right for his face. Exhale slowly. Aim at his feet so the smoke trickles up little by little. He won’t cough too much then.” She relit one of the cigarettes that had been previously put out, grabbing it from the oyster shell void of

any sheen. “You must light them like he used to. He will know if you don’t,” she said, and grabbed a large box of matches, lighting one of the thick wooden sticks and waving it like a shaman at his feet.

“Look how he loves it!” she said, handing me the half-smoked thing before darting off toward the window, off to dust the vase of polyester tulips whose colors were indistinguishable.

So I did as I was told—first by my employer, then by David, and now the hospice specialist from Ankara—and inhaled, feeling burnt hairs of tobacco cling to my tongue, kneeling down by Pichler’s feet, which were delicately tucked into the long duvet, and breathed out, at first directing the smoke toward his feet, like Ece had told me to do, slowly angling the direction of the smoke up towards his torso.

Alone with the great writer for the first time, I finally chanced to look at him, but only through the veil of smoke, a half-formed halo, something resembling a crescent moon now looming slightly left above his head. I looked at the wisps of little red hairs loosely scattered throughout his scalp between a large network of purple bruises, his long wizened gizzard, and the young, spirited eyes which tried to burst through their heavy lids in order to either curse me or dub me his successor. The slow, methodical collapse of his will and his organs was near as his gaunt frame lay encased within the soft and airy duvet, the tucked in corners of which seemed to occupy a secondary role, that of a boa constrictor, silently tightening around the crevices of his toes, up his ankles, eventually ending with the three fat pillows scattered under and to the sides of his head, the three of which were perfectly situated in equal distance and resembled something of an ellipsis. And I will not even mention his gaze: a scrutinizing look fixed directly on me, who

would soon silently proclaim myself as the ‘writer-in-residence’ St. John the Divine, me, who could have been a disciple of Pichler’s prosody had I ventured to set aside any amount of time to study those wondrous German tales, likely through the viewpoint of a musicologist, since I could not understand one word of the language in question, only could have savored their rhythms and melodies, assuming a native speaker could have recited them to me, maybe even at the foot of this cot, since any foreign words stripped of their sound would surely amount to absolutely nothing.

All Pichler could do was to continue to drag his pupils downward from the fixed position of his head, which tilted up toward the ceiling, resting on that trio of perfectly aligned pillows, sentencing me to something unspoken—a gaze so hot and rooted that another oval shape formed around his eyes which looked just like an annual ring found inside trees, all of which occurred in slow motion, and just might have occurred in real time too, considering Ece had already finished brushing away the dust from the vase full of synthetic tulips and was now on the other side of the cot, holding a pair of manicure scissors and at war with any excess baby hair which threatened to ruin Pichler’s immaculate mustache.

No, Pichler’s gaze wasn’t steady or fixed; he adjusted the coordinates of his pupils to find the open space beneath Ece’s bent and jerking elbow, her movements akin to someone clearing away brush with a machete, which required Pichler to be steadfast and tactical in his frontal cover, perhaps because he had found this moment to be the arrival of his own little apocalypse, the moment wherein he could finally slide away from his orbit like a swimmer escaping a riptide, which would entail not fighting it, but rather pushing himself across it . . . but to bring this whole episode back to some semblance of

reality, he lacked the strength for a forward crawl, nor could he butterfly his way out of this horror, leaving Pichler only one option: forced to employ something of a dog paddle to try and escape the quiet orbit of the little apocalypse currently toying with him, the face of which was me currently blowing smoke at his navel, terrified.

Yes, it really must have been possible that he well knew the end approaching.

Maybe the dust which Ece had brushed away from the plastic leaves had collected itself into the shape of the word like an aerial advertisement, random lines and curves which ended up looking something like F I G H T, which mocked more than motivated his weak frame, since any half-evaporated drop from his energy's reserve was not spent scrutinizing the Turkish nurse nipping his half-translucent lip, but was being spent entirely on me, nothing more than extraneous brush Ece should have sliced past with her tiny pair of manicure scissors, which she still held, hacking away at those baby hairs which were never long enough to cut in the first place.

Herr Pichler . . . I want to assure you I will do all I can to glorify your name, to force it down the throats of the New York publishing houses, yes, Herr Pichler, the literati will admire the handsome, translated copies of which, due to your spectacular English, you would surely approve!

Moritz Pichler died the day after I arrived. Ece and I were in the kitchen when we had first heard the static hiss of the oxygen tank instead of his shallow heaving. "Listen," Ece said, unfazed as she dabbed off excess lipstick with the writer's toilet paper. "No more moaning."

David came entered the house just as Ece was confirming the pulse. None of us felt the need to cover his body. He was happy there lying in bed in his childhood parlor, David assured us, after he had joined Ece and me in the kitchen where we were freshening our breath with the same bottle of raki. After taking a sip, David asked me to write a short obituary for *The New York Times* to send to my employer for publication. He said that already had finished his two hundred words for the same newspaper whose pages were scattered over the floor of the stiffening body. I told him that I suffered from crippling dyslexia and that I wouldn't be right for the job, to which David nodded and stood up to leave the kitchen and go upstairs. Ece and I heard him hit his timpani, which I imagined being stored in a tiny closet only big enough for a children's stool and the drum itself.

While we were alone, Ece gently asked if I had remembered to change his tank.

“Change the tank?”

“The oxygen, like we did together yesterday. I told you to do it this morning.”

I could hear David's footsteps leaving the closet, passing through the upstairs landing, and entering one of the bedrooms. He rummaged around for a while and came back downstairs, holding a tiny suede notebook clasped by one marbled button and a dirty white string. “I wouldn't dare open this without adequate clothes,” David told me, and before even handing it to me, he began to construct a parcel, using the topmost piece of cardboard from the stack I had first seen upon entering the house. “If any oils from your finger taint the pages, the value will decline,” he warned me, reeling industrial tape around the parcel, “but here it is.”

The three of us walked to the nearby post office. My employer had instructed me to send the diary immediately for ‘thorough inspection.’ I remember David making a sluggish reach for his back pocket, searching for his wallet. “It must have fallen out of pocket,” David mumbled, still clutching the parcel before placing it on the counter. “Oh, I’ll just keep the receipt. I’ll be reimbursed,” and I handed the clerk the forty euros to pay for the expedited shipping of the package which I never once touched, and before the clerk had even handed me my receipt, David had stuck his hand out for me to take. “We’ll be in touch of course,” David said, already reeling his blue hand back towards his body before I could even shake it. “A pleasure,” David said, already slithering out of the post office, back to his father’s home.



I'm inclined to lie here, to call that pink slicker a cape. To transcribe a deep meditation that never occurred when I first approached the converging tracks outside of the *muzeum*'s entrance—the *muzeum* I had convinced myself of needing to visit, as I lay on that deflated air mattress in the Neukölln sublet.

And here I am now, sucking on my bleeding finger, trying to tie this apron with one hand. How much time do I even have left, before Zeke or Jeremiah walk in to witness this disastrous spectacle? The monkfish, still grinning inside the box on the floor; the shells of clams still bloodied; no, while I could go on—talking all about that Yorkshire priest I saw, ushering his religion students out from a rented bus, while I, unsure what to do with myself in that small Polish town, stood there, gawking at them all—I must refrain now from doing so. Fiction is a pleasurable, collaborative effort. Truth telling remains the burden.

