

THE REAL INSTRUMENT

by

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In

English

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Date

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by

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ABSTRACT

The Real Instrument is a conceptual cross-genre novella that explores the wandering consciousnesses (or larger collective conscious) of commuters sharing the same high-speed rail line. This collection of post-modern vignettes is organized into five segments that act as peeks into the internal reflections and observations of several different characters, all of which share the same public space (the train car). In each segment, the characters are focused on enacting, coping with and/or replaying their own thoughts—all of which appear to be independent experiences, but thematically, their interiors intersect. These themes include the self's construction of reality, or the Real, the self's relationship to the Other, obsession and anxiety, narcissism and solipsism. The novella is an esoteric grappling with the linear confines of the outside world vs. the organic state of the mind—which is often fluid, chaotic and unsettling.

Chair: _____
Signature

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On Track, A Critical Introduction

When I took the train every night—and I still do whenever possible—I always noticed the lights on in the houses flickering in the passing neighborhoods, dotting the landscape speeding by my window. Moms and dads were at their kitchen table, talking after they put their kids to bed. Like Americans everywhere, they were asking questions as profound as they are ordinary.

--Joe Biden, Arrive Magazine

Trains

In 2008, when the news on NPR was inundated with up-to-the-minute campaign coverage about the presidential election, I became very conscious of the powerful rhetorical devices and slogans of the trail, such as the moving “Yes We Can” refrain. Perhaps not quite as iconic or overt, was a particular newspeak that leapt out at me again and again. The buzz surrounded Joe Biden’s Amtrak commute from Delaware to Washington, when he served as Senator. Whenever I heard snippets of biographies describing Biden, the briefs were always sandwiched by a heroic description of his daily hour-long train ride. His choice to take public transportation situated him into the familiar daily grind and equated him with the everyman.

What was at first an interesting factoid about the man, eventually evolved into a Boy Scout-earned badge: STAR COMMUTER. Every time I heard anything about Biden, his commute was a component of the discourse; Joe chose to take the train to get home to his children more quickly, or Joe had established a routine during the ride which prepared him for a day of important decision making, or even his own sentiments, that the windows provided him with a view into American life (37). While the mystique of the

train is a rather redundant trope, in the case of Joe Biden, the cheekiness of the cliché was overridden—his ties to the train solidified his integrity and made him trustworthy. The metaphor of journeying into an unknown future with an average Joe seated next to you couldn't be timelier. The train space and language of transportation systems both literally and figuratively allow for the simplification of complex human relations. You may have nothing in common with Joe Biden—but once you both inhabit the train space, suddenly then you do.

The public transportation jargon stuck out to me because of my own experience as a star commuter for many years. As a pre-teen, I walked the precarious rocky tracks by foot simply for the thrill of feeling an engine pass by inches away, to smash pennies, to escape from adult supervision, and to smoke cigarettes for the first time. In my later years, the tracks provided the privacy to partake in much more devious and experimental behaviors. In my early teens, I began actually commuting on SEPTA on my own. Those first rides were often from the suburbs where I grew up to Center City Philadelphia for various afterschool and summer activities. At that time, being an adolescent meant existing as a chameleon, trying on a colorful array of labels and masks: a raver, a hippy, a punk, a grunger. My time on the train was a sacred space between the segments of my life, a moment I had embraced as private time to simply be who I was. A time often dominated by heavy internal processing, listening to jazzy jam-band instrumentals on my bright yellow Sony Walkman, and jotting down terrible poetry. The idea that such a space provided me with the ultimate privacy, and yet, was a vast public domain fascinated me. In my solipsistic teenage angst I was alone and lonely on those train rides, but also

comforted by the presence of other off-kilter riders, subtly humbled by a shared sameness.

For me it is still a particularly eerie, yet alluring phenomenon to think about the vastly disparate consciousnesses housed in the same space, headed to similar destinations, all of whom are complete strangers. While the central purpose of getting on a train is to head from point A to point B, contained within the passenger's minds there is an energy that is in direct opposition to the linearity of the train's forward motion. The mind is constantly in flux, sporadic and unpredictable. The actual rails of the track, the parallel order of the thick overhead cables, the neatly lined schoolhouse seating, the rhythmic cadence of chugging along the rails all provide a frame—an instrument by which a sublime array of chaotic interior dialogues can intersect. None of this is ever verbalized. Like many of the thoughts I had as an overly heady teenager—and still do—I have always felt my sentimental feelings for the train are difficult, if not impossible, to convey. Even though my affair with public transportation is rather ordinary, riding still reminds me that I am connected to something greater, a collective consciousness. The Biden-Amtrak refrain was attempting to tap in to those same idealistic notions in voters—that we all share the same cabin on the same train, despite our outward disparities.

What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant.

--David Foster Wallace, Oblivion

Rails and Routes

My husband and I moved (in almost a straight line) across the country from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Santa Rosa, California shortly following the completion of my undergraduate degree, and film school at Temple University. Newly married, we sought jobs, adventure and escape. Mostly, we fled to avoid settling in the same place where we had both grown up. When I began the English Graduate program at Sonoma State, my head was full of cinematic aesthetics and the culture shock of moving from a dense, aggressive city to a sprawled countryside. The grand act of spontaneously moving from East to West, followed by the novelty of rural small town living was sensorially overwhelming. I knew very little about Northern California before the move; in fact I had never even set foot in San Francisco, so it was much like hopping aboard a train, closing my eyes and getting off at a random stop—it was frightening and fantastic. Space and place (and the disruption of the familiar) were dominant themes in my cinematic studies, and those themes had bled into my real life. I had completed the ultimate commute both literally and spiritually. In hindsight, it is obvious why *The Real Instrument* is the fruit of my Creative Project.

The novella itself, a conceptual experiment, grew out of two ideas for a short story that both involved the multiple-internal thoughts of a hodgepodge of passengers on their daily morning commute. The original inspiration for the train was the notorious El

(The Market-Frankford line), an elevated subway in Philadelphia. My first desire was to re-create the very distinct mise-en-scène of that particular space. The El travels through portions of the most depressed, impoverished and dangerous pockets of Philadelphia, drawing some of the most intriguing and fascinating people. When riding the El during a particularly difficult time in my life, I had often thought to myself that the subway itself was its own character—I would daydream about filming a short ode to the experience of riding it one day.

My other intention involved the psychology and internal life of the urban traveler. What if I knew what my fellow commuters were thinking? What if all their thoughts were suddenly exposed at once? Was there an underlying sameness? The marriage of these two concepts (the space/place with the greater psychological concerns) and eventual evolution into a larger experiment, came from my desire to emulate the post-modern authors and theorists that I was studying at the time. The late David Foster Wallace's epoch, *Infinite Jest*, particularly inspired me. *Infinite Jest* took the length of my undergraduate studies and several years thereafter to read in its entirety. The book itself was also part of the inspiration for pursuing graduate work in English, rather than film. What made the novel most enjoyable to me was also what made it so challenging to digest. Wallace's masterpiece is bombarded with complex and lengthy footnotes and endnotes, some of which become short narratives themselves, which in turn, have even more of their own footnotes. I bought a small dictionary that I could carry with me when I took the two-and-a-half inch monster on the bus or to the coffee shop (and referenced it almost every few pages). Wallace commits pages to the smallest minutiae—the writing is precise and formulaic. While his writing is cleverly systematic, the act of reading the

novel is rather chaotic. The process is constantly disrupted due to the necessity of re-reads, pauses to look up references and general frustration. The narrative is a series of long, complex diversions. It is these sub-stories, and the active work that was required as a reader that points to the greater theme of the work—the painstaking effort to be a human being living in the modern world. Wallace simultaneously builds and dismantles the world of his characters *and* readers. The work is constantly commenting on itself, forcing readers to be aware of their own relationship to the fictional world of the novel. In an interview response to a question from Charlie Rose about his excessive use of footnotes in *Infinite Jest* Wallace said,

There is a way that it seems to me that reality is fractured right now, at least the reality that I live in. The difficulty in writing about that reality is that text is very linear, very unified, and you, well, anyway, I am constantly on the look out for ways to fracture the text that aren't totally disorienting. You can take the lines and jumble them up, and that's nicely fractured, but nobody is going to read it. Right? So, there's got to be some interplay in how difficult you make it for the reader and how seductive it is for the reader to be willing to do it. (1997)

When I attempted to create the literary world of my own characters, I sought to mimic the feeling that Wallace's work offered me. I wanted to tediously construct, then disrupt, and perhaps even collapse the experience of both my characters and readers. The daydreams of stationary commuters in a moving cabin car provided the perfect avenue through which to digress and disrupt. Once I had written a preliminary short character study of passengers on a train, the meta-narrative and setting had formed. I became interested in working with a structure in order to unravel the world hidden beneath it. Fictional hypertext, and real-time blogging were potential schemas to explore each character. I imagined a “choose your own adventure” format wherein readers could elect

different narrative paths. These digressions would stem from the central fictional piece that is the core of the work. Then non-linear digressions would branch out of key moments, character's imaginings, interior monologues or visual descriptions. One could click on a phrase colored differently from the rest of the text and unlock a new point of view or story. Picturing this interactive narrative, I could only see it being successful as a hybrid or cross-genre work. Minds don't always think in finely tuned prose; sometimes thoughts are more disjointed, or even poetic. Before I could map, structure and storyboard the work—I had to write it. And after writing and writing I learned that my text would refuse to obey the rules I had set out for it. The work, ultimately insisted on designing itself.

Once I had begun writing, a paradox manifested. I wanted desperately to convey the complex multiplicity and fragmentation of the interior life of my commuters, and of humans in general—but the story itself had to be readable and engaging, as Wallace pointed out in his interview "...it had to be seductive enough for the reader to want to do it." I didn't want to lose or disregard the reader's own interior world which, like my characters, may float from thought to thought but has an instinctual desire to be held on track. While the train provided a unifying setting, and the route a shared community—something else was needed. Riding is not only a passive mode of travel but also a relatively engaging sensory experience. The kinetic ebb and flow of the bodies in and out of each stop, the constant hum of the rails, and subtle, but constant movement in the bodies of the riders all contribute to a symphony of sorts. Even with a mental commitment to resisting linearity, as I began to write I found the guts of my characters were compelled toward classical literary rhetorical devices such as symbolism, musicality

and motifs. I resigned myself to this inevitability: there had to be just enough of a shared experience for all the passengers' psyches to be held together in the physical space of the train, as well as on the page. At this point, I looked to the other (not so romanticized) scenery of the interior of the trains I had ridden in Philadelphia—trash.

Just as Wallace's endnotes were essential to his masterpiece: plastic bags, food scraps, graffiti, balled panty hose, and empty containers—revealed themselves to me as the redundant endnotes of public transportation. Trash is ordinary, which allowed the coincidence of all the characters interacting with the same piece of trash as both plausible, but also, symbolic. An empty plastic Aquafina bottle manifested as the rolling rhetorical device, and unifying motif on the train ridden by my characters. The mundane empty vessel, meant to carry water (often the symbol of life in literature) alludes (for my characters) to the absence of a missing element—or a lack of connection. Kicked, smashed or otherwise acknowledged on a subtle level by all of the characters, the Aquafina bottle rolls in and out of each segment of my project as a gentle reminder of the tension between wholeness and fragmentation, a material world clashing with a spiritual world.

By the time I had written several vignettes focused on the internal struggles of the minds of my characters, my work had rejected all my expectations for it. It would not exist as hypertext, or in the blogosphere. The colored text I had designated to act, as a reminder for the reader to switch gears seemed less like an esoteric device and more like a gimmick. I had experimented with Talmudic writing, adding asides as I thought of them to the perimeters of my typed pages—a practice that I couldn't keep up. In my early notes, I had even planned for a guerilla-esque art project to accompany the work. Screen

prints of each segment could be branded on tee shirts and would represent different train characters like trading cards or urban traveler uniforms—a kitschy idea that only ended up providing a nice distraction from writing. Even the train itself had rejected the identity I had set forth for it. The actual distance the real life EL traveled was too short to convincingly dissect the internal lives of my characters. Ultimately, the El transformed into the West Trenton Local. Like the highly publicized Biden commute, the WTL spanned a very diverse socio-economic sphere. Loading in New Jersey, the regional rail plowed through rural Pennsylvania, several affluent and wealthy suburbs, very low-income urban environments and desolate projects, eventually arriving at University City Station, the campus of University of Pennsylvania, the hub in Philadelphia of academic and scientific innovation. My project was simultaneously losing and finding itself; the fragments and crumbs of characters studies became pieces of a larger and more cohesive mosaic.

Inside in this novel's multiple, time affected view, is ever more mysterious than Outside. And for the author, who is throughout this novel writing in her deepest element, there is more to risk and farther to go.

