Our Feet Are The Same

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(From “Immortal For Quite Some Time”)

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Winter semester is over and I’m headed for San Diego, your notebook in my pocket. I drive south through a familiar Utah landscape. The predawn mass of the Wasatch Mountain Range looms over me to the east. The black sky leaches to grey, silhouetting the snowcapped mountains. I pull off in Cedar City for gas and breakfast.

An hour later the freeway throws me centrifugally along the outskirts of St. George. The first Mormon temple completed in Utah gleams white against brilliant redrock.

I’m welcomed to the painted lady of the Nevada desert by a screaming formation of low-flying jet fighters. I need gas. The exit funnels me onto THE STRIP. The MGM Lion is a huge plastic pussycat. The LUXOR pyramid is fronted by a fiberglass sphinx and obelisk EXCALIBUR: waferboard and cinderblock kitsch. Sunburnt tourists stagger along the lethal sidewalks, aging flesh sagging around bare kneecaps.

I breathe easier west of the city among the straightforward mirages of the Mojave Desert.

5:30 p.m. I’m in Santee, up the gorge from San Diego, parked in front of Van Winkle’s. While collecting my thoughts and feelings, I make a rude sketch in my notebook. I wish I had a better eye for things. I fear that my naïve drawings are echoes of thoughts I’m not perceptive enough to recognize as shallow.
You left a “self portrait,” dated “89.”

There are thumbtack holes in the top center and one in each corner. Were you proud of the drawing? Did you like the playful expression? The hint of light and dark personality? The portrait as mask? John, I don’t know you. There’s so much I don’t know.

How would I draw myself?

It would be a painful set of awkward lines, fragments like my bits and pieces of self awareness.

Alex has been producing a set of what he calls “Selph Portraits,” sketches drawn
quickly in the early morning hours. These three, for instance, were drawn at 12:02, 12:08
and 12:15 a.m. on the 27th of February 1992:

Who lurks in that only partially conscious state between waking and sleeping?
Stripped by tiredness of strictures of language and culture, who is he? Who am I?
Day and Night Cook, you wrote. $1200 a month. And you lived on the premises.
I leave the restaurant and find a cheap motel just down Mission Gorge Road, the
six-lane highway snaking up the canyon between the big city and this town dominated by
trailer parks. Sitting on the squeaky motel bed, I call Van Winkle’s and ask for Van. My
hands are shaking. A woman says he won’t be in till 10:30 or 11.
I walk east from Van Winkle’s as night falls, eager to see your neighborhood:
Sentry Storage
Santee Inn
Gun Shak – Discount Guns and Pawn
Kingdom Hall of Jehovah’s Witnesses (cars arriving at a fast clip)
A sign pointing north: Las Culinas Women’s Detention Facility
Los Panchos Taco Shop – OPEN/ABIERTO

A bail bond place

Santee Pioneer Little League. Under lights a big left-handed Chicano kid mows down skinny little long-haired gringos. Hegel got this one right.

The moon looks like a tiny pared-off fingernail hanging just above Venus, neither body as bright as they were last night in Utah when I called the children out of the house to look.

Finally I screw up the courage to go into Van Winkle’s for dinner. I’m self-conscious. Will I be taken for you?

One side of the large room is a dance floor and stage flanked by a bar, the other has been decked out with red carpet and formica-topped tables set with paper place mats, forks and knives wrapped in paper napkins, salt, pepper, sugar, and catsup.

John Wayne is the decorating motif. Photos and paintings of the “Duke” cover two walls. In the largest poster, autographed, his craggy head looms above a foggy scene of a stage coach in a desert landscape. On a third wall, between signed photos of Pat Boone, Gene Autry, and Johnny Cash, hang two blown-up photos of Santee in the old days and one huge painting of three San Diego Chargers annihilating an opposing quarterback. Under the latter stands a big-screen TV.

One Sunday afternoon you called me from here, a Chargers’ game barking in the background. We talked, as usual, about books.

The menu suggests fried chicken or barbecued spare ribs. I tell the waitress I’d like the ribs. Blue cheese dressing on the salad. Baked potato.

It’s Karaoke night and a half-bald man in jeans, cowboy shirt, and mustache is the host. He hands the cordless mike to an angular fifty-year-old woman he introduces as Betty. She stands at the back of the stage and sings “Stand by Your Man.” I can barely hear her, which is just as well.