How is it possible that I had brought a slicker with me then—overcast, but not even raining that afternoon two months ago—yet I now seem incapable of even the simplest task? Zeke must sleep in his apron, and I still can't even remember to grab my own, which was hung up right there, next to the tower of boxes.

Yes, the night before I flew to Poland, I lay on the deflated mattress, foraging through some free ancestry websites: KinCore, Famous Kin, the eponymous findmypast.com. I typed in my last name only. I think it was then, sometime between learning that Aaron L—— died in 1988 in Pulaski, Kentucky and that an unnamed L——

was born in 1878 and died in 1880, according to the New York Passenger List & Arrivals, when I decided to venture to Poland. Why not? I had no business being in Berlin anymore, and maybe I could have found something else to surprise my employer with—anything to compensate for the botched diary. *Yes*, I concluded, *I really must go*, and booked a flight departing from Tegel the following morning. But how can someone with such self-assurance be then so incapable of throwing a few fish on ice?

But there I was, loitering outside the station for a painfully long time, staring at the large metal constructions that collectively spelled out the name of the town—OŚWIECIM—staring as if the sign itself were the reason I had traveled here. I created anagrams: mice . . . wOeś, but I didn't know if the accent above the s altered its sound, and when mice and wOeś were all I could come up with, I walked inside to see if the station offered complimentary Wi-Fi, so desperate to see that quivering blue dot that marked my location, that blue dot vacillating on my screen, next to an outlined expanse of empty space, which slightly resembled Central Park.

I had been deployed once again, but this time by my own self, to stand in this loose pink slicker in front of the bus station and stare at the priest—with a falcon perched on his blue finger—taking roll, ensuring no students had fallen behind. But before I knew it I had already found a taxi, handing the driver the piece of paper with my address back to Kraków. There was always the next morning, yes I had the luxury of a next morning, two months ago. Not now. The only luxury I would have now would be to brush, with my bleeding finger: WHITE BOY, HURT onto the impeccably white apron and shove it in Jeremiah's face before leaving this freezer.

Is five thirty in the morning too early for a drink? Hair of the dog, scale of the fish, right? After Yakov left, the two of us really got involved there at the dive. I couldn't say a word without Yannis toasting to 'the maestro's hopelessness' and blowing me kisses. As I've said earlier, Yannis really is the only one who knows how to calm me down; he's also the only one who knows how to booze me up the fastest. His scornful tactics are brilliant. Call me 'maestro', degrade me, and then send a smooch my way with your chalky blue lips—I'll be stumbling east across Central Park and trying to find my building within the hour.

At least I didn't embarrass myself in front of anyone, save for Ray, the old Dominican bartender. He's seen much worse, in any case. Last night wasn't nearly as bad as when I returned to Kraków from making anagrams and staring at English schoolchildren. That one was bad:

*Green!* I yelled, à la Tevye, *green!* The tall thin bottle of blackcurrant pálinka, which Gabi had just brought back from a recent trip to Budapest, back to that dead end street, was quickly evaporating into thin air. *Green*, humiliatingly enough, was one of only a few words I had managed to say to Gabi, a florist and vegan, but most importantly, a gracious host for strangers from off the Internet. She believed the charity would bring a 'positive chi' to her apartment. Since I was in such a rush to get to Oświęcim, we had hardly spoken when I first arrived earlier that morning, staring at the building's foreign intercom, quickly pressing each button, which did in fact succeed in reaching Gabi—but not before setting off the Polish spinsters, who very quickly began to hiss from their small, uniform balconies throughout the Gzysików complex.

Gabi's laptop was plugged into two tall speakers in the far corner of her living room, next to a milk crate displaying the spines of a few books. I recall an old hardcover edition of *Sklepy cynamonowe* and a bent and translated copy of Bukowski's *Women*. I remember guiding my way through her Polish keyboard and finally managing to type in something like *better then good time* into the search bar, ecstatic to have found the link I was looking for: Gladys Knight & The Pips – It's A Better Than Good Time (Mixed with Love by Walter Gibbons). A few moments later, I noted the buzz of the gun humming away on the floor of the living room. Gabi was inking a small astrological symbol on her friend Klaudia's ribcage. *Kelly green? Do you have Kelly green?* I pulled my old Eagles shirt out of my suitcase so I could show her the color.

*Only black, or no, no, I don't remember what Gabi said, but evidently by that point I couldn't have cared less about the color, quickly tapping my way through the lineage of the Philadelphia Eagle's iconography, handing my phone to her and asking her something along on the lines of: *Could you work with this?**



That the Philadelphia Eagles replaced the Frankford Yellow Jackets, that they drew their name from a symbol of President Roosevelt's New Deal, or that NRA did not

stand for National Rifle Association—these were bits of trivia I had no idea of until the following morning, when I looked through my phone’s History, scrolling through the hyperlinks and learning how *Fight song* lead to *Devotion* and *Bad Behavior*, how *Retired numbers* somehow continued on to *Franchise history*, finally landing on the one hyperlink that took me to Wikipedia’s *Blue Eagle* page. I suppose at the time I was more focused on the locating some melodic pattern as Gabi turned on her gun, beginning to outline the curvature of a wing, referring back to both the image on the screen and a sketch she had quickly drawn. Who knows, maybe I was even on board with this New Deal plan I still know very little about. In reference to the slogan: Yes, I was doing my part! Acquainting myself with Poland’s taxicabs and receiving my first—and certainly, last—tattoo, lying there with my arm stretched out, yes! I thought, almost falling over in place . . . yes.

*Four on the floor in the basement of the old crematorium, four on the floor as the kick pummels through every crevice of the small basement, shaking the small crowd of dancers clenching their fists, beating their fists against their chests as if, in this basement of the old crematorium, they were engaging in what could only be some evolution of ancient tribalism, collectively finding what had been missing, ecstatic to finally have uncovered those coordinates of their noble savagery, discovering it below the sprawling urban structures of the old The Third Reich; four on the floor, the rhythm thrashing on even louder now, the resonances of which were easily noted by the affable spāti owner sipping Turkish coffee upstairs, only a few feet above it all, standing there behind the counter and holding his small wax cup as the opening string arrangement to Tarkan’s hit*

*single Kuzu Kuzu begins to play; oh, nothing new, another Monday morning in Berlin, the spāti owner says to himself, der Morgen ist wunderschön! he thinks, walking over to his radio and raising the volume the slightest bit, just enough so he can make out Tarkan's lead vocal underneath the din—no, not din, clamoring of the music, now perfectly content with the ratio of Kuzu Kuzu and the four on the floor, back to sipping coffee, until the old Romanian barman storms into the spāti, leaving the one patron, whose head had surely collapsed by now, at a quarter past nine on this Monday morning, all alone and having had nowhere else to go but his step-brother's business, it is really impossible, funny even, to imagine him drinking anywhere else, but now he is asleep, giving the barman ample time to storm into the spāti and politely asks him to 'lower the fucking volume, I beg you!' to which the spāti owner smiles and indeed walks to his radio, lowering the volume, Kuzu Kuzu now quieter, smiling still as the barman storms away, soon whacking his step-brother on the head next door, the spāti owner unfazed as usual, if it wasn't the Turkish pop song then it would surely be a shard of broken glass out there on the sidewalk, not a problem at all, he thinks, kein problem, let the poor man exhaust his fury onto the affable spāti owner who only wanted to accompany Tarkan's lead vocal, which had required him to raise the volume just the slightest bit, and the fixed rhythm thrashes away still, the dancers so equally positioned, as if all held by a string, maybe even in the clutches of the upstairs spāti owner himself, who had actually found it to be a success that the Romanian barman had visited so early on in the day, giving him a few hours of peace, but you really never knew, if it's not something else later this afternoon then it will surely be something tomorrow; and there was David Pichler, the timpanist and techno apostle, in the center of it all, in his uniform of assless black chaps*