--Eudora Welty, on Virginia Woolf's To The Lighthouse

Conductors

Alongside my work on my Creative Project, I had taken several literary seminars in the MA program, which allowed me to delve into the classic modernist canon, and expand my repertoire beyond the contemporary authors and poets I had been focused on prior to first conceptualizing my project. Working backwards in my studies resulted in an unwinding of the initial constraints that bound my novella. Concepts and thematics important to me such as fragmentation, and chaos were unpacked further upon reading authors such as Ralph Ellison, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

These early pioneers of the modernist approach of dis-assembling form conveyed the internal struggles of their characters via a mix of stream-of-consciousness, free verse and free-indirect speech. The omnipresent third person narrators of these texts would often blend into the thoughts of the main characters themselves. For example, in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Daedalus' point of view is the focus of novel. His stream-of-consciousness is followed from his mind as a young boy into adulthood. The narration and text of the novel also itself mimic Daedalus' development; when Stephen is a young boy, his thoughts are dream-like, sparse and unclear, particularly in his response to the details of the events at the rectory he attends. It is hard to follow what is even happening in the novel, because Stephen himself does not fully comprehend his own experience. As Stephen ages, the writing of Joyce and the

perspective of Stephen as conveyed by the narrator is denser and more layered, in a way that is congruent with his matured state. At one point the novel almost transforms into a Milton-esque poem when Stephen (as an adult) attends a particularly haunting sermon during a religious retreat. The sermon is pages long, puckered with digressions, and laden with excessive complex biblical and literary references (Joyce 90; ch. 3). The narrator's direction, Stephen's interior and the Rector's sermon are so complicated they overlap and intertwine, making it difficult to determine who is speaking and/or thinking.

Similarly, in Woolf's, *To The Lighthouse*, the reader weaves in and out of the consciousnesses of several of the characters at random and unapologetically in the famous dinner scene—even jumping from one gender to another. The private thoughts and impressions of the attendees at dinner call attention to Woolf's break down of the linear paradigm of classic storytelling (82; xvii). The reader is redirected multiple times through very specific details of a singular moment. While Ellison's *Invisible Man* is mainly structured around the unnamed protagonist's singular point of view, the narrative is a dreamy and hazy recounting of his experiences traveling from the South to the North. Often his memories flow into songs, poetics and speeches seamlessly and spontaneously, just as the reader would experience their own reflections in real-time. Joyce, Woolf, Ellison and many of their modernist contemporaries are navigating the difficult relationship of the interior mind to the exterior world—the precarious edges between all of our consciousness.

As my vignettes grew into completed short stories, the classics texts allowed me to articulate my own obsession with the edges of the psyche. The protagonists of these classics were *conductors*, their own interiors acted as both conduits for their own

impressions, those of the author, as well as the reader. The interiors of Stephen Daedalus, Mrs. Ramsay and Brother Blank also provide a mirror to those outside of themselves—reflecting the desperate nature of the human condition. Their private inner constructions point to the illusion of linearity and our human dependence on it. Despite the limited and unreliable subjectivity of the characters in these classic works, there is still just enough unity in the plots, just enough, and again, as Wallace points out, there is a “seductive” pull to lure the reader.

While my Aquafina bottle served to unify the physical realm outside of my characters, I continued to seek to overlap the boundaries of intersubjectivity. Not only do all commuters share the rails, the train car, the sounds of the train, they all had another commonality, the voice of the conductor—the call of the stops.

“It almost sounds like the conductor is, in a way, the voice of God....perhaps you should write his story?”

My Creative Project Chair and mentor pointed out in one of our sessions. It was a suggestion that provoked an authorial epiphany for me at the time. I had been writing the piece in omnipresent third person narration, but I had yet to consider that the conductor of the very train I was writing about was in his own right omnipresent. The idea of exploring the inner workings of *his* world was one to which I was both drawn toward, and equally recoiled from. The conductor represented the intersubjectivity and triangulation of all the other stories I had written at the time: *The Mother*, *The Filmmaker*, and *The Companions*—to define him felt like a deliberate collapsing of the world I had been furiously constructing and deconstructing.

I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am Invisible, understood, simple because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you sometimes see in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imaginations—indeed everything and anything but me.

--Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

Arrivals

While a collapse did arrive, it wasn't ultimately in the Conductor's story.

The conductor's own arrival came during a rather apropos trip my family had planned during my spring break. We headed back East to Philadelphia to see friends and family and when I broke away for a girls' night out, I took the West Trenton Local for the first time in perhaps a decade. I was pleased with my own rendering of the space—how it smelled, felt and rode exactly as I had always recalled. I rode one way during the sunny afternoon and returned late in the evening. It was during the evening return, after my cell phone had died and I was forced into mindfulness that I saw him. It was the would-be conductor of my own story, calling the stops on this very train, collecting my very ticket. Perhaps it is an old cliché: the author's characters reveal themselves in real life, appearing out of the mist. However, this random stranger was the perfect fit—an unlikely post-modern muse. From that moment forward, I was able to write my conductor story without fearing a philosophical compromise of my text. Moses' voice of God symbolism was inevitably ironic. Like many of the characters found in the classics, he is deeply flawed, imperfect and unreliable, and Moses' own life story is haunted by the same tensions of my other characters, except perhaps more acutely. He is constantly

negotiating multiple edges; those between order and disorder, known and unknown, the self and the Other. As a service worker he resides in the sphere of invisibility to which Ellison refers to in his opening to *Invisible Man*. Moses is in many ways an extension of the train itself. However, his own identity struggle provides a mirror to all the other inhabitants of the train—all “star commuters” in general exist in perpetual invisibility when riding on the train. Perhaps even more compelling than the holographic nature of commuters themselves is the invisible distance between them. This space is dense, filled with interior monologues, memories, and judgments but yet on the exterior, there is no deliberate communication, connection or physical touch. Lives on hold, both stationary and traveling, all behave as placeholders for themselves—until they arrive wherever it is that they are headed.

The collapse that did arrive for both myself as author, and in the flow of the narrative of novella, culminated in the poetic crescendo of the segment titled “Invisibility and The Musician.” The initial intent for that section was to give a voice to the space between commuters, or the space between *us*. The cataclysm occurred, when as an author, I felt that only poetics could properly convey these “echoes” between passengers on a train. I attempted to personify this distance with the use of a declarative “I” which was then intermingled lyrically with the interior thoughts of the characters themselves. All of which resulted, through the verse of the poem, in a collective representation of the psyche of the train and its urban landscape. There is a profound paradox in the impulse of my novella to tap into the broad spectrum of human consciousness. The paradox is finding that I had written a book about the multiplicity of humanity—for the very few. In my effort to juggle the richness of the very fleeting moments of my characters with a

nihilistic and deconstructed form, I managed to shrink everything into an esoteric language. Arriving at a poetic and fictional crossroads, I found the language of my work was encoded by the who or what of *the real instrument*.

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The Real Instrument

If your mind is related to something outside itself, that mind is small mind, a limited mind. If your mind is not related to anything else, then there is no dualistic understanding in the activity of your mind. Big mind experiences everything within itself.

..In one sense our experiences coming one by one are always fresh and new, but in another sense they are nothing but a continuous or repeated unfolding of the one big mind.

...With big mind we accept each of our experiences as if recognizing the face we see in a mirror as our own. For us there is no fear of losing this mind.

-Shunryu Suzuki

Superstition or The Conductor

“Sir, you will need: a yam, a white votive, a black votive, Borracho powder, Cast Off Evil powders, 7-11 Holy Oil a charcoal rin'—for safely burnin' it all up. An' finally, a representation of sumpthin' dat symbolizes de cravin' you wish to cast out, sumpthin' from de source. Firs' you purchase de objects from my store. You mus' wait until de wanin' moon and cast an spell I include for free wit de purchase of de Santeria items. You come back de following week at same time, an' I customize an incantation an' blessin' for you. Finally, durin' de next wanin' moon, you again return de store and purchase a Macutos. Dis powerful amulet you will carry with you always fe stave off de evil dat caused your cravings, and den, you will be free. If you do not follow de directions exactly as I convey you, deh will be a grave consequence. I kyan tell when I look on your eyes dat you believe, and eyes dat believe are essential for de magic work. I kyan offer you crucial price.

Moses had been keeping an eye out for his “Shortie.” For the past two years, and every subsequent morning for the unforeseeable future, his deep brown eyes reflected the many uniform lines associated with the SEPTA Regional Railroad: rusted rail tracks, beige pleather aisles, bold parallel directional arrows, consecutive foggy oval windows and thick rubberized overhead cables. The lines, often overwhelming to him, burned like a screen saver into his retina, forcing his brain to reconfigure from multi-channeled into a singular neural pathway: Point A to Point B to infinity, day in and day out.

The West Trenton Local begins its daily sprint in New Jersey, at a station originally established by the Reading Railroad in 1929, situated in Ewing, or the armpit of the “Armpit state.” The line extends out from the pit and through the rural suburbs of Pennsylvania, then barrels through the many layers of Philadelphia until it arrives in University City. The passengers of the WTL span a vast socio-economic cross-section from the pastoral Amish teenagers to the teardrop-tattooed-recently-incarcerated aging hoodrats. Their vast collective physicality, figures and colors juxtaposed together, burst through Moses’ linear haze.

His favorite example of this “bursting effect” took place exactly one year into his employment with SEPTA. It was the day a small dirty-blond haired boy with a *Muppets Take Manhattan* lunch box boarded in Woodbourne (Stop #3) with his young mother. They took a seat across from a wrinkled, shrunken older man in a green-striped suit wearing thick spectacles. While his mother, adorned in Rockabilly garb with jet-black hair coiffed into an oversized pompadour, chatted away on her cell phone and stared out the window, the boy and the old man became aware of one another. The deeply pleated hands of the hearing-impaired man began signing to the little boy.

The little boy smiled and returned the signals with a made-up version of his own sign language, as if he encountered old deaf men everyday. The two strangers played this way, communicating only with gestures, until the boy was rushed off at a later stop. Moses had witnessed the spontaneous exchange between the two when he punched their senior and child-designated holes and eyed the oblivious mother's TransPass that day. The moment touched him, provoking nostalgia in him that he couldn't exactly place. By the time the clipped white circles of paper had touched the ground, he realized it was only another bought of nostalgia for a time that never existed. These waves of false déjà vus had become more frequent over the last year, but overwhelmed him nevertheless. Emotions were still new to him, as was the profound change that had rapidly manifested both externally and in the deep subconscious levels of his psyche. Since he had gotten clean and sober, Moses was a living entity for the first time in many years.

He now fully embodied the persona of the old-school classic man-of-the-rails. He once envisioned this idyllic black man as a child while scribbling in a steam engine-themed coloring book. He would select a crayon called Sterling, and then imagine a rounded train conductor winking at him, calling him by his name, and sharing brief legends while taking his ticket. Moses once heard that when you get clean, you return to the age and mentality that you were when you first began using and drinking. This was more than a stunted maturity. Moses indeed returned to that time, but upon his awakening, he had also recovered every known identity and ambition that went with it. Suddenly he was catapulted into a future that didn't match the imagined one of his youth. Fossilized as child in the mid-50s, he slumbered through the Civil Rights movement and the Sixties subculture. Apparently, his deepest self-induced coma was during years that

were better to sleep through anyway. Moses noticed that many people held misperceptions about the addict, or at least about him. He saw this romanticism in his sponsor, who perhaps should have known better, and other outsiders when he was first getting sober. They would ask him unanswerable questions like, “what prompted you to start using in the first place, what are your deeper issues?” They asked him to get honest about what he had lost by choosing the junk over everything else. “What are your ‘isms’?” They assumed that the years he had spent homeless in abandominiums were the result of a long, slow progression. Counselors prodded him about his relationships with others. Surely, his life had spiraled out of control resulting in loss after loss—there must have been a cause, a reason, for the fall. But that wasn’t how it went.

Simply, once he had found the unmatched pleasure provided by dope and booze, he spent the following years as a full-time consumer, fumbling around between the highs. He never had a marriage or kids to lose; there had never been a high-roller job to blow off. He had made a commitment to that lifestyle so early on that he missed his coming of age. And then one day, thirty-five years later, Moses walked out of the brown stone half-way house at the corner of Frankford and Somerset and filled out an application for SEPTA at Suburban Station (Stop #21) in Center City. He wasn’t “Mo” anymore. Now plump and greying, Moses was the Conductor: a shepherd of commuters, a transportation facilitator, and an exceptionally humble hard worker—an archaic thing, trying to grasp, or connect, with the contemporary.