I dig into my potato.

A skinny nine- or ten-year-old boy lets his mother push him onto the stage and stares into a monitor while he mouths the words to “Do You Think I’m Sexy?”

The host doesn’t have to look at the monitor while he sings “I Got You Babe.” Not a bad voice. Nor is my salad too bad, although there’s a lot of water in the bottom of
the fake wood bowl.

A man and woman wearing black cowboy hats sit at a table with a middle-aged woman in pink polyester. At another table hunch an emaciated, chain-smoking woman and what I take to be her chain-smoking, even more emaciated mother. The latter has dyed her limp hair at least three consecutive colors. A girl and a boy sit with them, both under ten, dressed in Sunday-best black and white. While I attack my ribs, the children, first the boy, then the girl, are led to the stage where they half sing, half mumble their way through pop songs I don’t recognize.

The woman with the black cowboy hat grabs the mike, bounces off the confining stage and moves confidently across the dance floor in red cowboy boots, red skirt, white blouse, and fitted black coat. She’s a vigorous dancer and a full-throated singer. I can’t help but pay attention to her sudden presence, especially when she skips over to my corner table, stabs my eyes with hers, and sings huskily, “I want your body.” Through the sauce of my spareribs I manage a half smile. She two-steps over to the bar where her man stands. Then she swings her compact body back to my corner and moans “I love your body.” I force an embarrassed smile and concentrate on my potato. Embarrassed for several reasons, not the least of which is that she turns me on.

Behind me the wall creaks open and ten or twelve men and women come out of a room I hadn’t noticed. They’ve been in a club meeting, or so I gather by the logo on their identical blue-satin jackets: “Fabulous Fifties – San Diego Chapter, Ford Club of America.” Above the entrance to their room a sign announces that PICKUPS LIMITED and the Santee KIWANIS also meet here.

The kitchen is framed by a brightly lit door under a NO SMOKING sign. Your domain. Where did you smoke?

The thin woman’s eyes close to slits as she hisses at her wandering boy. She stabs a sharp index finger in the direction of his chair.

The woman in the pants suit comes over to my table and hands me a vinyl book: Would you like to see this?

I nod and take it.

*SONGBOOK: BE THE STAR YOU ARE! D K KARAOKE*

It’s a list of songs. A huge list. She wants me to sing! She doesn’t know me. I
read through the list. There are songs from my high-school days that I still sing snatches of when I’m alone. I fantasize about taking the stage and belting out Johnny Horton’s “North to Alaska.” Instead I plunk down money for the dinner and escape.

11 p.m. Sitting in my motel room, I make a decision not to call, not to try to talk with Van. It’s a gut feeling that grew in me while I ate dinner and became a conscious thought just minutes ago. Van was angry with you when you left, perhaps because of a fire; and you thought he had cheated you out of some savings you had invested with him. Why should I let a John-Wayne-loving old man color the way I’ll see you for the rest of my life?

Besides, Van’s first-hand, biased accounts would be too strong for me, diverting me from the faint traces I’m following. In some ways it’s better to seek you where you’re not. Life changes, progresses. The fixed, the immutably described, the absolutely defined is dead. You are dead, but I don’t have to murder you.

I fall asleep remembering the last time I saw you. Your feet were livid.

17 April 1994, Santee

Nosing around your turf this morning. Did you have one of the three motel-like rooms stretched out under a flat roof in back of the restaurant? Not unpleasant rooms fronted by lemon trees and backed up to a row of tall cedars.

There was a Pink Floyd concert last night in Jack Murphy Stadium, which stands at the other end of Mission Gorge. Would you have been interested?

I drive into the parking lot of a shopping center just west of Van Winkle’s: Purple Heart Veterans’ Thrift Shop, Driftwood Lounge, Fraternal Order of Eagles – Aerie 3973, Santee Chiropractic Clinic, Santee Coins and Jewelry, Rollerskateland – Classic Billiards, The Potter’s House Christian Church, Pastor Chris A. Wendt: Jesus Christ: The Same Yesterday, Today – And Forever.

That’s what we all think we want – a fixed point. And many of us pin the assignment on Jesus. Am I using you as my absent and thus theoretically perfect point of reference?