*and a leather dog collar, stomping and pounding his left fist against his chest while he beat his felt-tipped mallet against the rears of the surrounding dancers, all of whom seemed to actually enjoy the timpanist's peculiar ritual—maybe a bit distracting at times, but all in good fun—and I couldn't believe how that terrible reserve I first felt from David could have changed so drastically, how the muscles in his face that hardly seemed to contract could now spasm uncontrollably, his head now shaved like a monk, while I loitered around the crematorium, debating whether or not to punch him in the face for handing me that bogus diary to send to my employer, to which even he objected to, but more importantly, I was furious that the music couldn't move me like I wanted it to, that I had lost the ability to not only make music but enjoy it, the rhythm firing onward, down the Autobahn toward oblivion. I was the only one who roamed around, everyone else positioned in their allocated places, and I had never suffered a more violent pain, unsure what to do and absolutely heartbroken that music could not heal me, no I'd prefer that mallet go elsewhere, David; all I could think about was how that birdlike drawl of Faulkner's voice could fold into this mix of industrial sounds, entering and leaving gradually: love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice, which was a tragic thought really, not nearly a creative inclination as much as a desperate product of absolute bafflement and helplessness, because his voice could never coexist with this languageless roar of sound, yes, best to scrap any creative inclination which might arise these days, music has fled, better to leave it to the figure wearing the balaclava and turning those knobs on the sequencer, best to let this be—I woke up. I could still hear the endless cycle of the kick drum, from only the night before, even though all I could see was that same bonsai plant, the same bent copy of *Women*. It was only a matter of time*

until the spinsters throughout the *Gzysików* complex would begin to hiss from their uniform balconies.

Half-past five really might be too early for a drink, maybe I should wait an hour or so, especially since the dancers had only begun to really lose their shit at seven, or even eight in the morning, stomping and pounding away while I miserably roamed around the appropriated crematorium. Yes, I remember how humiliated I felt that I had actually thought to mix a Faulkner vocal sample in with the thrashing techno. What an abhorrent idea. I must have had that idea at around six that morning two months ago. I should wait at least thirty minutes so that I could at least drink a little bit closer to the time when the party really took off, which was only a few hours before I boarded that terrifying propeller plane to Kraków, and which resumed in my dream less than a full day later, after I had consumed so much of Gabi's blackcurrant pálinka, yes, dreaming about some spāti owner who might or might not exist, but more importantly recalling David Pichler in my deep sleep, how he was exactly the same in my dream as he was then, smacking his mallet wherever he could—and all within the same twenty-four hours proceeding his father's death. I should wait an hour. In an hour, I could toast to another logged year, I could celebrate another anniversary of my 'hopelessness' in the exact same way Yannis did yesterday. But if I abide by the dancer's schedule then I wouldn't be able to even think about drinking until at least seven, and by that time Zeke could easily have already stormed in to cut me open, gut me, and throw my innards into the white container of water, next to my floating purple nail.

And while I'm already thinking about that first night with Gabi, can I just say how angry I am, that this bird, only two months later, has already begun to fade? I'm ashamed enough that I had drunkenly consented, no, not consented—solicited my Couchsurfing host to permanently mark this strange political icon on my arm, an image which I didn't even know existed until I woke up the next morning to see what I had done, opening my eyes and soon thereafter, while still hearing the thrashing of the techno music, staring at the plastic wrap gripping itself around my forearm, coping with the aftermath of my successful venture, and not without a gruesome throbbing in my head. And looking at it now, freezing my arm off, but looking nevertheless, it's infuriating that not only I am forced to showcase this scarlet letter of recklessness and idiocy—since I have no choice but to show it off to whole neighborhood in this August heat wave—but that the tattoo itself doesn't even look properly done! What kind of ink was Gabi even using? This black bird has lost its brilliance.

I've given up trying to tie this apron. I'm rolling my cuff down with my left hand, no more of this tattoo—I have shit to do. The snapper is still in one of those boxes: that's the next column on the display I need to finish. But maybe I ought to rinse off the shellfish one more time. Is any place as miserable as here? The only suitable rival could maybe be the downstairs boarding area of Kraków's main bus station, where I waited for one of the few drivers to snatch the printed ticket I had been handed at the booth. At first I was unsure whom to hand it to, since these men—who leaned on the few rusted-out vans parked in this circular rat-infested basement which spiraled up like a derelict Guggenheim, up toward the ticket booth, the snack bar, and the one sole toilet—gave no

indication whatsoever of what they were doing. But since I had refused to spend money on two round-trip taxis in only two days, there I was, the same fool, only then with a new tattoo, waiting among these drivers leaning on their alleged vehicles and smoking cigarettes, not even bothering to remove them from their mouths, each driver biting his own orange filter, while I observed the long cylinders of ash quickly develop. I remember that some of the drivers looked to have been the same age as me, but this was hard to discern, considering that they all had the same white mask strapped onto the bottom half of their face, the same mask as almost every other person I had seen in passing during the half-hour walk toward the station, looking at them all marching by and wondering if I had missed the memo concerning the city's rapid outbreak of SARS. I didn't see any masks yesterday, because I took a taxi wherever I went, since I still had a handsome sum from the money my employer had already wired to my bank account. So taxis from Kraków's Jana Pawła II Airport to Gabi's dead end street, from the dead end street to Oświęcim, and then back to the dead end street, taking highways most of the time, which is probably the reason why I hadn't seen any of these masks the previous day. Thankfully it wasn't SARS, Gabi later told me, nor was it any other virus drifting through, but rather the air itself—the terribly dirty air which refused to leave the valley in which Kraków had been built, air that really did reek of burnt plastic and coal, now that I think about it here in this foul-smelling morgue of a seafood room.

All of twelve seats of the old Mercedes, its emblem gone from the hood, were occupied by the time I entered the van. I was the only one without a seat when we left the station, but after a few minutes the driver began to open the van's door wherever he

could, not only at the unmarked corners where passengers had already been waiting, but seemingly everywhere. Picking up passengers at the designated stops did not satisfy the old driver, who manically downshifted to fetch anyone at all, yelling something or other and waving them in, such as the elderly lady, who upon hearing his supposed route shouted from driver's seat, nodded her head a single time and proceeded to fling the few coins she held somewhere in his general proximity, soon wading through the mass of passengers holding on for dear life as the driver approached the unimaginably high number of roundabouts without decelerating. Before I knew it, the old emblemless Mercedes was crammed with people. I held on tight to one of the flimsy safety handles with my left hand, hoping to rest my dominant, right arm wrapped in plastic—just like only a few minutes ago, when I tried to tie this oversized apron with only my left hand, since the other hand was out of commission, sucking on my finger and all—giving me ample time to stare at this ridiculous tattoo. My head was conveniently stuck in a mechanic's armpit. When we finally reached the country roads, most of the smog then behind us, people would yell something to the driver and he would soon slam on his brakes so whoever yelled could be let out. *Dziękuję, dziękuję*, some said, to which driver nodded, sometimes mumbling *Tak* . . . before resuming his improvised route, the final destination of which was the *muzeum*.