He hadn’t seen her at any of the meetings recently, his Shortie. He also hadn’t seen her during his a.m. shift in many weeks. Today, like every other day, his run had begun as a haze of machinery and chilly wet air. He was pushing buttons, manipulating

brakes and watching the reflection of his thick mud-colored neck and chin bend in the foggy aluminum gadgetry of the 7:03 a.m. local. This first shift was his particular favorite, the one Shortie frequented. For Moses, even in their stupors, the morning rush of commuters was always a vibrant and eclectic group. From 7:03 a.m. to 8:22 a.m., the daily melting pot was a silent symphony of inner thoughts, regrets, secrets, daydreams, and unforgettably expressive faces on people who likely believed themselves to be expressionless.

He had developed a sort of mental filing cabinet of regular passengers, like his Shortie. He would manage this index system in between his ticket clicks; doling out transfers, opening and closing the train doors, checking his watch and the sound of his own muffled loudspeaker announcements. The passengers provided something less monotonous to think about, something to prevent him from thinking about the past. If he sat still with himself long enough, the regret trickled in. Much like with the nostalgia, he would remember the potential for things that never happened, like the emerald-eyed, skinny ashen-faced girl that asked him so sweetly,

“Well, dontcha wanna go wit me to the sock hop?”

She had been too simple, still a baby girl. Taking turns sipping from a stolen bottle of stale cognac with the boys was instead his date that evening. Moses shared the innocence of the girl despite his resistance to it. One’s coming of age cannot be cheated or skipped over, and now in the post-millennium, Moses returned to it. His whole identity had diminished to a crying out for the world to take him to the sock hop.

When he was on this first run of the day, he had grown to anticipate certain morning regulars; instead of being simply passengers, they were more like characters in a

play for which he had been given front row seats. Before he knew it, he was pushing his red speaker button and announcing:

“WEST TRENTON LOCAL TO 69th STREET TERMINAL, have your tickets and passes ready pl—“ He clipped off early and was the only one hearing the *ease* part.

As he had anticipated, his most reliable commuter had just barely made the route. Often dressed in signature purple prints, a feisty woman in her later years who always referred to him as “Reds,” pounded on the nearly shut exterior of the door.

“Hey! Hey! Help me up here Reds—hop to it, hop to it!”

It was the two frail arms reaching up to him from under one of her many wide-brimmed hats that appeared to speak to him. He did not remember this particular hat and made note of this on the mental card he had been developing for her. He reached out to help her, and even though she asked for his help she would inevitably refuse it. She straightened up in the hydraulic elevator-like entrance of the cabin before making her way through the second auto-shut door to her favorite window seat. The double door system, and the claustrophobic passageway to the train always reminded him of oppressive institutional entrances.

“You look lovely today, new hat?”

She either did not hear him, or ignored his question as he held the door after her. While the hat lady held the first position in his interior catalogue, she was far from the most intriguing. There was the (once skinny) pasty thirty-something woman whom he had never considered attractive until she gradually began growing outwards. She was a sporadic passenger, but he guessed by the severity of her facial expression that whenever she was on this line she was on her way to a place of incredible significance. There were

others like her too, although most passengers carried gazes of the apathetic variety. *Were they headed to jobs they hated?* Besides the dominant body of going-to-work stares, there were unlimited styles of scrutinizers, daydreamers, and squinted eyes of confusion. There were the drained caretakers talking loudly to their parents with resentful glares. Hundreds of teenagers who all looked alike and often shared the same catalogue space in his mind; their eyes were always turned inward: fixed on the self. White men in white shirts with gleaming white teeth who peered into their magic glass screens while eating Power Bars. College students with gaping mouths and highlighters and heavy overflowing messenger bags with deep, hopeful, wondering eyes. Overweight perverted ogles who stared provocatively and sweated profusely while acting out a variety of inappropriate self-stimulation rituals.

Sometimes Moses was so convinced of the ogler's inherent creepiness that he would spend his evening clicking through thousands of images on the Megan's Law search engine looking for a match—his attempt at modern heroics. The most haunting gazes radiated from the empty, ambiguous and grey eyes that bulged from empty hollowed-out faces. Often those expressions came from those without tickets at all, or tickets they had found on the ground. The desperate ones would try to pass off trampled dirty receipts that resembled tickets, or they would attempt to reuse “transfers” that were intended for a different line. It was these soulless eyes he understood the most. He'd had them himself once; he was sure of that. Shortie had them too.

Shortie stood out to him not only because of her dead stare, but because she was the only patron who had ever crossed the threshold of regular passenger to real life acquaintance. Shortie became special when he started seeing her at meetings; if he had

never seen her at meetings, he could never have been sure any of his passengers even existed. Their five to ten seconds of interaction when he glanced at her monthly TransPass at 8:06 a.m. graduated quickly from mental Rolodex of habitual behaviors to spiritually significant.

He remembered first seeing her board at Jenkintown (stop #14); a raw smell radiated from her oily white-girl dreadlocks; her sunken skin was melting away; her cat-eye eyeliner smudged as she jittered—he identified with her down to his marrow. As different as their skin and forms appeared around their bones, they were both former junkies, or at least he was a former junkie. She was still using when Moses first saw her: scamming and scavenging. Even though she was dope sick and sweating, she would attempt to flash her “bedroom eyes,” hoping for a break on the fee. He gave her more freebies than any of the others, even before he came to know her outside of his sphere; he had an unexplainable fondness for her. But on the days when she was really high, he resented her and would kick her off early. On those days Moses almost—*almost*—envied her, as she would nod into oblivion. Her whole body would sometimes hit the seatback in front of her, the sound of her forehead clapping at every stop, even if the train had coasted with deliberate and slow precision. She hit it in her ankles and neck too, places he’d never even shoot up.

“Look little Shortie, you look pretty bad today and again no ticket? I’m kick’in you off at Wayne Junction (stop # 17).”

He’d leaned down so she understood him, and he could almost smell the remnants of the dope that had entered the ant trail of dots dangerously patterned around her main artery, above the collarbone.

“Come on, come on, just one more stop. You don’t understand—.”

You don’t understand. He would grin at this. He couldn’t tell her, and he didn’t want to. Besides, her gray eyes would haze over like a blind dog, and she would fall back into the haze of junkie purgatory before he could respond to her anyway. The conundrum for Moses was the awareness that he was free from the horrible life of the withdrawing apparition, yet was equally jealous that she still got to feel that first wave of warmth. Regardless, he knew in his gut that his former life, one that was buried underneath the commuter files in his mind, was never worth returning to. He embraced the structure of his job, its lack of drama, and its simplicity. Simultaneously, it provided him with a space to slowly learn how to re-integrate into the flow of the universe.

“Langhorne Next, Langhorne Next.”

He had time between stops to be alone in the only semi-private space on the train and do his own gazing. In this space, separating the entrance from the platform to the train, and then the train to the cabin, he would give himself permission to daydream before the train became impacted and bustling. These moments of solitude were priceless, and today his mind was just on her.

The day he saw her at the 4021 Club Easy Does Group, he recognized her as familiar but chose to react to her as a complete stranger. Breaching the boundary of passenger/conductor and her change in physicality from panhandler to sober-person was jarring for him. A hat covered her dreadlocks, her makeup was appropriately subtle, and her grey eyes had been replaced with sparkling blue sapphires. She appeared years younger than he assumed she was, and this made him feel a little uneasy and guilty. *Was this really her?*

“Hi, I’m Moses, I’m an addict.”

“Hi Moses.”

When it was his turn to introduce himself, the collective “Hi Moses” echoed in choral unison off the wood-paneled converted West Philadelphia home. He looked to her in this elongated moment for signs of recognition but there were none. For the entirety of the meeting, he caught only fragments of other peoples’ shares:

“I’m gonna get my son back, one day at a time, I put one foot in front of the other, they say sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly”

“God is good.”

“All the time.” (*In unison*)

“I’ve been feeling some type a way about somin...”

“I am on fucking Step Four and...”

“My cravings are not getting better, I guess I am not in the middle as they say...”

“Next stop Somerton, next stop folks.”

Moses recalled the embarrassing disappointment that had weighed on him during that meeting with an intensity and accuracy that was typically reserved for larger life moments, such as missing a pass at the most important football game of the season when you’re fifteen, or after he decided to shoot up the first time when he had promised himself he would only ever snort. On the black and white checkered tiled floor his buddy Randy, a starkly pale, white boy with a crooked spine, had whispered to him remorsefully,

“You know bro, it will never be the same again—your life I mean.”

Moses hadn’t digested the weight of that comment at the time. He was instead

struck by the irony of his unlikely partner in crime, and the checkeredness of their skins paralleling the tiles of the tiny bathroom. The simple inevitability, of the relationship of lightness to darkness, the polarity, represented his addiction perfectly; he either went all the way or he didn't, there were no grey-scaled in-betweens. He had made the decision and had felt the reddening heat come into his cheeks: a combination of ecstasy and humiliation.

The similar tugging in his gut now, over Shortie, couldn't represent the same thing. But it was likely some brand of resentment toward her. This feeling he couldn't place was aggravated throughout the meeting, as she continually didn't acknowledge him with her new crystal eyes.

The meeting space was a stuffy one. A mist hung in the air like cigarette smoke in a room full of smoldering half-extinguished butts. The dust cloud in middle space haloed the heads of the circle of drug addicts. There was something dingy and oppressive about the room, the stained folding chairs and the loud maple floor. In all the meetings prior to this one, he had marveled at the life and hope contained within the space. The stories inspired him, as did the sheer survival, the honesty and authenticity of people who had once been liars, con artists and sometimes murderers. Shortie looked so clean, white and naïve. She had belonged so well on the train; he had understood her pain then, but in the sacred space of recovery where people really had it bad, he felt she was a tourist. This distracted him, and a bitter taste began to creep from his throat into his mouth. It tasted just like dope.

Pacing the aisle between Jenkintown (stop # 14) and the Elkins Park (stop #15), he spotted a sprout of blond dreadlocks peeking over a seat facing the back of the train.

This is the stop where she often boarded. *Had he been so lost in thought that he didn't even watch her board?* The train was filling in now, and he didn't make it all the way to the reversed seats before he had to return to the door and prepare the train for the next stop.

“Elkins Park, Elkins Park next.”

Moses thought back to that meeting as his pulse elevated. She had spoken that day. In the pause, between shares, right before she raised her hand and introduced herself, his stomach had rumbled loudly. The groan was significant enough for his friend Joe C seated next to him to smirk. The sound of her voice was that of a siren in the gruff of the wild; the soothing and rhythmic sounds had enchanted the group, or had enchanted him. He hadn't made out a word she said that day. There were lots of “Uh huh girls” and “Share thats” but he never really listened to the content of what she was saying. He was struggling to keep her in the catalogue and, therefore, not really know her. Moses had even thrown out a “Say it, Shortie,” feigning his appreciation of her private thoughts and struggles. His pre-pubescent reaction to her was confusing yet felt inevitable; Moses had no idea what it meant or what he was longing for, but her simple acknowledgement of him might have resolved it all.

“Fern Rock Transportation Center, Fern Rock.”

His walk down the aisle was hurried and almost panicked. The guilt of what he had done after that meeting, and the weeks following, when she had appeared at almost every meeting he attended, threatened to compromise his crafted, conductorly disposition. He had abused the time between stops with his daydreaming and was falling behind schedule. However, he had to say hello to her; he was convinced that confirming

her eyes were still crystal blue and clear would resolve all of his building anxiety.

“Hey there Shortie, long time no see—”

“Sir, excuse me, *Sir!*” A hand tugged at the back of his blue piped uniformed leg before he could finish greeting her. She might not even have heard him. He hadn’t seen the hand coming because he was in the reverse seating section. A slight vertigo overcame him as he turned back around to respond to the commuter. Riding backward is always unnatural. They were approaching the city now. The buildings were funneling closer on either side through the windows, creating the illusion of twilight approaching, even though it was actually morning—as if someone had hit the rewind button. In the time he could have been saying hello to Shortie, Moses had instead had to explain to a confused commuter that he would have to pay for a transfer in order to take the subway at the next stop. Moses had lost his rhythm. For a conductor, the pace and accuracy of a run functions much like the repetitive base riff of a classic jazz song. Although it is chugging along in the background of the song, subtly and almost undetectable, the riff is an essential component of the song. Without this backbone, the rest of the melody sounds empty. Dominated by treble. Distorted—off tune.

On the days he missed the very precise timing of his announcements or when he didn’t have enough time to collect all the tickets, Moses felt like an incomplete song. Heading back to the door to prepare for the coast into the next station’s platform, he was obsessing about getting himself back on track. Then he did something he had never done before on the train, he tripped. The moment was preceded by a loud crunch and pop (the startling pop of a car tire running over a milk carton) and then down he went, his right foot slipping first toward the door, then his left. It was a graceful skid, one that allowed

enough time to hear a collective gasp from the more alert passengers. When he finally stopped sliding he found himself with his heels against the door and the culprit, an empty Aquafina bottle, neatly attached to the arch of his booted right foot. Moses cursed under his breath. That bottle had been floating around the cabin for weeks, haunting him. His failure to take the time to clean it up had resulted in the uncomfortable embarrassment he had just suffered, and now he heard the passengers one by one chime in:

“You okay sir?”