Mid-morning, at the river, I come across a monument:
Where are the daughters of the Kumeyaay Indians?

A slight breeze rustles cottonwood and willow leaves. I wander along a pleasant path and climb some rocks overlooking the river. A fat lizard does pushups on a rock above me. Bees. A white butterfly. On the trail below a deeply tanned man walks his big dog. I am pasty white when I take off my shirt. The lizard is gone when I look up.

I imagine you a healthy brown after many mornings walking in this gorge. There is peace here.

Then I imagine you in bed until noon when you get up to work in the brightly lit but windowless kitchen. The one day you do lie on this rock in the sun your lard-colored skin burns a cancerous red.

A lazuli bunting flaunts its colorful head and throat and white-barred wings on a bush just above me. A nomad. On its way north. Perhaps I’ll see this very bird on the Great Western Trail inside Provo Canyon when I get back home.

I lay back in the sun. A breeze keeps the flies away for a while. When it abates they drive me from the rocks.

A single orange California poppy.
A heavy-beaked raven.

During the afternoon I drive aimlessly around San Diego. In the evening, not far from Balboa Park, I stop at a promising Thai Restaurant. After ordering I notice several male couples in the restaurant and more couples out strolling along the sidewalk. Across the street at tables in front of a bar sit several dozen men. Somehow I’ve found my way into the center of gay San Diego.

Did you come here? Could I have seen you here in 1984, holding hands with your friend? The one who died a year later?

Four men and a woman sit at the table opposite me. I picture you with them. A lively conversation, good food. Friendships deepened by sexual attraction. They laugh about something. They are comfortable with one another. They care for one another. They meet every Sunday night for dinner.

But Sunday night, like every night, you are in the kitchen at Van Winkle’s cooking ribs and frying chicken and making salads to eat with crackers in cellophane. You are proud of your soups. In your notebook you call your friends losers.

18 April 1994, Pismo Beach, 10:30 p.m.

Los Angeles behind me, I walk along a deserted beach under a half moon. The waves break silver in triple and quadruple rows, messengers of eternal processes.

Breaking away from the tradition you felt held you captive, you fell into an emptiness for which you were ill-equipped. It felt empty because you had believed that the world outside the one delineated by Mormonism was sorely lacking; and you were ill-equipped because you were throwing off all the tools Mormonism had provided. The Kiwanis, the chiropractor, the Fraternal Order of Eagles, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Potter’s House, or even the Mormons could have supplied structure and fellowship. But you had had enough of structured fellowship.

Earlier this year Alex got a call from a curator at the BYU art museum. There was a New York artist in town. On her last night in Provo she wanted to talk with someone “interesting.” He was met at the Comfort Inn, Alex said, by the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He guessed her age at sixty. They talked about New York – Alex grew up in Brooklyn – and about art. At some point Alex noticed that the big rhinestone pin she
was wearing spelled out ULTRA VIOLET. Are you Ultra Violet? he asked, dumbfounded. Yes. You’re the Ultra Violet who introduced Andy Warhol to Duchamp? Yes. You were Dali’s lover? Yes. What are you doing in the Comfort Inn in Provo, Utah? I’ve come to do some prints, to give a lecture, and to talk with people about Celestial Art.

Ultra Violet had got religion. And specifically the Mormon variety. Not enough structure for her, finally, in Warhol’s Factory.

What you needed, John, may have been what you left behind.

These are thoughts I’ve thought before. How much explanatory power do they have? How much explanatory power is there in moonlight on waves?

One evening I tried out a related thought on Alex: chaos needs order and order chaos. No, he said. All roads lead to Rome.

19 April 1994, Morro Bay

Breakfast in a coffee shop overlooking the ocean. Across the street a grey free-standing cube of a barber shop. The sign in the window says CLOSED. Inside a hairy-armed, mostly bald barber dressed in antiseptic white cuts the grey fringe around an even balder head. Outside a red, white, and blue barber pole turns and turns.


I drive north along the Pacific Coast Highway. Cows stand up to their udders in grass. Fat seals sun themselves on rocky points. Great egrets stilt through tide pools. Cormorants bob and dive. Flying lines of pelicans enter wave troughs and disappear.

The Henry Miller Memorial Library near Big Sur. I remember the anecdote in Miller’s Red Notebook that ends with “Caught in the bonds of security, and only 22!”