I remember being entirely consumed by the possibility that my tattoo might have given the old driver the impression that I was some kind of Polish nationalist; did he throw me a quiet look of approval upon seeing it? I remember obsessing over what that glance—down at the tattoo, up to my dark eyes— could have meant; I remember imagining who he could have been: a man who might have celebrated heavyweight titles

decades ago, but whose body and expression now drooped, but nevertheless a man who accepted this defeat with an obvious sense a grace. Did his smile have anything to do with when his eyes darted towards the murky plastic wrap, which masked the odor of sweat and blood and ink? Was he proudly looking at the bird after snatching my ticket, nodding and smiling? Could he have actually mistaken this failed attempt for the Eagles' vintage logo (which President founded which program again?) for Poland's White Eagle? Thrown around another roundabout, I couldn't help but imagine how proud he might have been, believing himself to escort a proud Pole—that while he, Pavel Nuda, or some other name, had fallen victim to arthritis and a succession of hernias, there was still hope left for Young Poland to endure!—although all he was really doing was shuttling the little Jewish boy from the Upper West Side closer toward the final destination, namely, the *muzeum*.

And now I wonder if any others too had mistaken the bird for something entirely, maybe those two who looked like they could have been *muzeum* guards: two middle-aged women with matching hair color, something between carmine red and sweet tangerine, obviously knowing the driver's route, since they had already secured seats when I first stepped onto the van and were now staring out the same window, watching the smog dwindle the further we drove from the city. Yes, they were guards, I was soon able to confirm, but only after I had passed through the metal detectors by the *muzeum*'s main entrance and saw them, still sitting down, but elsewhere; instead of the two seats in the van, the guards were stationed behind a table next to the *muzeum*'s toilets and waiting for me to press the required change necessary into their hands so I could vomit.

The bird continued to emerge shortly after, this time on the rolled out *banknote* I handed to yet another colleague whose hair was the exact same orange as the earlier two guards. Also just past the metal detectors, she was standing in front of what seemed to be hundreds of old mobile phones. I pointed to the wall of phones and handed her the note with the widely stretched eagle looming behind a long scepter and a *globus cruciger* without saying a word. And soon after, I listened to that demon voice— a succession of codes which omitted auditory output in the form of a Surrey-inflected female, whispering into my ear—explain to me where I was and what I was looking at as I walked through the splintered bunkers, stepping on the white tiles of the ‘medical experiment’ room. Only now do I realize that I probably looked like one of the surgeons who consult with my father about psychiatric complications following major operations, walking with one hand clasped behind my back and holding the big mobile phone with the other, listening to the nurse from Surrey. The strangest thing I remember doing was handing my phone to retired schoolteacher from Tomo-chūō so that she could take a picture of me inside one of the crematoria.



What the fuck was I thinking? I might as well have asked someone if the *museum* sold sweatshirts too. I'm feeling dizzy. I'm starting to think that maybe Seafood Clerk isn't the right job for me after all. I'm feeling a bit out of my element. Maybe I should have begged for a job at Barney Greengrass, shadowing one of the waiters there instead. That would actually be hard work, since all of the waiters there seem to either order for the customers, or already knew what they would order. Instead of Zeke or Jeremiah, I could hide behind that handsome waiter with the curly black hair as he said: *The usual then, Philip?* The unwavering order: nova, egg whites, and onions.

Yes, I'm really not feeling like myself this morning. The lights in here really are too bright, aren't they? I'm losing my balance a bit. I'm feeling how I did when the schoolteacher snapped that photo of me, the flash so blinding I lost my balance, wavering there and almost bumping into someone as the quiet march entered the crematorium, a march lead by the shy voice of Eli, *Eh-Lee*.

"The Zyklon B cans are to your left," Eli said, his eyes shut as he swayed back and forth, cradling himself into forward motion, and pointing to the old cans. "And on to the hair." Eli continued to direct the group, which I soon found out had first convened at 2915 Ocean Parkway, leading them towards the display of colorless hair: a glass encasement inflected by purple light showering the room because of synthetic filters fastened to the windows.

"Hair and firewood," Eli continued, continues now maybe, and I was struck by how soft and untouched his face was behind that writhing beard which curled around his

jaw and even reached his topmost part of his cheeks. I suppose I tapped him then, mid-stride between those rat-king clusters of anonymous hair and the emergency exit sign hanging overhead the neighboring stairwell: *Would you mind if I joined you?* and proceeded to introduce myself, telling him my name and where I was from. His eyes suggested that *Yes*, I could, but only after confirming that, *yes, I am*, and here we will address you not by the name you just introduced yourself by, but by your actual one.

I didn't know how to respond to Eli's renaming me. I didn't know whether or not to be angry or proud. I could hardly focus on the dead cells of colorless hair or the tin cans of Zyklon B on display underneath the purple light.

So one more joined the rage, the RAJE—the *Russian American Jewish Experience's* annual visit—one more added to the chain gang of New Yorkers and Philadelphians—one fleeting addition for the afternoon. Eli even introduced me to them, on the gray coach en route towards the larger expanse of the *muzeum*, heading to where the tracks converged before the main gate: “We have a new RAJE-r joining us, there in the back, Ephraim from the Upper West Side!” Eli squealed into the bus's onboard system, a confused and brief applause ensuing. Someone threw a kosher pesto chicken sandwich from a few seats up, and I stuffed into my mouth in order to avoid speaking.

So there I was, in backmost seat of that rented bus the RAJE was more or less living in during their weeklong trip to Prague, Budapest, and Poland. I couldn't believe how much I regretted joining these twenty-or-so people, who even came from neighboring zip codes. Nothing should have given me a deeper solidarity than braving out this *muzeum* with them. But they were a loud and oblivious group of Jews. I couldn't

identify with their witless comments and how they busied themselves with their cell phones.

The worst part of the afternoon was when a young woman, who was sitting in the seat ahead of me, turned around to ask me a question.

“So what kind are you?”

“What?” I said. What kind of question was this?

She seemed startled by how confused I was.

“What kind of Jew are you?” she inquired.

I had no idea what they were talking about.

“Well, where are you from?” said a remarkably tan young man, who was wearing a tight-fitting t-shirt.

“Ashk— . . . Upper W—. . . 168th and Broadway,” and I proceeded to stuff the remainder of the kosher pesto chicken sandwich into my mouth.