“Damn! Ole’ head busted his ass!”

“Take it easy man.”

“Do you need help? —Someone help him for God’s sake!”

He brushed himself off, waving away the multiple hands extended to him, and in an act reminiscent of his former aggressive, less-composed self, he kicked the squashed bottle. When he did so, he forgot that the bottle would now remain a floating hazard.

The episode had cost him; he had run out of time to check on Shortie and had to manage the large influx at Fern Rock (stop #17). Fern Rock, although it has no ticket office, acts as an interchange of six different transportation lines from which one can reach virtually any place in Philadelphia. The earth’s magnetic field can be charted in what some mystics refer to as ley lines or power points. These points can be mapped on the earth’s surface and are thought to cluster in places of spiritual significance. Moses had overheard a discussion about the ley lines in Harry’s Occult Shop, a store he had visited that very day after he had first seen Shortie at 4021. Although it hadn’t occurred to him today, often he had thought that if train stations charted their own version of a cosmic map, Fern Rock would have the most concentrated intersection of ley lines.

Fern Rock marks the official transition of suburbia to megalopolis. The perpetually dimly lit station is by no means ornate. Overhead catenary lines dominate the sky scape and there are three platforms, two islands and one side platform that welcome several regional rail lines and the subway. Each of these structured tiers cast angular shadows on the others, so that when the passengers wait for the train, it always appears to be twilight. There is a bus stop, and a large, always-full parking lot. The surrounding area is a poor, albeit stable, community. 1920's-style row homes in poor condition line the streets surrounding the station. The incoming foot traffic is always hurried and aggressive, and the passengers are always at odds. Just as Moses climbed behind the last passenger, he suddenly found himself held up.

“What’s the hold up Bud?”

“Some kid spilled his coffee everywhere,” a large square shouldered and tailored back responded to him, without even turning around. The timing would be off by a few minutes now, and Moses would have even less time to make it to the back of the car to visit with Shortie.

While kicking the empty coffee cup and other abandoned objects under the seat to clear the aisle (not including the bottle from earlier), he caught just a glimpse of his usual round face and five-o-clock shadow. Now it was framed by abandoned broken warehouse floating by in the background. But then he honed in on something. He had to squint across a row of bobbing millennial teenage boys to see it, but etched into the dirty glaze of the window across his reflection was the word *cursed*.

There was nothing really strange about etched graffiti in train windows—Moses had memorized most of the etch art on several of his runs, but now he had his last visit to the witchcraft apothecary, Harry’s Occult Shop, on his mind.

After his regular Monday and Wednesday meetings, Moses would head over to the Market Street Subway line then transfer to the Broad Street Subway, get off at Broad and South, and navigate by foot the cracked cement of the run down sidewalk. As he would every week, on his way to Caribbean Delight (a food hut he frequented), he would pass the gigantic familiar mural plastered on the sidewall of Harry’s Occult Shop.

The mural’s focal point is a twelve-foot tall masculine angel, with a blurred out face and wings that span the entire length of the row-home style building. The faceless alabaster angel has a fist raised into a pump, while his other hand holds a long staff topped with a cross. Covering the bottom half of the angel, so that it looks as if he is rising out of it, is a gothic stained-glass window. The window is impressively saturated in color and is an extremely believable depiction for spray paint, on which is painted a pictorial of a black Jesus. Jesus is holding the same staff as the angel above him, but also cradles a small white lamb—a lamb that Moses had caught himself associating with Shortie. Below this icon-esque window, where South would be located on a compass, is a large slithery and intricate graphitized word. A word Moses has never been able to decode. In each quadrant where N, E & W directionals might be, there are also three other words similar in style, but these are also still illegible to him. In the top right corner, faded, and obviously existing years prior to the contemporary religious tribute, is the sign for Harry’s. In vintage typography and white lettering the words “Since 1917, Harry’s Occult Shop, We Aim To Help” are easy to overlook.

Typically the scent, traveling several blocks from the Caribbean joint, would make Moses start to think about what he would order when he arrived there. But the hours following his sighting of Shortie at the meeting, triggered at the first sight of the mural, instead gave him a distinct and disturbing full body hunger. After several years sober, he had been fairly confident that he would never return to the temptress sauce that enslaved him for so long. But for some reason now, an urgency, much like that he battled in detox and isolation, overtook him. The craving wasn't like a typical dope craving though. He had been meeting with his sponsor, going to meetings, following the book—all of his actions, from a psychological perspective, indicated he would never return to his habit. He was taught that most relapses start long before the user succumbs to his or her addiction (they are planned, anticipated, or are part of a gradual decline in behavior), but this compulsion was sudden: an undeserved attack: an assault on his psyche. Shortie's failure to recognize him at their first encounter outside of the train had unsettled and flustered him. Somewhere inside himself Moses was becoming convinced that their encounters were significant, a sign of something larger than the train, or his sobriety, or their contrasting colors. Stunned by his own vulnerability and sudden loss of appetite, he sought comfort in the shop. He walked into the unassuming chime-adorned door as if he had always intended to go in.

On that first visit to the store, his eyes had adjusted slowly, just as they do when walking out of the brightly lit outdoors into a dark and cluttered space. The store was larger than he had imagined, three or four rows of stack style bookshelves occupied the center of the cement-walled interior. The walls on either side were lined with occult shop staples: powders, candles shaped like clawed hands or women's bodies, cone-incense,

hollowed out skulls, tarot cards, pentagram jewelry and lizard-skinned pipes. There was no counter or salesperson in sight. As he stepped further into the shop to inspect the inventory of Santeria paraphernalia, Moses felt both ridiculous and intrigued; Ridiculous, because he could still imagine himself talking smack and loitering with his old boys on the corner where he used to hustle. Before his habit had humbled him, he would have openly balked at such a store, perhaps even stopped in to heckle the owner, for no other reason than to show off to his friends and to be a smart ass. However, the part of him that was intrigued he attributed to “softening” as he dried out over time, but also to his earliest recollections of his mother.

Although she died before he was even an adolescent, his most vivid and recurrent memories of her were her rituals, wherein she would light candles and hum hymns in a corner of the house that resembled an altar. Although his childhood was hazy, the iconographic photos of Saint Mary that his plump and devote mother would pray to were still graphic imprints in his mind.

“God is good,” she would say. Her dark eyes and skin would glow from the match she would be lighting, and she would turn to him for the correct response.

“All the time, Momma, all the time.”

Moses never inherited his mother’s faith, even though he recognized his survival was a miracle. He believed in the tangible, Good Orderly Direction, his work, the massive power of the earth, blackness, and steel machinery—like the train. Although he believed himself to have no faith at all, especially not his mother’s deity, he had been brainwashed by his attendance at countless meetings that he must believe and depend on *something* in order to stay sober. So he supplemented his perceived faithlessness with something he

thought to be distinct from it, and that was superstition. Much of his superstition was subtle. His mental catalogue of passengers, for example, seemed much more compulsive and methodic than superstitious. However, there was an underlying causality. Although it was not always obvious even to Moses, it was intrinsic to his need to continue keeping tabs on everyone. Simply, if he did not keep them ingrained in his brain they might not go on, or he might not—either or. On some deep level, he believed that his commitment to memorizing them somehow affected their existence. It would never occur to him consciously that it was possible that the collapse of this system, enacted by Shortie’s agency outside of it, was what was tearing him apart and provoking his cravings.

“Wayne Junction next folks, Waaaaayyyne Junction.”

Moses had barely recovered from his fall and the spilled coffee setback as he opened the door at Wayne Junction (stop#18) for the boarding passengers. He squinted and stood on the tips of his toes to make sure he could still identify the dreadlocks peeking out of the seatback at the other end of the car. They were still there, and he felt reassured that he had time to get back on track *and* get to check on her before she would get off. This suspended animation of the outline of her body at the back of the train convinced him that she wasn’t sober anymore. Her stilled posture must equate to her nodding out.

“Brother, kyan I help? I am yahso in de back.”

The counter of the shop was oddly positioned in the rear of the store, and Moses hadn’t even noticed it. He had been entranced by an array of bath salts in glass test tubes on a rack on the wall; one tube was a cleanse for wealth, another for passion, and most were for vague notions or trivial states of being, like “weightlessness.” Moses followed

the accented voice to the back of the store. Moses wasn't surprised to find a bald, deeply wrinkled man whose posture was bad and whose ethnicity was hard to determine. He had an islander-esque accent, but Moses could not determine where he was from. Something about the man was authentically peculiar and enchanting, just like the shop itself.

“Brother, why is dat you are yahso? If you is lookin' for Janis she isn' doin' readings today—she has de gout. Besides her clients, I know every face dat come in here, puttin' away for di tourists, but I know dem faces too. You be looking for a specific spell?”

Moses acted as if it was completely natural to request a spell from a stranger in order to cast out the unbearable craving that had been provoked a few hours earlier. What felt like moments later, Moses had found himself eating his favorite beef pie at Caribbean Delight while staring at the black bag of powders and candles across the table from him as if it were a long lost brother. *Why not?* There was no reason not to follow through on the old man's incantation and subsequent instructions. Superstition compelled Moses, but the augur's warning of dire consequences should he not follow the directions precisely disturbed him. Intellectually, he understood the ridiculousness of the spell, the money sought by the man at the counter, and mostly his own pathetic desperation. Emotionally, he was unspun—as he had during most of his active addiction—he acted out of panic.

“Temple University Next, Temple”

The college students always line up at the front of the train car preemptively as it is still moving. Moses typically prepares by limiting ticket collection to the front car after Wayne Junction (stop #18) and waiting in-between the doors so as not to get stuck behind the rush once the twenty-somethings begin getting up to de-board. For this reason, he

again could not reach the back car in time to see her. While standing on the platform ushering out the anxious students and chanting “West Trenton Local to University City,” he again returned to thoughts of the previous months. After first seeing Shortie, and having the spell cast that evening, he had continued to see her at what felt like every meeting he attended, and she continued to not recognize him. Once she was clear and sober and someone that Moses resented, he failed to see her on the train at all. However, as time passed it was as if Moses had not wanted really to be recognized at all. When he spotted her in fresh clothes and new outfits he would seat himself in the rear of the meeting or what his sponsor would refer to as “the aisle of denial” or “inventory row.” He would keep his fellowshiping after the meetings brief and skirt out quickly under the guise of resting up for his early morning shifts. He would rather reject her than be rejected. In the meantime, he diligently followed the spell, yet his cravings for drugs only worsened.

He had waited patiently for the waning moon, and when it arrived, he loyally returned to Harry’s Occult Shop for the second stage of the “incantation.” The old man was out on the day he promised to say the incantation, and Janis hurried through the customized blessing that had been promised. Before she allowed him to leave the store, she pitched him on the power her personal readings could have in his life. Despite the declining reputation of the shop and the spell, Moses was determined to follow it through to the end. On the day of his regular 4021 Club Easy Does It meeting, which was the same day he needed to return to the shop to purchase the Macutos, or the amulet that he was to carry with him always, Shortie was not at the meeting. This did not particularly disturb him, but as he made his commute toward South Street, he was overcome with an

intense relief. The peace that overcame him as he rode as a passenger himself on the subway to Broad and South was intoxicating, and the awareness came that he no longer had the urge to get high. The underground safe lights of the subway tunnel flashed in his peripheral, and it occurred to him that perhaps the spell was truly working.

“Market East Station, The Gallery at Market East.”

The time between Temple University (stop #19) and Market East Station (stop #20) was approximately six minutes, one of the more lengthy distances between stops. Before stepping into the car to begin his descent into his rapid ticket collection routine, and with the intention of finally putting to rest his curiosity and facing Shortie, he instinctively reached into his left pocket to fondle the amulet. Rolling the blue and white beaded Macutos shell between his first and second fingers had become second nature almost instantly. He had continued to reach for it even on days after having thrown the amulet away into the tracks between the narrow dark crevice that separates the train and the platform at University City (stop # 23—the final stop). He had felt particularly guilty that day about the absence of Shortie. His compulsion to throw it away had come on suddenly between shifts, and he had acted rashly. He began to suspect he was somehow responsible for her disappearance. Maybe the spell was casting *her* out.

Returning to his duties with an uncomfortable shudder and with increasing fear of the potential consequences of the broken spell, he made his way down the aisle. Moses even had enough time to check in with his regulars, make mental notes about their changes, comment to them, and nod and smile. His timing was impeccable and with just a few minutes to spare he had reached the reverse cabin and the head that he assumed belonged to Shortie. Tapping each aisle end with his palms lightly and alternating his

right and left hand, he slowed to a stop when arriving at her back. Just as he was about to round her left shoulder and look down to see her eyes, he stopped himself. The head did not seem to sense his presence, it did not turn and was motionless, stuck in the very same position it had been when he first became aware of it.

“30th Street Station Next, 30th Street.”

Believability or The Mother

She actually shook her head back and forth in *real* life, just as she had during the imagined dialogue she was having with her OB-GYN.

“Mara, we’re going to have to ask you to head over to the Emergency Room.” Dr. Anderson, a tall, oval-faced woman with a silky jet-black hijab, squinted while studying the ultrasound monitor. The beige machine purred eerily, acting as a soundtrack for the pause in which Mara should have been digesting the sickening feeling that something was very wrong. Instead she returned to the interior of the train and out of her thoughts long enough to note that the purring was a sound similar to the WTL cruising the rails, and that the ultrasound machine was the same color as the seat back in front of her. *Funny how the mind always strays during the commute—off track.*

At first glance, Mara was a rather generic curvy redhead. However, she had a Play-Doh-ish face that was in its boring mode on this particular day. A few pounds gained or lost, a bit of color shimmering or drained from the face, a clean eyebrow wax or flyaway eyelash could change her appearance entirely. Almost daily it varied from either extremely good-looking to plain, or nondescript and various in-betweens. Regardless of

her unreliable appearance, her body was typically in a perfect BMI range for her height—she was an exquisite example of athletic form. However, due to her pregnancy, she was sixty pounds heavier than usual. Also, she didn't "show" classically; her bump had developed into an elongated horizontal lump instead of the ideal soccer ball shape, so her pre-pregnant perfected physique was now, in her opinion, just frumpy.

Shutting her eyes again, she found herself back in Dr. Anderson's office. This time she would immerse herself in the fear of the moment.

"Mara, we really have to get you over to the ER," Dr. Anderson repeated.

"Um, Okay, this doesn't sound so good."

Mara mouthed the words, and from the perspective of her fellow commuters, she appeared to be talking to herself. She caught it happening and felt awkward. Overly frustrated with herself every time she realized she was playing out these scenes in public, she self-scolded. *Why can't she keep it internal, behind the lips, like everyone else?*

Dr. Anderson pulled the silk head covering back behind her ear, turning away from the screen; she carefully wiped the gel from Mara's unimpressive bump. The Dr.'s eyes stayed focused on the routine, but Mara could see the subtle strain in the eye sockets. There was a pitiful awareness behind them; this baby will never come out alive. Oddly, even knowing this, there was a soothing quality in the reflective sheen of the head covering. It would be ideal to snuggle it close to Mara's cheek, or use it to wipe away the tears she was fighting back, or to neatly soak up blood stains. *But that's the point of playing this awful scenario out.*

Mara acknowledged to herself that she was just imagining this again. The purring sound was continuing, even though Dr. Anderson had shut off the sonograph machine, a

reminder to return to the *real*. The pleathery train car seat felt like butter under her palms, like the kind of seat that lined the community room in a low-income retirement home. She was happy to not be sharing it with any other passengers today. The luxury of being seated alone allowed the pain and fear to subside momentarily, and then, Dr. Anderson gently nudged her to come to a fully seated position. *If she reenacts in her mind the worst possible outcome, she'll be prepared for it.*

“You can get dressed now; I’ll meet you at the front desk.”

Dr. Anderson turned her head completely now, probably afraid her eyes would finally give it all away. The gut-wrenching emotion of this kind of loss, of potentially losing an almost full-term pregnancy, was now more familiar. Mara reasoned to herself that gaining some understanding of what it might be like, even if only in imaginary fragments, that handling a *real* loss won’t be as debilitating; it had been rehearsed. Now a nervous breakdown would not have to be the end result, if she did in fact lose this pregnancy. Sniffing a loud, self-deprecating, ironic snort, she was amused with the ridiculousness of this mental game, as well as her inability to control it.

As a teenager, when her Play-Doh appearance was always sculpted to bright, fair and lovely, Mara attended a summer acting program in the city. The gritty brownstone housing for The Actor’s Pod was just a few blocks from her destination today. Opening her eyes, focused again on the seat back in front of her, she recalled that the only person she ever considered a mentor was her stage and acting teacher, Anthony Palaro, the co-owner of the ‘Pod.’ Tony was the old school, long pausing, serious-about-his-craft ‘father’ of the place. Tony’s counterpart, Rod, was the ‘money’ and a successful talent agent. Rod once told Mara while smoothing his combover, “Either gain ten or lose ten

pounds, if you want to make in the biz, kiddo.” This was followed by, “Don’t worry about it, you lucked out with a good non-Jewy nose.”

Tony was different; the money didn’t matter to him. He had the air of someone who had once longed, deeply and painfully, to make it on Broadway, or in film, or maybe he just always longed for something unachievable. A long cavernous scar stretched the length of his left ear to his Adam’s apple, just grazing his chin. Once during a class, he blamed his lack of a career on the injury, but did not explain its origin—a mystery Mara had wondered about over the last 15 years. Tony was a firm believer and practitioner of *Method* acting, and taught his Film & Character Study class with the core philosophy that believability in acting comes from actually feeling something, rather than pretending, or modeling a feeling. His class included incredibly awkward and uncomfortable exercises. One of Mara’s favorites was called the standing line exercise. *Not her favorite at the time, but now, now it makes more sense.*

Basically, one of the students would have to stand on a makeshift stage in the corner of one of the windowless, claustrophobic “performance” rooms on the third floor of the Pod, and deliver one line, just one, commercial or otherwise. Something like, “I don’t need you anymore.” or “That dress isn’t very flattering.” or “Why did you do it?” But just saying the phrase wasn’t the kicker. The art of this practice, the Method part of the exercise, was in delivering the line as *yourself*. There could be no inauthentic affect, ticking or finessing of any kind. No snorting, smirking, shrugging, blinking, looking away—anything that indicated an embellished performance, rather than the truth—how would Mara really say the line if the moment to say such words arose in her life? The task sounded seemingly simple at the time, but turned out to be near impossible for Mara

and her peers. What typically happened varied from student to student, but was always inevitable. A feeling of nakedness would overcome the student, who, stripped of all his or her coping devices and shticks—everything that a hormonal-teenage-drama addict needed both on the stage and off the stage to survive—would be lost. The body and mind would collapse and tears would erupt, or for many, laughter; Not just benign awkward chuckles, but the convulsive kind, with shivers and stomach pains. Mara’s lip quivered and turned up at one side, remembering the scenarios.

“Okay, so Mara, your line is, ‘I’ve been hiding in the dark for too long now.’ And before you begin, I see you’re already leaning to one side and your right fist is clenched.”

“I’ve been—”

“Nope, Nope—you took a big loud breath, and then you puffed up your cheeks—remember this is just *you* saying you’ve been in the dark too long. Would you normally take a deep breath and then puff your lips up like that? Or is this you just trying to p-e-r-f-o-r-m? OK. Again.” Tony’s scar was often also simultaneously coaching her, like a creepy neck puppet.

“I’ve been hiding in the dark,” She felt herself direct the line toward the puppet this time.

“No—Again. You felt it this time, didn’t you? That unnecessary oomph you put on the word ‘hiding.’”

The Asian guy, Matt, with a spiked buzz cut who went on to star in Coke commercials, her friend Stacy who chose to “gain Rod’s ten pounds,” the shaggy black-haired, pimply guy whose name she couldn’t recall, and Tony and his little neck friend all stared up at her from their crappy folding metal chairs, waiting for the line again.

“That boy got what was comin’ to him.”

Mara opened her eyes. She had heard her fellow commuter’s voice before; it was familiar, as was the peculiar comment about this boy. She wondered if it was déjà vu or if this voice, which had practically spat the comment on the back of her neck from across several rows behind her was the same lady she had once seen talking to either herself, or the window, or an imaginary being more than once. Mara instinctually rubbed behind her head. *How funny, that would be a perfect standing-line line. That boy got what was coming to him.* Even now, even in her head, she couldn’t deliver it without an affect. Besides, she wondered almost accidentally and almost out loud—what did the boy do? Mara wanted to turn around to see who exactly the source of the comment was, but she didn’t want to be obvious. That kind of eye darting toward someone else’s business was dangerous on the WTL. Mara knew better, and momentarily lost herself in the *real* again. A gush of cold air grazed her second chin. The conductor slammed open the door for the passengers waiting to de-board at the next stop.

“That boy got what was coming to him.” She repeated the line again for Tony, and for the exercise.

“Better Mara, better. I am starting to believe you this time. Your cheek is quivering, but I can tell it’s natural, real.”

Mara’s instinct told her that at her age she was perhaps too young to obtain the type of insight that came from those exercises or maybe it was just that she thought about the meaning of them too deeply. Regardless, it was Tony who taught her that everyone is always performing. *That’s why those raw moments, those rare segments of authenticity*

when someone speaks and responds exactly as him or herself are so important. Just as the woman did a few rows back. That boy got what was com'in to him.

The other Method exercise in Tony's toolbox had no name that Mara could remember, but was the exercise that truly elevated her neurosis to the next level. Matt, Stacy, shaggy-haired 90's kid and a few others, including herself, would awkwardly carry their folding chairs to the stage and line them neatly in a row, facing Tony. The seating arrangement was similar to patients in wheelchairs placed in a med-line at a hospital. The exercise began with Styrofoam cups, then "meaningful personal objects," then to the larger things, like emotional incidents. The tedious focus, almost meditative, took years of "dedicated practice," as Tony would say in a cocky tone. Mara would picture Al Pacino and Robert De Niro sitting in folding chairs next to one another as Tony continued to give directions.

First a classic relaxation exercise would kick off the practice, in which one had to sit in the chair with the same discipline as in the standing line exercise, without pretense and finesse—a serene state. After five minutes the "re-creation" portion began. Slowly, in silence with refined precision, the students used their fingers to feel the weight of an empty Styrofoam cup a few inches in front of them. Of course, there is no cup from an outsider's perspective, or for Tony, who intensely evaluated each movement of each finger on each student, checking for signs of inauthenticity. For Mara and the other teens, the cup was slowly manifesting, first in the sensation of matter in the hands, then in an outline, geometric lines would slowly grow and connect becoming the form. The tedious part began when, using her fingertips ever so gently, Mara would attempt to feel the lip of the cup, centimeter by centimeter, circling the rim—it had to be *real* not just believable—

the cup had to be actualized. This included even the creation of the correct shadow, which cast by the florescent overhead would form a crescent on the cup's interior. Possibly, the shadow was forming in Mara's interior as well. It crept outside from her memory and on to the metallic ceiling of the train car, morphing into different patterns due to light gradations coming from the train's rapid movement through the concrete jungle.

"I dropped mine!"

"Just drink it!"

"Mine has coffee in it!"

Mara would imagine all sorts of reactions from her peers during the grueling sessions. There was a thrill in hoping one of them would just freak out screaming and throw his or her cup at Tony's neck. However, such a scenario could never happen. Tony was clearly trying to convey to the group the falseness of that kind of juvenile overacting. In only a summer's worth of time, the philosophy was burned into Mara's psyche. *It was afterward that it really took off.* She began honing the incredible skill of turning worry into creative visualization: *in order to be free from the shock and pain of worst possible outcomes.*

The typically active baby was quiet inside her stomach—the stillness, a reaction to the train's comforting and humming vibration. For just a moment, Mara allowed herself to be enveloped with the excitement of the child's arrival. Just like those initial first five minutes of relaxation with Tony, she and her baby were there together, authentically, growing and being. She looked toward the window and realized for the first time on the ride, just how long she had been staring straight ahead. She acknowledged her luck in

owning the whole length of the seat to herself, or rather, how lucky they were as a pair; it felt safe momentarily to make this distinction.

There was a gentle tap at the back of her foot; Mara knew it was some sort of trash rolling about under her seat. She lifted her heel and could tell it was a bottle of sorts. It fit perfectly into her arch. She pressed down ever so slightly, playing with the give of the cheap plastic.