They weren't worth it. 168th and Broadway was the biggest fuck you I could think of. I could have, with the minute or so remaining, explained what family history I knew of: three of my grandparents raised in Philadelphia; their parents scattered throughout Eastern Europe: Moscow, Warsaw, Bucovina; my father from a loving home in Trenton, his father, my Pop Pop from a clapboard two-bedroom apartment shared with his brother Neill (who I only remember meeting once at Pop Pop's funeral in Boca. He trembled and wheezed and spat as he spoke) and their parents who ran a dive downstairs, which I imagine as being similar to the dive I was at with Yannis last night. I suppose another appropriate answer could have been a 'Boca-Jew-in-training,' passing an oblique

reference to my ninety-year-old Grandma whom I adored, a retired truant officer who never took her afterlife in the sun for granted, who still has a penchant to label everything as *mellow*—whether that be a new film out, or the cow’s tongue at Boca West’s in-house delicatessen. I could have gone on about the significance of Strat-O-Matic Baseball in my father and uncles’ childhood, or about my mother’s offbeat clique of Jewish girlfriends: the self-proclaimed C-Dashers (C-shers) in middle school. Or I could have said that I’m the kind of Jew who places his full confidence in the Bangladeshi waiter pointing at certain items on the cheaply laminated menu at Artie’s Deli just south of Isaac Bashevis Singer Boulevard—that’s the kind of Jew I am, you bitch.

I wanted to explain, in vivid the detail to these poor excuses for companions (at this point all I wanted to do was get off the bus . . . but where would I exit? And all I want to do now is leave this terrible freezer, but who would see me?) the aromas of my neighborhood, of the wafting scent honey-roasted nuts which the *Nuts4Nuts* pushcarts offered; surely they craved the history, so I thought about giving a brief lecture with the remaining thirty seconds, that could be a good way to shut them up: *Nuts4Nuts was founded by Alejandro Rad, an Argentinean who brought Mani Garripanda to the New York streets*; and lingering among the smell of the pushcarts was the copious amount of Shaoxing wine poured into sizzling woks, or between Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve, the notes of Douglas Firs which punctuate the air with their mollifying flavor—Christmas trees, even bought by Jews, sold by radiant, sleepy Québécois always gripping Styrofoam cups. Besides for Eli, I hated them all. And now I have become like them, helpless and loud, an absolute waste of space, incapable of opening a box without bleeding.

Eli never walked with the pack. He was either waddling so far ahead—it seemed that he was actually avoiding rather than guiding the group—focused on something he was reading on his cell phone, maybe even looking at an online map of the *muzeum*—while we all trailed behind, following in his oblivious wake. Although we were fast approaching the latrines, I nevertheless caught up to him, tapping his shoulder yet again.

“Sorry to interrupt, but are you by North London by any chance?”

“Yes, Golders Green. I come here to give tours.”

“Do you know Moritz Pichler by any chance?”

Eli’s face turned red, his mouth beginning to violently twitch. “Do I know Moritz Pichler? Oh yes, I know Moritz Pichler, my absolute hero as a child, but more importantly, the father of that vile fool who sent me into months of silence, who, as far as I could tell, lamented my admiration of his father, detested me for reading his father’s work when he didn’t dare, but instead practiced the harp, but only did that if he and his cronies weren’t all shoving me to the ground and sticking their fingers inside in my ears. Yes, I knew Moritz Pichler,” he snarled, his short chipped teeth somehow sharpening themselves with every clause into these fang-like shapes, “Oh but David . . . but David Pichler, our favorite little harpist. His father loved that David played the harp, remaining entirely oblivious to his offspring’s cosmic evil that infected all the young boys walking down Finchley Road. David Pichler is why I will homeschool my baby daughter.”

“Mortiz Pichler was your hero?”

“I adore his stories.”

“So you speak German then? I thought he strictly wrote in German?”

“Ephraim, why are you speaking of this man as if he is Gershom Scholem? He wrote in Yiddish. The best children’s books in the world. I wonder if he will publish a new one. I would love to read it to my daughter.”

I couldn’t tell him that there was the slightest chance I had incorrectly replaced his hero’s oxygen tank, consequently killing him. I was just about ready to run back over to pay the redheaded guards to vomit again.

“So his work has been translated into English?”

“No my Father translated it as he read to me. But listen! Can’t you see the irony of it? The maestro of children’s books, entirely unknown outside of the Yiddish-speaking community in Golders Green, breeds the cruelest harpist in all of England. He must have been bitter about his second rate-ability, he—”

“Now a timpanist.”

“—is the blueprint of the life I dodge and use will use my memory of him to form my daughter’s moral compass.”

The wet fangs had shriveled back into his teeth as he regained his composure, and I tried to picture these two grown men interacting three or so decades ago.

“He’s a timpanist, you say?” Eli’s hands were clasped together behind his back, waddling on with his enormous gut leading him, but before I could tell him an abbreviated version of my time with the Pichlers—that I, the stranger who tapped him by the Zyklon B cans, had been in the kitchen as the remaining color paled away from Pichler’s face, or even tell him, since he did possess a rabbinical quality, how there was the slightest chance I had not fully understood Ece’s directions, that I forgotten to replace

his hero's oxygen tank, killing him—we had already arrived at the latrines. “We can talk later Ephraim, I need to do this thing now.”

The barracks was lofty and reverberated our presence like an old cathedral. I wondered who the architect might have been and whether it were possible that he knew that this barracks—full of holes and splintered wood—would shift roles and become a place more for preaching than expelling. I heard the reflections of Eli's voice reverberate off of the walls—whooshing sounds that harmonized with the creeping May wind entering through the inlets in the wood, all of these elements building an awesome instrumentation of their own. Who should I have given credit to for constructing such a fascinatingly sonic chamber? The architect? Eli himself?

Eli stomped on the ground three times, using his body like a judge's gavel. Then he began:

“RAJE-rs, RAJE-rs! Take a rock from the ground and put it in your pocket. Keep a piece of this history with you, a history, not a parable!” Eli wavered, stretching his voice to unimaginable ranges, “A story which took place here, behind me, among shit and ash,” gesturing toward the latrines and continuing, “in this filthy sordidness of what has come of this world . . . They tried to take us away, they tried to ambush us with gas, and listen to me now, listen to what you need to now hear,” a story which I can only recall scattered lines of, lines that he rhetorically repeated over and over again, actually a similar scheme used by my shriveled Hebrew tutor with the curling yellow beard. “A life for a life!” he asserted two times over, first when a Jewish doctor had to deliver a friend's baby “here in this very space!” demanding that her friend meet her here after the

evening's roll call, drowning the baby immediately after delivery to save the mother's life, the young woman biting on the plank of wood. "A life for a life!" And only a few years later, the mantra returned: "A life for a life!" uttered again, but then in New World. The same doctor delivered the same friend's baby some years later, the mother miraculously coming across an advertisement for a new practice as she walked down Ocean Parkway, an advertisement for her friend's new practice, and then in New York, the doctor finally having "a pristine white room!" I remember Eli raging on like a madman, "a perfectly sanitary room" . . . "a perfect delivery" . . . "A life for a life!" and the reverbed reflections of the room sounded out even louder, deafening the hollow barracks before curling into the group's collective ear and procreating so that there would be small motes of echo creeping within our canals like nymph-staged chiggers, raspberry colored bugs who remarkably enough, elected not to leave their standard lesions, but rather just to linger without causing any visible fuss there in their new chambers, entirely satisfied with these specific hosts and feeling no desire whatsoever to crawl away and leave the pilgrims in peace.

While listening to Eli's sermon, one of the RAJE-rs, a New York Presbyterian emergency medic, squared his shoulders, poorly aping one of the proud yet emotionless soldiers who hover on the sidelines of inaugurations. But his emotions got the best of him and his eyes began to water, maybe believing that the medic jacket he was wearing that day took on an even greater role, convincing himself that this newly established practice Eli was yelling about must have been affiliated with his own very hospital. I discovered later that Doctor Perl practiced at Mount Sinai, not New York Presbyterian, which we know by now, is the hospital where I was born.

New York Presbyterian! Maybe that's where I'll go! Like Posada said, pues polvo eres, y al polvo volverás. I don't even speak Spanish and I understood that much. Would my father hire me to help clean up his office? Or would he get in trouble if I had discovered the names of his patients? I could surely do much better job archiving files than trying to discern which kind of snapper these are. Maybe I'm losing my emotional investment here, all alone and freezing. If I had a job at Barney Greengrass I wouldn't have any problem memorizing the menu. I could happily explain to a tourist what a pickled herring's flavor profile is like.

Yes, I could have no problem at all talking about the herring, unless it was the selection from Mały Śledź, the herring and vodka bar I entered, after abandoning the RAJE and hailing a taxi parked not so far from the converging tracks, writing down the address of the bar—which Gabi had told me about—on the back of receipt paper, and returned to Kraków.

There are only three barrels to sit on at Mały Śledź, and the girth of the bartender's gut seemed to account for the middle one. Either that, or Bartek, the large and affable bartender with inviting green eyes, refused to let any patron block his central field of vision. That left room for only one, since Iwona J—— was sitting on top of the left barrel, nursing a shot of something involving bison grass, drinking it exceptionally slowly, which she would proclaim to me—I paraphrase—as being the 'superior way of indulging,' I had no idea what to order, so I pointed toward the green liquid that she should have consumed long ago.

Bartek quickly assembled a plate of chopped herring for me. The fish was coated in a thick, pungent red oil. “Hot and spicy,” Bartek said, pointing to the one English menu next to the plate. One of the herrings options read: “Hot & Spicy.” I took the plastic fork he threw down on the bar’s wooden countertop and tried an especially fleshy bit—and now that I think about it, I’m grateful that I was able to sample the various kinds of herring, before everything had gotten far too out of hand and the blistered face of that beggar had rubbed up against my cheek . . .

I tasted the herring. Was this supposed to have been some kind of spiritual homecoming? Just the oil made me crave those cloudy tendons drenched in chili oil, which my father and I tried, unsure whether to laugh or cough or cry when we felt the oppressive numb of a Szechuan peppercorn for the first time, my mother looking at us with an unforgettable expression, something between a scoff and smile—nothing new for the waiter there at Spicy & Tasty in Flushing, Queens, where we stopped to eat on our way home, after watching the qualifying rounds of the US Open. I couldn’t help but weigh the comparison between that meal in Flushing and this one in Kazimierz, nor can I stop laughing about how all of these ingredients are almost at arm’s reach, here in the freezer room, but I wouldn’t dare try and snag any pickled fish or the chili oil off the shelf. Someone would surely see me, so I’ll just stay here, laughing and bleeding, but really wishing that I could scoff, but knowing I shouldn’t even do that, because the mere act of attempting to scoff would be so flagrantly appropriated. I am in no position to be scoffing at anyone, or anything for that matter. And more importantly, I would be lying to myself, not telling the truth, and since I have already confessed to so much, to having had

no thoughts at all, as I approached the converging tracks outside the gate of the *muzeum*, I'm certainly not going to start lying now.

Iwona and Bartek reminisced. They had grown up together in the Soviet utopia of *Nowa Huta*, both still living there, but now in the *Osiedle Kombatantów*—the Combatants' Estates. Polish architects traveled to Stockholm to study the newest breakthroughs in urban design: *Osiedle Kombatantów* was the result of their travels and research. Bartek loved talking all about it, and I was happy to listen. Yes, *Osiedle Kombatantów*, still close to the steel mill and the tobacco factory, which their soccer balls used to land nearby. They had seen both the unveiling and dismantling of Lenin's statue and were now with the fool who thought he could earn his employer's respect back through bringing him a rock picked up outside the Auschwitz latrines. The bison grass vodka kicked in and I took out my phone to draft an e-mail to my employer:

Comrade! I hope the archive is coming along nicely and sorry to have been out of touch. I am now in Kraków, and I think I have a necessary addition. We can talk when I am back in the States. Also, My Mom's cousin just retired from her dental practice *Comprehensive Dental Care* on the ground floor of *The Century* on Netherland Avenue, and I realized it is very close to your house. I was her final patient, as she scrapped away my plaque and tartar, stuck her violet curing light into my mouth so she could seal the powdered glass filling. After, I looked for you in through the window of Malecon but I only saw an old lady with a sunflower dress hunched over her pernil. Wish you were there. How could I forget you crunching on that skin during our fruitful meeting! If you would like my services in the future I would be very much like the opportunity to aid in any future. I think I have something that you will be very interested in. All things considered, the diary in question did arrive safely...

A loud group of five entered the bar, their chests collapsing with their shouts, then expanding to breathe in deep lungfuls of the warm, herring-scented air. I couldn't

continue with my draft. A group of five entered the bar, four squat men all wearing identical clothing: steel-toe boots; stiff cotton pants (equipped with fastened switchblades), and pilot jackets, which they had flung over their shoulders. And I will never forget those huge fur hats: a mass of black fibers, poorly stitched together, looking as if the hair had been ripped off from their very own stomachs. They were with one woman with dark green eyes, wearing high leather boots, and whose face had begun to suffer premature aging.

They all stood together like a circus chain gang, some strange comic militia. One looked to be married to the blonde woman, who I took to be younger than her appearance, and who wobbled in place while each man took turns wrapping their arms around her, kissing her cheek until her husband, the shortest of them all, actually licked her face, and proceeded to produce an Old World guffaw, while his wife, or girlfriend, wiped off his trail of spit. They were all thirsty for Bartek's elixir and seemingly hungry for groin, ambling around from one side of the tiny bar to the other, while I sat on the barrel to the right, unsure whether I ought to insert myself in the curious festivities, or shut up and drink.

Bartek turned to grab some more bottles of Zubrówka and immediately began assembling shots for us all. None of us paid for anything. I really didn't understand how he made money. I guess he knew all of them so well that it would have been strange if I were the only one paying.

I did everything I could to remain unfazed, as the men took turns pawing at this woman's groin. I was not going to judge them like I did the RAJE-rs from Queens. I was the one entering their orbit, the stray bit of shrapnel that was occupying the last barrel. I'll

tell you one thing: I wasn't about to be that elitist voice of reason condemning their actions. They didn't even speak English! I was actually much happier to be with them, and not with the RAJE-rs on the bus, trying to answer that little Jew's question on the bus. Paw as you please!

OK, fine, so maybe I am fetishizing them a bit. Yes, those coarse ballistic nylon sheaths terrified me, and yes, I did wonder whether or not I would be safe . . . but I had been listening to Bartek speak about the utopian housing projects and how he grew up without any issues at all. Surely my fear was misplaced. Bartek had an assortment of plates set aside just for them. He wouldn't hand over a free platter of fish to a group of thugs, would he?

My focus turned toward the beggar who had just then entered the bar. Bartek poured boiling water into a highball glass that already had powder for instant soup at the bottom of it. The beggar began to yelp; the heat from the boiling water transferred over to the glass, burning him, which was more than apparent from how the veins within his watery eyes began to strain. Bartek handed him a napkin so he could grip the highball glass. His thin frame, excluding the copious amounts of skin, which hung limply from his breast, was concealed by an oversized ski-jacket, which I had supposed he carried with him year-round. Hardly eating any of the bread, and still unable to grip the highball glass, the beggar slowly tramped outside, sitting down just outside of the herring bar, while I turned around to peer through the dirty window out toward the smog, watching him like a deep-sea diver peering out through his bathysphere.