Adjusting her position, she sank back into the interior mode. She began to wonder where her husband was and what he was doing. *Was he okay?* She released the bottle, and with it, her peace went too. The conversation was already forming. A stranger in scrubs was trying to relay the awful news about him to her gently. She sank back into the blue plastic seat of the hospital ER. The stranger, a short-haired nurse, was leaning in low, close to her face, placing a hand on Mara's tense shoulder. This one was kinder than Dr. Anderson, but of course, there was something more severe about this tragedy. Mara's tears began to well and she looked away from the sweet nurse. A whispered conversation coming from her peripheral vision a few seats away caught her attention. The soothing and barely-audible words were being exchanged between a concerned mother and her flush-faced H1N1 infected toddler. Something about the pair was familiar, and an eerie sense of déjà vu again came over Mara, almost distracting her from the task at hand. *Perhaps she wasn't trying hard enough; it had to be believable to work.*

Hunger or The Film Maker

Clack Clack Clack Clack Clack Clack Clack Clack. The melody of a plastic film reel hitting a projector base had become an ongoing soundtrack in his mind. He used to have ringing, sometimes voices in his ears, but now the clacking had replaced those. However, when he was commuting to school on the West Trenton Local, the clack score was almost nonexistent, silenced by the overpowering tone of wheels on rail.

Evan was still flushed from the pure eroticism of the prior night, what he had done, what he had filmed. He didn't even care that he had dumped his coffee in the middle of the aisle, pissed off several commuters and somehow lost his *City Paper* (opened to the "I Love You, I Hate You" section) in the commotion he had created while boarding. He longed for the excitement of the previous evening so strongly that he welcomed any physical reminders of his transgressions. He had worn yesterday's clothes intentionally, left his salty sweated skin unwashed, and basked in the wrongness of his unclean body. All these dirty subtleties enhanced his already chiseled, classically handsome appearance

by creating an exquisite juxtaposition of suave and unkemptness. The green hat he had been wearing for a few years now was an adornment reflective of his provocative duality. It was stylish but also homey, as it was hand knit specifically for his head by a friend taking knitting lessons at the time. There was something exotic about the way it looked while he wore it, giving the impression that he spent time on an island somewhere surfing, smoking pot and eating oysters. His dark hair penetrated the knots of the holy yarn like tiny snakes peeking out from underneath. The hat was the kind that others felt the unexplainable urge to remove, dying to release the lush silk locks beneath.

Evan absentmindedly tugged at the dark hairs through his hat while deciding whether to lean up against the side of the train wall so he could get a peek out the window in the seat in front of him, or whether to position himself closer to the aisle. Being situated at the rear of the train car gave him a certain advantage, even though it limited his view of the outside world. He had no one behind him and could survey everyone in front of him. This sensation of having both privacy and omnipresence enabled him to feel a naughty kind of dominance. He subconsciously sought out the same seating arrangements in his classes at school.

His film school had many viewing rooms where classes convened. Some of the more desirable classrooms even had theater-style seating; so that when he sat in the back he was actually positioned above everyone in front of him rather than just behind them. The only downside to this preferred seating arrangement was that it was not conducive to making eye contact with his coeds. However, there was always his favorite classroom, the one he was headed to today. This particular room was designed in a panoptical shape much like a circular planetarium. The multi-media station was positioned at the center of

the room and projections could be made on any of the walls or cast on the ceiling. This space was appropriately located at the furthest end of the film department and in the closest proximity to the adjoining art department's studios. Both the film and art departments were tall cement-bricked ten-story buildings sharing the H block of the urban campus. He loved how both buildings penetrated and dominated the sky over campus and the city, a view he would always anticipate as the train approached the campus stop.

“Wayne Junction next folks, Waaaaayyyne Junction.”

Evan liked the sound of the conductor's voice, the way the aaaayyyne rolled off. It was a fine temporary replacement for the clack and it sounded like it had been a line delivered straight out of a Tarantino flick. He thought about how great the “PD” room was for viewing ultra-violent films like Tarantino's.

Evan had first enrolled at Temple's film school during the program's highest attendance year, and during his first semester, his department had received a rather large donation. The donation was intended to be used to build a unique space that would promote unity between film and art students, and it was Evan's favorite professor, Dr. Everett, who rallied to oversee the project. Dr. Everett proposed and ultimately designed what was now known as The Peter Delmar Viewing Room. The irony in his decision to supervise the project was that Dr. Everett was a theory guy and less production oriented. Evan knew that his professor was secretly motivated by having an exceptional place to watch movies and converse about them on campus perhaps, like Evan, the professor had also preferred to view violence properly—larger than life-sized. He had an affinity for Dr. Everett because he could see his true intent beneath the posturing he had to perform

for the faculty. Like many of Evan's observations of others, when he studied the professor he would be waiting to catch a glimpse of his fallacies and hidden agendas. Dr. Everett was the archetypal professor with brown oxfords, ill-proportioned attire and a fatherly beard. He was incredibly attractive yet unassuming, and Evan was certain there was a secret behind the doctor's neutral grey eyes. Mostly he wanted to believe that Dr. Everett was the same as Evan was on the inside: perverse and deceptive.

Evan had noticed the subtle way his professor would cock his head when he spoke to certain female students, and he felt a particularly tantalizing energy come from him when Tanaz showed up the first day of Theory and Analysis 303. Tanaz wasn't just an anthropology major acting as a tourist in the film department. Evan had noticed her since they were freshman, but his obsession with her had grown and he was precise and calculated about his pursuit of her. She wasn't just gorgeous, she didn't just have long brown hair that smelled like brown sugar and melted butter, she didn't just have perfect throwback Grace Kelly facial features—she was a great filmmaker and she had a brilliant command of the art and history. Evan had the freedom in the PD room to sit much closer to the front because he would have a 360-degree view, thanks to the individual swiveling theater seating. That first day, he had positioned himself diagonally across from Tanaz, knowing he could watch her less obviously this way, but the angle left room for her to return his stare if she chose.

“Okay kiddos, you're in Theory and Analysis 303. Also you're in the coolest classroom on campus, and I fought hard for this time slot—so we are not going to waste any of my time and your money and we are going to dive right into what we all want to talk about—*cinema* and the how and why of its effect on us.”

Evan had appreciated Dr. Everett's no bullshit shtick. He also spent two prior semesters in his theory classes and had a good sense of the man's academic likes and dislikes, and how to get by in his classes without having to work too hard. Both Evan and Dr. Everett shared a fascination with Dogma films, Auteur theory, old timey Erotic Cinema and young women. So it was easy for Evan to throw together a paper that the professor would enjoy and likely decorate with positive comments and an A grade. And so, because Evan had figured out Everett's grading style so well, when he finally shared a semester with Tanaz, he could easily indulge himself during class in thoughts that would trigger his lustful appetite, rather than worry about busy work.

Just as he was recalling that first class with Tanaz, a familiar scent crept into the cabin. The smell tickled his nostrils and he instinctively salivated. Fried sugar doughnuts, one of the sexiest smells in existence, it filtered in when the train approached the city stops and he always forgot that it would happen. Today it had come prematurely, perhaps five stops sooner than normal. Evan assumed this was because last night's exploitative activities left him particularly in tune with such subtleties, even from miles away. The aroma was practically indescribable, but the closest Evan could come was coffee cake, grease and cocoa butter—just like Hawaiian dark tanning lotion. Every time the train neared the city, Evan was given the delightful gift of this smell and it was followed by an even greater gift—images of tanning lotion being smoothed onto supple female body parts. As early as he could remember, Evan always had hypersensitive senses and each receptor always seemed to trigger another one. Every moment of his life was a heightened sensorial experience. When he was younger, typical associations, such as the scent of crayons and the ambiance of a kindergarten classroom, or hearing a sound like

wheels on concrete and imagining a tricycle, were seemingly ordinary. However as he matured, his responses to stimuli became more complex. Smelling a crayon would lead not only to the memory of a classroom, but the scent would trigger a series of highly specific details. Evan would smell, taste and feel a Cornflower colored crayon *and* the skin on the finger that he imagined once held it—what might digesting both might feel like? By the time he had reached puberty, Evan felt he could experience the combination of inanimate and animate, such as blue wax to a child's skin, very precisely. Secretly, he had believed that this was a special gift, or a marker of his special genius. In turn, he felt protective of his multilayered perceptions and never shared his heady impressions with anyone, although occasionally, he felt certain individuals, such as his professor and others he had fixated on in his past, telepathically acknowledged his special gifts.

Evan closed his eyes in order to properly savor the last bits of doughnut remaining in the train car cabin. The train was alive with other smells too—other unwashed bodies like his own. Evan inhaled deeply until the last tinge of brown sugar faded away, lingering like the note of Tibetan singing bowl. Just as the aroma floated away, a hunger awakened inside him. But with his overactive senses, the odor triggered much more than a simple hunger. It triggered something erotic—an obsession for flesh. Sweet flavors especially triggered a Pavlovian-like response for him. Over time, his hyperactive senses had begun to fuse together, making it harder to distinguish the taste of sugar on his lips from that of the feeling of flesh under his palm. Even the pleathery cheap back seat of the train beneath him propelled him into what had happened only hours ago, and for a moment he lost himself—squeezing the seat almost to the point of tearing.

This is why film was his medium, even his savior. Exceptional filmmaking required a conscious and acute awareness of the senses. The best videographers and directors always meticulously addressed the sensory needs of not only the viewer, but also the actors and components of *mise-en-scène*. Part of the art of fabricating reality meant knowing how to trick the brain into experiencing stimuli as if it were really happening. In Evan's opinion, the way to own the viewers' psyche fully was to engage their senses. He was turned on by the potential for this kind of control, and the medium of film was the ideal channel for what he perceived to be his own special powers.

Once, during a lecture on Third Reich propaganda cinema in an Intro to Film Analysis class, Evan had his first experience where he believed for a moment that the medium was speaking directly to him. The fear forced him to leave in the middle of class; it was as if on some level he was being exposed. Although he abhorred Nazi propaganda of any kind, there was a part of him that was attracted to the immensity of what it could and did accomplish. After that day, Evan often fantasized about controlling others with his own special brand of propaganda—often he took these thoughts to destructive ends. He couldn't allow himself to think about even now, as it propelled him back to thoughts of last night and he might start to get turned on again. Evan took a deep breath and chuckled to himself as he scanned the colorful occupants of the WTL. He watched as they stared through the glass segments out to the passing scenery. He knew this was just how they looked at home when transfixed by their own screens.

“So lets get started my future film theorists! You have made it all the way to 303; who can tell me who Sergei Eisenstein is?”

Dr. Everett had thrown a quick glance toward Evan when he didn't receive an immediate response. Evan knew that Everett was giving him the go-ahead to fill in everyone and just as he was about to speak *she* began.

“He was the Father of Montage.”

Tanaz cocked her head slightly and shot a glance right into Evan's eyes. Or so he had perceived. Several chairs that other students occupied swiveled toward her direction. Evan refused to move his own chair; he had to maintain his cool as he had the last few semesters. Besides, in order for his seduction of her to be fulfilling, she needed to come to him, rather than he having to make an advance on her—even if the advance is as minor as body language.

“That's right, Tanaz. That's your name, correct? So why the Father of Montage?”

She nodded at Dr. Everett's reasonable question, and the two shared an incautious glance that had made Evan both uncomfortable and excited simultaneously.

“Well, he was interested in how editing could manipulate an audience into feeling certain emotions.”

Tanaz bit her bottom lip when she said this and Dr. Everett mirrored her, also biting his lip before he responded.

“Yes, and we're going to take a look now at a classic, Eisenstein, *The Battleship Potemkin* or his finest example of both montage and also an example of his other agenda, that Tanaz failed to mention: propaganda.”

Evan's memory of that day was as precise as his ability to simultaneously know exactly how Tanaz smelled, how her thighs felt against one another in her seat, and what her neck tasted like. When he remembered those first few weeks of what he defined as

“courting,” he would remember it in real time as if he was reliving it. His life replayed in widescreen chapters as if it was actually happening all over again, and he reveled in his memories. *Clack Clack Clack Clack Clack Clack Clack*.

When the lights had gone down that day, and the projector kicked on, he had finally allowed himself to swivel his seat six more inches toward her. He had breathed deeply into his body and projected all of his sexual energy in her direction, and it had worked. The first half of the short *Potemkin* segment, he inspected her as she fashioned her fingers into a comb and stroked her chocolate locks. The flickering light cast on her profile in such a way that speckled her cheek with grey grains, and just as he had thought to himself how wicked she had appeared in that light, she turned toward him. Quizzically, and with glowing eyes, she appeared to mouth the word *what*, as in, what did he want? Evan shrugged his shoulders and methodically smiled, and then feigned an intense interest in the next scene, one he had watched in several prior classes; a crying baby in a black carriage, rolling helplessly down a set of steep cement stairs.

Evan began to perspire and absentmindedly rested his head on the back wall of the cabin car. He was seated directly beneath a PSA poster reminding commuters in both Spanish and English translation to get a free-anonymous-HIV test and ironically he contemplated the same poster at the other end of the cabin. He felt overloaded by the weight of his senses and became acutely aware of the grittiness of the train. Just as this awareness had begun to annoy and almost suffocate him, several pieces of trash, powered by the train’s inertia, rolled over his feet. There was the coffee cup, half latte-stained *City Paper* from earlier, as well as a beat-up Aquafina bottle. He thought a bit about the karmic significance of these items finding him again, and felt an obligation to perhaps

take them with him when he left. Instead he chose to move across the aisle to the other vacant back row seat, liberating himself from the responsibility.