We saw them strap on their masks and reposition their hats, the group stumbling out of the bar shortly afterward. The beggar lit a cigarette with his trembling hands, and I sat there next to him in the small alcove between the herring bar and another short, neighboring building, thinking about how the drama had already come and gone—not thinking about how I was sitting on the streets of Kraków with a rock from the *muzeum* weighing down my pocket, snuggled up with a stranger. The bar was going to close soon, Bartek had warned me before I stepped outside: We close earlier on Sundays, he said, in this wonderful country, where Jesus Christ our Savior was recently crowned King. He had to go work again early the following morning.

I don't remember his name, but I do remember how his handshake somehow initiated a strange amnesia. I suppose that we just tried to communicate the most basic elements of our life, but I would be lying if I tried to say what, specifically.

Soon he stood up and howled out: 'FC Barcelona? Arsenal? Manchester?' pronouncing each of the syllables just well enough so I could understand him. With a sense of pride I never knew existed, I shouted back: *Tottenham!*, knowing absolutely nothing about that club, other than the fact that I knew Tottenham was a neighborhood in north London, and that maybe, the Pichler had supported them, blurting the word out into the air that still reeked of burnt plastic and coal, and he repeated what I had said, screaming: *Tottenham! Tottenham!*—a team I knew absolutely nothing about, and quickly corrected my allegiance: "American Football . . . Philadelphia Eagles . . ." and without thinking straightened my arm and pointed to the tattoo of the bird under the layer of plastic wrap, the image of the bird somewhat blurred from sweat which had layered itself under the wrapping. By this point, the amnesia had certainly subsided, because I

vividly recall how his eyes and cheeks began to twitch upon seeing the bird. There was no way that he had recognized President Roosevelt's icon. I shuddered at the infinite possibilities of what the tattoo could have meant to him, evidently signifying something, because he immediately stood up to face me, fully extending his right arm into a salute: a pose which he maintained for a terrible amount of time. I wanted to go back inside, back to Bartek, but the beggar wouldn't get out of the way. He was keeping me there, eternally unwavering in his salute, it seemed, until a friend of his walked by—a fellow *kolega*—another beggar, who lazily shook my hand and continued onward, crossing himself, while I, still in the alcove, watched both of them cross the street and disappear.

My head is beginning to nod. Have I lost too much blood already? I have faith in myself to stick this one out. Maybe it's the lack of sunlight; that would make sense. It was pitch black when I woke up this morning to get on the train, and Yannis and I stayed at the bar from around four in afternoon until well past midnight, so that would mean that the last time I had seen the sun for more than a few minutes would have been when I sat in that dirty garden, making every effort to do nothing. It's a little past seven and the raspberry sorters must certainly be on their way.

Maybe I should have written some of this down, maybe I should have taken a cue from my great-uncle Hank, whom I visited after I had arrived in Boca Raton. I had decided that if I had flown straight home from Poland, everybody would only need to have taken one look before realizing that I'd lost it—especially my father, who would insist on sending me to yet another colleague-friend of his for consultation before they would convene at the Dick Savitt Tennis Center and chat about me between sets. No one

would tell me to ‘get it together’ down in Boca. They’re all too busy choking on their black and blue strips or falling asleep at the bridge table—or writing down their life stories from decades ago, which had been what Uncle Hank was doing the moment I arrived. A perfect place to decompress, I remember thinking while still in Kraków, after finally having reached Gabi’s apartment after returning from the herring bar, eventually changing my flight later that night, but not before a long shower, since for some reason, likely because of all that bison-grass vodka, I had foolishly thought that Gabi had lied to me, that maybe there really was outbreak of SARS in Kraków, and to my drunken mind, rubbing up with a fascist beggar must have been the easiest way to contract it.

I had even been excited to listen to the same stories Uncle Hank tells; I could just sit there and not worry about whether or not he prefers matches or a lighter for the cigarette I could have soon blown in his face, as if that activity were common among asthmatics and octogenarians. I really needed a day or two in peace, relaxing in the luxurious purgatory that is Boca West Country Club, I thought, turning on the shower in Gabi’s bathroom. Yes, it would have been a great idea to scribble away alongside Uncle Hank, writing down what had happened only twenty-four hours earlier, while he recreated war stories next to me, yes maybe I should have followed his lead back then, sitting next to him inside of his screened-in deck, looking past the hummingbirds circling around firebrush and oyster plants, out onto a small green pond, wondering what the fuck happened.

*A nibble of kasha!* Uncle Hank moans, furiously scribbling away into his yellow legal pad, checking his syntax with a magnifying glass before pausing to rub his aching

wrist, while I sharpen his pencil with the lime-green sharpener, a chore which I was more than happy to do, since I didn't want to keep looking out past the firebrush and replaying the events of the past four days, manically orbiting in my mind.

*A nibble of kasha*, is all he can manage to say, *a nibble of kasha*—his old boyish mantra which, according to my grandmother, he would repeat over and over to their mother in north Philadelphia, opening for his little mouth to be fed.

“No kasha, Uncle Hank,” I roar into his eardrum. “Bagels, lox, some cold cuts. But no kasha.”

“We might have pasta salad.” and I grabbed for my glass of orange juice on the table. I had no idea what had overcome him then, ignoring me for the errant stars of graphite smudging his margins.

“Do you want me to see if there is any pasta salad?”

“What?” he blurted, staring at me as if we had never met, so consumed with trying to find a succession of words that could only hope to contain something resembling truth. What he seemed to be saying was: *What? Why must you disturb me? Where's Sunny . . . where's my wife? And you are?*

What horrific calamity must have happened to warrant his wife's absence? Her playing cards were still right there on the table inside the screened-in deck, next to her sweetheart's legal pad. No, reminding Uncle Hank that his wife was two miles away, over at the Jewish Cemetery, wouldn't have been right.

I remember thinking that maybe a look could have sufficed. I tried to locate the tender coordinate within his eye to make him understand, they must have been somewhere behind the wire-framed glasses, going through every millimeter of the eye I

had chosen, since of course you can only really look at one eye at a time. But even that gesture was in vain, since I had chosen his right eye, which was way too far from where it should have been, a lazy eye. My gaze seemed fixed and inflexible, falling on his inflamed whites, right by his tear duct, and landing on nothing.

A few minutes later, Uncle Hank had placed his magnifying glass down and closed his eyes. I read his minuscule script:

A first hand account by Henry 'Hank' Goldman.

When you lose a parent, you're supposed to go to temple for eleven months. morning and night. So Raffé and I went...I don't have to go because I was only eleven and he was thirteen, but we both went. And if it was a real bad day, Mom would drive us. Well Mom would sit fifteen minutes during the service, so she met the Rabbi. A year later, Mom told us she had been dating the Rabbi, but they broke up because the Rabbi wanted to marry her. She already had three children and she didn't want any more children. He was eight years younger so he wanted children.