“What are you reading?”

Tanaz asked Evan several weeks into the semester, not long after he had peeked her interest. Now they tended to sit closer during the lectures and screenings, and even Dr. Everett had noted the chemistry by directing the occasional wink at Evan when Tanaz was speaking.

“Um, it’s called *Exit to Eden*. It’s an Anne Rice book but she penned it under another name.”

Evan couldn’t have been more delighted by this question. He had intentionally dug up the steamy novel because it provoked a kind of mental foreplay for him. He was obsessed with existing in a perpetual erotic state during class and the book helped.

“Do you want to borrow it? I’ve read it many times.”

“It looks like a nice break from Deleuze. Is it about Vampires?”

Tanaz always looked directly into the eyes of the person with whom she was speaking, and Evan interpreted her confidence as an invitation to penetrate her with an even more intense stare in return.

“No. I think it would be more fun if you took it and dove right in, it’ll be a surprise.”

“Alright, I’ll give it a whirl.”

She exhaled a breath of some kind of savory breakfast into his mouth as she took the book from him. Her naivety, the spicy flavor of her breath and their close proximity left him ravenous. The book was an erotic thriller about S&M. How would Tanaz react? As she put the book into her satchel and attended to her prepare-for-the-lecture ritual,

Evan inhaled all of her. He listened intently as she swallowed and breathed, and imagined picking up her hand up from the desk and licking the underside of her pale wrist. Evan's mouth opened in real time on the train reminding him with a bitter coolness on his tongue that he could only re-live it all in memory.

Dr. Everett's syllabus could not have been more apropos for Evan's building sexual tension. The next few weeks were devoted entirely to discussion and screenings related to feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* essay. Mulvey applied Lacanian and Freudian theory via a psychoanalytic lens to classic patriarchal Hollywood cinema. She pointed out that in 50s and 60s era cinema, viewers were forced into sharing the perspective of the male protagonist, and therefore were subject to what she called the "male gaze"—a gaze that predominantly objectified women. The thesis was one that sparked lively conversation in class and also one that Evan agreed with wholeheartedly. However, he was forced to contend with the truth of his own voyeuristic psyche. He could not deny that he, himself, embodied and furthered this patriarchal objectifying. But participating in the academic pursuit and discussion of his own objectifying tendencies only stimulated his dark appetite more. And it was during those weeks he would realize that in order to fully consume Tanaz in the way that he desired, ultimately he would have to film her.

Evan showed up to class every week fifteen minutes early in order to secure his spot in the classroom and make small talk with Dr. Everett. He often helped to set up the projector or shove black and silver inputs into outputs—symbolically poking and then trying another hole. The weekend after he handed Tanaz his copy of *Exit to Eden*, he arrived even earlier. He approached the room peering around the propped-open double

doors just as a gigantic reverse image of the infamous seduction scene from *The Graduate* was running across several rows of seats and part of the surrounding screen. Dr. Everett had started his set-up. As he turned into the room, her figure emerged almost as an apparition. She was sitting in Evan's seat. In that very instant there was the illusion that she was being birthed out of the nook of Anne Bancroft's iconic shadowed bent leg. Tanaz was wearing a dark blouse and bottoms so that only her neck, face and eyes were revealed. The reflective yellow book jacket with pink and white lettering was unmistakable; she was reading the book.

Mrs. Robinson you're trying to seduce me....aren't you?

In almost the next second, Tanaz was quickly camouflaged by a flurry of images being rewound as Dr. Everett cued up the scene.

"Oh hey Evan! Can you give me a hand?"

Dr. Everett called to him from the media station. Evan quickly made his way toward the pillar of machinery to assist him, the sounds of which were almost indistinguishable from the train's jostling. Tanaz could tell he was there but didn't break from her hypnotic reading. Even when Evan sat next to her, and other students began to fill in the blanks around them, she refused to look up or begin a conversation with him. Of course, he always waited for her to initiate discussion, so he did nothing. The screenings that day included *The Graduate* scene from earlier, several segments from Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and multiple sexually explicit scenes from *A Clockwork Orange*. This was the final day devoted to Mulvey's theories and Evan felt cheated that it was difficult for him to symbolically gaze upon Tanaz. Instead he was forced to tap into his magnified sensory consciousness to get his fill of her. Once he focused his mind, he

could feel every move she made as if he was the seat beneath her. He could smell her hair product, a citrus medley that put him in the mood to imagine her fruit shape parts digesting in his stomach. He also convinced himself that he could smell between her legs a wetness that was provoked by reading his favorite pornographic story, or maybe it was from the horrific scenes from Kubrick's masterpiece.

At the end of class she finally addressed him while they were both squirming out the desks and waiting in the exit the theater-style line that had formed out the door.

"So, you're either pretty sexy or extremely creepy. It was pretty audacious of you to lend me that book."

She actually bumped into the back of him as he stopped short at the end of the aisle to let another student pass.

"Audacious? Need I remind you that you asked ME about the book?" And I am definitely both creepy AND sexy."

The banter manifested so naturally that for a few moments he felt like he actually was a normal undergraduate young man rather than someone who just pretended to be one.

"Well, you've got quite the game. I'm intrigued and I love the book."

The words "love the book" part trailed off as she veered away from him in the hallway toward the girls' bathroom.

The next two weeks for Evan were blissful. After Tanaz had clearly made her move on him, he gave himself permission to start storyboarding a five-minute short indie film starring her. He was currently enrolled in a 300-level videography class and had access to all the production equipment necessary, and coincidentally, he also needed to produce a

five-minute end-of-the-semester piece. He transformed his off-campus basement efficiency into his own film studio.

bolex camera
 tripod
 lighting kit
 set of cotton multi-colored drop cloths
 light meter
 plastic dishwashing gloves
 2 brand new place settings
 flowers & candles for the kitchen table
 clack
 melon
 chicken breast
 asparagus
 bag of fingerling potatoes
 trash bags
 clack clack clack clack clack

Evan visualized the extensive list he had made those two weeks printed on the seat back in front of him. He had wanted to be completely prepared for the moment she would inevitably ask him out. There had been plenty of time remaining in the semester and he knew he could count on her to spark a conversation when returning the book. He had spent hours, sometimes while seated next Tanaz in class, drawing a cartoon version of her for his storyboard. His black-inked anima rendering of her became a more real version of her than her actual being in the same way that the lines of food and flesh had blurred.

“Temple University Next, Temple”

Time had been moving in slow motion, and once his stop had arrived, sped up like a Claymation stop-motion montage, nauseating Evan. Of course he welcomed the vertigo, the sickness, as he composed himself and prepared to get his mind back into the school space. He spotted a sexy coed preemptively rising and heading to the front of the car preparing to de-board. He thought about following her partially to wherever her class might be—he was early again today. He could relax a little, he had finished his film for 300 after all. Class would feel empty today without Tanaz, he was certain Dr. Everett

would notice her absence. Evan had left her there, like a half eaten meal, right in front of the old bolex camera. He would edit the footage later.

Invisibility, or The Musician

So What? “So What” from *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis is my selection.

The morning commuters on Mondays don’t seem to notice:

toes tap the floor in fascist rhythm without consciousness,

without purpose,

smashing down on their own imprints—shadows.

So What? girl with natty hair and rolled back retinas appears to mean.

She spits attitude and resentment her boots click

an

urban

metronome.

I want to ask her just. how. does. she. think. she. knows. me? I have four
conversations with her that will never happen—between chord progressions.

She is already gone through the turnstile.

Often, I gaze down only at the feet they don’t seem to notice either:

that I am odorless, marginal but OWN the atmosphere,

I enounce

I syllabize

I aspirate

No one notices because it is unclear who or what
is the *real* instrument.

So What? Columbidae huddle and hide in terminal structures, my audience.

Coo. Coo. Coo. They Chant.

Reverberation of their wings and stank and flock and perches—clack like hi-hats
in and out

of corridors and subway doors.

Shadows riff and improvise in an outpouring of support. Weather down here is
that of perpetual gloaming. No way to know what time of day it is.

For me and the pigeons,

it

is always twilight—the magic hour. The trains themselves have their own
precipitation: Gusts, flickering lights, and occasionally—smoke.

Sometimes they ignite them before they even exit the train. Beaming red pepper
flakes and ashes sprinkled at my feet. Offerings. Tips.

The subterranean sphere sweats and excretes a kind of pain. A space of sudden
hollowness—then penetration—and suffocatingly full again,

then six minutes later

Refrain.

Refrain.

Refrain.

I and my noise BURST through the timely Order of the thing, the machine and

its barreling power

cannot compete with the sound even though they try to drown it out.

And quiet again.

Here comes another saucy urban metronome:
 This time more erotic. A heaving in the tulle-wrapped chest.
 Up and down. Up and down.
 I want to believe they are beating along to the tune.
 Two itty-bitty snapping fingers.
 But then I remember the cunningness of the unconscious figure that heaves
 and thrusts. I am the only one truly dancing. The lead.

L'ENFANT PLAZA STATION?

Bell trespassed—broke the rules of marginality. A real talent posing as a loser.
 But, who can resist the sound of bow stroking a strung sheep gut?
 That instrument reminds me of my spine—emancipating hum released when it
 curls and hunches
 when I play.

Or, on rare occasion, a child tiptoes on each note, having not learned to walk flat-
 footed, a perpetual awe.
 No time to stay planted on the ground.
 But just as they observed with Bell, this sacred little Zen master is
 hurried off
 away
 from the underground serenade of the Poor.

So What?

Transition as the commute fades. Slow resolution. Pixels transmute and re-form.
 Reform me and you.
 Missing the grainy crackle of Kodak film. Authentic tarnished edges hand
 cranked and light metered.
 The white on black on white on black—a primordial scheme
 undivided but more so, interdependent. The chemical reaction to light on
 plastic—removes the gradations that separate us.

Big Brother, “Big Brother” from that *Talking Book* begins
in the privacy of post-commute, a necessary reprieve.

Did you ever digest on repeat for hours the sweetness of that harmonica?
Metal and tone tastes of dripping peppered mango or cinnamon sugar on fried
bread or skin on sweat on a sticky mattress in the humid mist,
in the suffocating corners of the hidden structures.

Underground the pitch, a whine or cry so unhinged spits black graffiti on cement
walls, resist his lyrics, but only at first. Then. Paste does soak in—Rev’s diary
perhaps? A working class plumber
painting

a confessional page from his life here or there
on subway walls, evading Big Brother.

But that was Brooklyn. We’re not as chic this far South.

Big Brother can’t get reception underground. Signals are disrupted by structure,
impenetrable mechanical waves and my, *our* wailing.

He creeps around the edges of the stairs coming down here anyway,
an unassuming

but venomous red debris radiating out all the way from a satellite’s orbit to me.

Once I thought it was he coming down, when a fight broke out in the middle of a
precise and rehearsed crescendo. A quickened pace. “An unarmed man shot for
nothing”

He couldn’t be such a coward, so I assumed it wasn’t him after all.

And I kept playing.

Big Brother the conductor,
 the station shaped like a panopticon echoes the flick of finger picking and nylon
 strings and deep hot breath
 but
 passengers never notice.
 They behave as if they know it, pretending not to hear me or brainwashed
 afraid to doublethink or lost in t
 thoughtcrimes. Conforming on the exterior—dressed for the cold. Someone did
 give me a blanket once. Wool, elastic trim and staples left behind, pressed into
 heavy cloth.
 Was it an act of kindness
 or pity
 or selfish? They didn't seem to hear me playing, nor look into my reflective irises.
 Just.Try.To.Cover.Me.Up.

Perhaps I am *Big Brother*.

I AM, because I govern all walks of life in this glistening cement barrel that
 sweats oppressively when empty.

I see them stomp by and I become them.

I am the round pregnant woman with lazy cream breasts, the large nosed college
 boy with a scar across his neck and Bolex pointed at me for more than five-
 minutes (while watching myself I believe my performance sings like *The Jazz
 Singer*).

I am also the reformed sexless, genderless Junkie,
 who I see all the time.

I parade around
 with a rainbow of plastic key tags on a chain—commemorating all the months I
 have stayed off the pipe.

I am the born-again, addicted to becoming saved.

My hair is kept hidden under a preposterous hat. I even walk fearfully—afraid of the musician

of myself,

but proud of my iron chastity belt (a hand-welded gift from daddy over 75 years ago).

I am the loyal football coach who heard something once in the locker room but ignored it. Bartleby of Wall Street. Narcissistic Academic. And the Doctor who intentionally dropped a prescription pad for Oxycotin at my feet.