Anyway, I'm in Saipan with Hepatitis and they put this Jewish captain next to me and we caught each other talking. He's from New Jersey and he said to me his Rabbi was coming to visit -- would I like to meet him? I'm lying sick in bed I said I got nothing better to do, I'll meet your Rabbi. So we get dressed in our uniforms, the Rabbi comes, and as soon as I walked in I knew who he was. But I'm eleven years older! So he didn't recognize me. I said to him, "You know who I am?" He says "Yeah I see your tag, Lieutenant Goldman." I said "That's not what I'm referring to." He said "What're you referring to?" I said "Do you remember Hannah Goldman?" He said "Oh my god, you must be Hank!" He came over, he threw his arms around me. He says, "Your mother was the most marvelous woman I ever knew." He said "I'm now married and have two children, but I'll never forget your mother." He said, "I'm going home in about two weeks, when I get off the plane the first thing I'm going to do is call your mother and tell her you're alright." And he did because I got a letter from Mom. Then when I came home – this is the funny part – I said to Mom "Wasn't that nice that Rabbi Lippis called and told you I was alright and you didn't have to worry about me anymore." She said, "I never worried about you!" I said, "Mom I was shot down twice. They were shooting at me every other day." She said, "Yeah yeah, but I knew you could take care of yourself." And Raffé never flew a mission, never saw action! He was in the Tank Corps but when I got my commission, he transferred to the Air Force. And he became a navigator too! He got to England just a week

before the War ended. So they put him in a squadron – he had all the ribbons and the wings and everything and they sent him home and he had all the points because of the ribbons! And they discharged him. I'm in the South Pacific, flying missions, and he's discharged! But that was better because he didn't belong in the service, Raffé...certainly not the Tank Corps. He used to lay tefillin every morning. I'm sitting here with Ethan and this is one of my stories. I will write once a day in this notebook for

Yes, I ought to have taken a cue from Uncle Hank, even though he wrote down my brother's name on the legal pad instead of mine. Maybe I should mark down memories while I can, before this freezer room—which is really starting to feel devoid of oxygen—kills the rest of my brain cells. I could write about the mere act of watching him. Or I could think of something sweeter, but I don't know what. Maybe I could try one day to write about more tender times, or even try to start writing music again, because after all, that's what all of this is about, how my decent second option has taken me here. Maybe I should try making techno. Or tomorrow, when I get back to the Chaplain's office, I could take a crack at a sentence . . . walking down Broadway in my tennis whites coated with the dusty red clay from the Riverside courts, that long gone utopia of my neighborhood, where I was once successfully excused from synagogue, faking sick on the night of Kol Nidre, not so long ago, then lustfully tip-toeing through the pews on the upper floor of the synagogue, quietly descending the steps until I reached Eric, the Puerto Rican security guard I had known my entire life—initiating our own unique handshake mid-stride—and headed down Broadway in khakis, dirty sneakers, and the same Joseph Abboud dress shirt I had first debuted at my Bar Mitzvah, briskly passing the *Metro Diner*, *Lenny's Bagels*, *Texas Rotisserie & Grill*, waiting for the light to turn green before running past the *Super Tacos* truck parked just off Broadway on 96th Street, past *Symphony Space*, back to my family's old apartment on 91st and Amsterdam,

terribly excited by that point, unbuttoning my shirt and upon hearing the doorbell ring, opened the door to a girl from the neighborhood. She too must have looked awfully pale, sitting next to her parents in the ground-floor pews at *B'nai Jeshurun*. How wonderful was it then, that by the time she left her reformed synagogue, her fever had subsided completely, that by the time she stood in my outside landing, ringing the doorbell seven or eight times, she was glowing, both of us laughing, noting how lovely it was that both of us had dressed up for Kol Nidre, Sarah stepping inside without even a proper hello, walking past me in her ankle-length gray dress which flowed out onto the white tile floor, squatting down to kiss my old, half-blind spaniel. I'll never forget running my hand through my hair and finding that bobby pin, without a kippah to fasten by that point, and quickly placing it on top of the refrigerator. So that Kobi wouldn't choke on it, of course.

I don't think I could do it. I couldn't even write a sentence yesterday. It's better to keep it simple. I like my earlier idea. It packs a stronger punch, yes, I should really just focus on the present moment, and write with my own blood: WHITE BOY, HURT onto this cold white apron, and with it, suffocate Jeremiah or Posada or whoever the fuck his 'girl' is.

I'm pulling off the apron, throwing it down onto the display between the baby squid and the rest of the melting pink ice. I'm opening the door to leave this place. I'm ready to run down the aisle of cold-pressed oils, bleeding. Running past the indoor displays of crab apples and raw nuts, past the locked cash registers, out onto the swarm of flies, cheering me on with their buzzing. Someone else will need to finish that display. Someone else will need to neatly tuck the catfish into the last column. I have nothing to

say, fewer thoughts now than when I first saw the tracks converge outside the main gate of the *muzeum*, fewer thoughts now than when I blew smoke toward a dying man. I'm feeling dizzy, likely because this bleeding hasn't yet subsided, but soon it will, because if there is one thing I am going to follow through with it's stopping this bleeding. I'm sprinting, while a bit of blood meets the yellow hood of a parked taxi, a bit of blood falling through the sidewalk grate that leads down toward the subway tracks. A right on 148th Street, yes, up to Broadway, to where I came from, running, amazed at how much distance I have already covered, if only I had used this determination a couple of hours ago; and now I see large banner draped from the three glass tunnels connecting the various buildings of the hospital together, a banner which reads *Amazing Things Are Happening Here*. Yes, they really are, I would say if I had any breath left, now on Fort Washington Avenue, entering the alarmingly old-fashioned lobby of the Harkness Pavilion, and proceeding past the security guard stationed in front of the elevator, who waves me in without as much as a second thought. He must think I'm a mechanic because of this quilted jacket I am wearing in the August heat wave, but at least the hospital is cold. I'm in the elevator, pressing the button for the sixth floor, standing in place for the first time and panting. I'm content for the first time in a long while. I made a decision, I say to myself, now sucking on my finger since I don't need to sprint forty odd blocks again, which would require me to use both hands to propel me forward, just waiting here, in this slow moving elevator, and looking at the clock above the buttons: 8:02 A.M., which would mean that Fairway has already been open for two minutes, Zeke must have already seen the crime scene. But that's really no matter now, the elevator door opening onto the sixth floor, I know exactly what I am doing, I say to myself,

briskly walking down the corridor and smiling at the receptionist, who is so delighted to see me, it's been way too long since you've come to visit, would I like a coffee? Sorry Marge, just hold on one second, and there he is, kneeling down and talking to a young girl, not older than eight or nine years old, and yes, now I am going to forgive myself for speaking so blindly of who Posada's 'girl' was, because there she is, right there, Posada too, but this time he is entirely engaged, not peering off anywhere, while the man with the beaky nose and dark eyes kneels down in front of the girl and, from what I can tell, now slowly walking and trying to look as broken as possible, is gently asking her questions about how she feels, could you rate it on a scale from 1-10? I have left everything back there, I promise myself, all of my shortcomings and passions, which have all amounted to nothing. I have forgiven everybody, all of the people whose gazes I have failed to meet, my employer, but most of all myself, yes, I have forgiven myself for assuming who Posada's 'girl' was, I tell myself, violently scratching my neck so that I have blood there too for when he sees me, and now I am approaching the three of them, I have forgiven myself, and I fall down before my father, holding my finger out to him, looking into his furious eyes and asking: *Can you stop this?*