The bank itself came down once to catch the 7:42.

I am him too.

At his back was a magnificent rustling—a green fan of bills fanned out ten feet wide from behind him like wings. A proud green-hued peacock jutting his chin out—his chicken dance would put the Mummers to shame.

He hummed *Singing In the Rain* just like Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*.

Then.

He. Winked. At. Me.

I am the trick, the stripper—the escort.

With grey faux fur hat, hand-knit leg-warmers and a coordinating French manicure.

I once heard red-faced businessman argue to sleeping obese wino who had wet himself several times over, that strippers were the true feminists.

The wino snorted,

then asked for a five spot. This was during the harmonica solo.

I am the anorexic and the overweight teenagers. Both walked together once toward me. Their heads large and alien.

Eyes bulging from skulls competing with one another. Bloated in a drowned dead-girl sort of way.

Whether starved or gluttonous—the heads always swell.

Androgynous-inter-sexed.

I AM. Straphangers always assume a gender, race, and identity.

Light grips on hanging nooses.

It is easy to see they are neither male nor female
pigmented or absent of color.

Easy to see they are vulnerable to these assumptions

Easy if you are—

Big Brother.

Every walk of life has passed me.

Once I was both a little deaf boy and old man that was hard of hearing at the same time. All three of us did, if only for a moment, seem to agree about the silence.

And then

I started to play again.

But I couldn't keep playing the same song.

The next on the Set List is always familiar, a song I've always known.

It is title-less. But everyone knows it.

It can only be sung A cappella.

"I got my e-mail down to under ten!" A saggy-faced woman dressed in business casual attire shouted

all the way across rails to
whom?

This was while I sang the richest, most soulful “Oh” I ever had.
It was a call, an ache, for the afternoon commute.

This new song. The one that everyone knows.

Is more of a collaborative offering—art.

When passing by me.

Everyone plays.

Visually, it begins as blank sheet of watercolor paper. Porous and thick.

The kind of paper that has to be fondled on sight and smelled too.

Just. In. Case. It. Is. Perfumed.

A long deep breath in and the blankness is primed—with Gesso.

Largo

Largo

Largo

Then the layering begins. The collaging/collecting:

Scraps of magazines, shopping lists, electronic instructions,
instructions for electronics, articles ripped from newspapers, thumb
printed animals on drawing paper, receipts for Chow Mein, gum
wrappers, gum wrappers origamied into little boats or hats
depending on how you look at them.

Segments of ripped nude-colored stockings, shoelaces, twine, beads
from broken earrings and bracelets, pigeon feathers, rodent hair,
rodent feces, torn dollar bills, dip, cigarette butts, used works, used
band-aids, glass vials

are everywhere at the station

When left behind they become their own verses, chants.

All framed by a special border

of strung together flyers and solicitations—or the more literary
contributions of the subway:

More Gesso. Another vocal in a four-part harmony, four layers.

It is the sweet baritone of charcoal on sheen.

The charcoal, distinguished by levels of blackness,
is derived—directly—from the angular and serious expressions of
those that never acknowledge me:

Clenched jaws, long pointed noses, squinted eyes, cheek bones
accentuated by bronzer, razor-cut bobs, post-human surgical
operations, waxed and penciled eyebrows, baseball caps wrinkled like
rock formations in Yosemite, umbrellas, or stakes pointed, poking
toward me.

Everyone an Anima character in graphic chiaroscuro.
But louder than all of these is the final layer—the bass,
a Pollack splatter-graph of internal thoughts
in the mind
space.

Each committee is loud and clear,

the effect—a fantastical choral messiah.

As the bustle and rush of foot traffic and metal compartments reaches
it peak

So. Does. The. Song.

This melding of the collective consciousness

choir of visceral atoms is so loud—so deafening—so obvious

no one notices.

So What?

Evening approaches and the space between the automatic shutting
doors grows greater and greater. I return to my first selection.

So What?

Although wind instruments tire easily, the golden trumpet insists on
returning to that beaten

riff

A repetition of a light irregular tap, like the remains of debris
from a crumbling building spilling slowly over one another
the leather boots crossing in front of me
become sparse, quieter.

Water drops, I think, a light mist or rain has saturated the ground
above sounding like a swishing or a baby gently nursing.

I haven't spoken once today only played and sung.

But—I still hear Davis, and Coltrane too I think, his tenor sax, and
Adderley, Evans and Cobb too.

Fading soundtrack—similar to what it must feel like to enter
heaven

slowly falling toward slumber. Abyss.

It occurs to me, and you too, that when I look into the eyes of the last
passenger,

all legs and clicking heels

rushing toward the closing rusted gate

while a man in a grey janitorial coverall

Resembling. Prison. Garb. Secures. The. Lock

She doesn't really see me

whether I am here or not

So What?

Insanity or The Companions

The sound was barely audible, just the faintest grazing of hollow plastic against train car floor. The battered and almost empty Aquafina bottle was making visits to the morning commuters. The WTL train wasn't exactly the epitome of tidy, in fact, this particular Aquafina bottle found itself rolling and bumping into the same beige patent leather toe for the third time in the same week. The passenger connected to this toe felt the gentle nudge of the bottle and instinctively tapped it away. Not remembering the bottle from either time before, she returned to her conversation.

“Hey Randy—Reds, you listening?” She didn't pause for a response. “Surely, anyone could see he had pushed her to do it. Uh huh, uh huh, he surely pushed over her the edge.” Gently folding her aging, midnight-colored arms into one another, small particles of her flaky skin shifted then settled like tiny bugs being momentarily disturbed. These white flakes appeared to be an extension of her purple and white silk shirt, a signature of church going ladies. She turned away from the train's interior and her companion on the right, to the smudged oval window on her left, and then outside to something beyond. Her gaze serious as she sized up familiar concrete buildings that

floated along framed by the eccentric red rims of her glasses. She nodded to herself, to her companion, and gestured in a way that seemed to be directed to the entire audience of Center City bound morning commuters. A well put together red head, in Jenny Craig spokesperson attire, and seated a few rows ahead, appeared to return a head shake in response to the gregarious lady. Or, she was simply practicing generally disapproving body language: an instinctual physical tick observed in any SEPTA commuter at any given moment.

The companion kept his eyes forward, and squinted. He reacted to the tail end of the comment, the “pushing over the edge” part, with a confused lip bite. He absent-mindedly slid his finger up and down the crease of his right pant leg; this crease and his beige suit were impeccable. It was almost as if the suit had been dry-cleaned moments before he boarded. He shook his head and then sank into the back of their shared seat, the sun from the window spilling across her and splashing onto his face. His enormous forehead wrinkled in a friendly, homey way, like four or five smiles all at once. After a few moments, he opened his brown eyes and large mouth and turned his attention back to her as if he was about to respond, and then she began again, as if she knew what he was going to say.

“Reds, I am serious. This boy was brutal *and* to his own mother. He was ugly too. He looked nothing like her, took after his pop.” She bopped his forehead this time with the brim of her oversized white satin hat; it was of both the fantastical and cheap sort. A style which was currently, co-opted by hipster 18-year-olds attempting to evoke an era they completely misunderstood. But on her, this hat was perfection.

“Fern Rock, Fern Rock Next” the barely discernible voice of God sputtered out. Following the announcement, the rails got louder, or maybe, in the brief moment of collective passenger silence, the reverb just filled in the space. The passengers bobbed slightly forward in unison. A very premature exit line was forming at the front of the compartment.

The forehead crinkled in its understanding way again. This time he managed to get out “Well, that’s a real shame that…”

“I know, I know, Reds, she wasn’t at all to blame for it. He just shoved her one too many times and she had to protect herself. No matter if he was six or twenty-six, that boy got what was comin’ to him.” Her flaky arms unfolded, releasing the captive skin particles again and her hand briefly pressed against her blouse, reacting to her own statement.

“I gotta get out of my head,” she continued. “I just can’t wait for this picnic, all of us together again after so much drama. I’m so glad you’re here; don’t know how I’d handle things without you.” She shifted her bottom this time and looked back to the window, this time with a pleasant expression, then tapped his leg sweetly, right on the crease.

He seized his moment, first scratching his head, and then exhaling, “Ugh, I just don’t know if I can do it today,” the volume of his voice tapering off. And his face expressing an interior battle, as if he had good intentions on which he could no longer follow through.

The car’s conductor opened the door a few moments before the train had stopped, interrupting the conversation and continuing the celebration of too soon activity. The

whole dance perpetuated the comforting illusion of efficiency. “Fern Rock” he repeated, in person this time. Somehow it sounded exactly as it had over the speaker. The conductor smiled, raised his thick brows and wrinkled his nose as he held the door for several passengers. He had a cheerful, upbeat demeanor.

More people boarded, heading for one of the many stops on the way to University City. A rosy-cheeked debonair 24-year-old with a clunky-black case strapped to his back disrupted the procession when he awkwardly dropped his newspaper and coffee. He fumbled around on the floor for several seconds, or an eternity in commuter time, trying to figure out what level of clean up was acceptable in this scenario. The impatient line swelled out on each side of him dauntingly, as heads poked around, attempting to identify the hold-up. The pressure built quickly, shooting him towards the rear of the car and into one of the two last seats, forcing him to leave behind the mess as well as his coffee and paper.

A noisy-pair of teenage boys were the final passengers to board. They sat directly in front of the hat lady just as she was about to respond to her companion’s lost comment. Both young men sported variations of black, blue and grey skintight clothing and accessories. They also wore matching oversized sunglasses and shared mop hairstyles. From the perspective of those seated behind them, they looked like floating skinny alien heads with cool hair.

“Everyone you could ever think of was in this movie dude, like everybody, man. It was mad good, you gotta see it,” the alien head on the left said loudly.

“Really? Travolta?”

“Uh no, no actually he wasn’t in it.”

“Meryl Streep?”

“What? No—she wasn’t it in either.”

The alien heads carry on, oblivious to their surroundings, protected by an invisible magic bubble that kept reality out of the sphere, a place reserved especially for teenage boys.

“Wayne Junction next folks, Waaaaayyyne Junction.”

“Reds, I love John Travolta, don’t you?” She taps his leg again, forgetting his comment from just a few moments earlier. His expression was that of someone who perhaps does like Travolta but then decides not to say anything. The forehead head drops a bit and his eyes roll back then down as he stares through the beige pleather seat back in front of him. The seat is covered with sharpie-inked phrases and graffiti. Some words are tagged artfully: *A-non-o-miss*, *Pez and Jester*. Most of the work is written in messy handwritten phrases like, *Gina says suck it*, *U wuz here and God Is Good*, then a few phrases down in the same handwriting, *All The Time*. There are graffiti debates i.e. *Gina is a lame-o* then *No she ain’t you’re the dick* then the diplomatic *Why can’t we all just get along?*

“I said —I love Travolta.”

Tilting her head and looking over her glasses at him, she leaned in very close. He reluctantly met her eyes and sniffed. Again, he appeared to contemplate something greater than her words, and then she went on again.

“Well, never mind that, the point is we’re together and it is a blessed-day-for-sure.” She said, this time trying to get the overly enunciated “blessed-for-sure” part to sprinkle into the seats of the alien boys, but they were still protected by the bubble and didn’t hear her say a thing.

The smells of the city crept into the cabin between stops, transmuting as the train progressed deeper into the heart of Center City. Temple University through Market East, a burnt illegal chemical quality, Suburban Station, the helpless scent of homeless people living inside metallic structures, 30th Street, a sexy fried doughnut aroma that eventually explodes into several cuisines.

“30th Street next,” the conductor said surprisingly clearly and with the finality of someone ending his shift. The Jenny Craig lady startled spastically at the announcement, and then awkwardly grazed all of the aisle-seated passengers with her fleshy sides as she rushed towards the front of the car.

“Excuse me,” The forehead said softly. He too wanted to make an early ascent to the door prior to his stop.

“Reds, what gives?” She said this sternly as she leaned back. The sound of the back of her hat crinkling against the seat could be heard above all the other noise.

“Ma’am, we do this almost every day now. I have been trying to be nice but we don’t even know one another. You have me mistaken for someone else, this “Reds” fellow. I’m really sorry—I’ve said this before, don’t you remember?” He didn’t wait or look at her this time, he just excused himself, grabbed his briefcase from the overhead and made his way to the front of the train, not turning back. The suit remained in excellent condition, several others followed him; this was a popular stop.

She was the last one left. She sighed, unfazed by the stranger’s statement. She scooted closer to the window, expressionless, peering out blankly and patiently.

As the train entered the next and final station, a shadow moved slowly down her face, a film fading to black. She looked to the door anticipating the conductor,

“He pushed her to do it, uh huh, surely anyone could see that.”