The brilliant flash of red-winged blackbirds. Examining a dead bird lying on the shoulder of the highway I find orange where I expect red.

20 April 1994, Monterey

Robinson Jeffers’ Tor House, overlooking the ocean in Carmel. Not a bad place to write poetry. Clumps of delicate blue iris stand among the trees he planted.
One of the joys
of travel – rare
talk about an iris.

Basho

Basho defined haiku in words that make sense of photographs as well: it is what is happening at this place in this moment of time.

Down the road and around the bend sprawls the Basilica of Mission San Carlos Borromeo del Rio Carmelo, founded June 3, 1770. Inside is the tomb of the

BLESSED
JUNIPERO
SERRA
1713-1784
+ ! + ! +

A pamphlet about the mission states that “The Indians lent themselves willingly to the Padres.”

John, how willingly would you lend yourself to my story?
Give up the rhetorical questions. Get on with your story.

A group of relaxed amateur artists works in the sunny protected courtyard to reproduce on canvas the iron cross atop the misshapen dome, the orange tiles of the roofs, the long ocher walls against a blue sky, and a profusion of multi-colored, multi-formed flowers. In the center a softly splashing fountain.

22 April 1994, San Francisco

Found a room in the Amsterdam Hotel, just two blocks down from Grace Cathedral and the Fairmont Hotel (where Linda raked in generous tips as a waitress in the Squire Room Restaurant the summer we broke off our engagement). You asked about that in a letter from your mission.

Bright sunshine through the room’s east window.
I woke up in the night to a sound I recognized immediately:

Bounce bounce bounce bounce.
Bounce bounce bounce.

A couple in the next room was having a good time. I couldn’t help feeling happy for them.

Bounce bounce.

I slipped into sweet dreams of my own and woke up later to hear them still at it:

Bounce bounce bounce bounce.

I wondered if there is some sort of official endurance record.

I woke again to the now ridiculous sound of bed springs. Don’t these people understand the rhythm of the whole? At some point things speed up to a climax.

I got up to open the window. It was getting stuffy in the room.

Hanging by two wires from the top rail of the fire escape was a rectangular metal sign:

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WARNING
FOR FIRE ONLY
PULL HANDLE
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The wind from the bay moved it rhythmically, like bed springs.

I hear what I expect to hear. I hear what I know. I hear what I want.

Looking out my window I can see the Academy of Art College. A steady stream of young men and women with oversized flat cases under their arms. Talented and hopeful and young.

And I’m 44.

It happens.

Walked through the Haight in the early afternoon. In a used book store I found a paperback copy of *The Seth Material* and bought it, thinking of you and the excitement with which you described its spiritualist breakthroughs over the phone. Eating a fat burrito in a Mexican fast-food place, I thumbed through the book, disgusted, until this section caught my eye:
There is the Mark which Mark has created, an actual physical construction. There is another, created by you, Joseph. There are two more physical Marks, one created by Ruburt, and one by your cat.

Not a bad idea: multiple narrators, one of them a cat. E.T.A. Hoffmann tried it once. And Cervantes used a couple of dogs.

You condescending son-of-an-Andalusian-bitch.

Sorry.

Later, walking among an inventively dressed crowd, a reflection in a store window brought me up short: button-down shirt, clipped hair, and a thin-lipped grimness under veiling sunglasses. In the context of Haight-Ashbury, even in its watered-down 1994 version, I saw myself as FBI, CIA, Secret Service, Establishment. I took off the sunglasses.

Midnight.

I’m back from seeing Allie Light’s film Dialogues With Madwomen. Women telling their stories. A black law student at Stanford who suddenly found herself sleeping in toilet stalls at the airport. Women abused by their fathers, their psychiatrists, their husbands, and then declared insane. A woman whose life was her unrequited love for Bob Dylan. A disturbed Chinese-American woman who, the film reported, was brutally raped and murdered not long after Light spoke with her. And a woman institutionalized for depression whose therapist discouraged her from going to college: Dr. Schwarz, she says, I hope you see this, because I did go to college and I became a filmmaker and this is my film.

I saw Light’s documentary in the Castro Theater. The Castro. For gays and lesbians what the Haight was for hippies. Walking from where I parked my car I was the object of enough unwanted attention that I rounded my shoulders, pulled in my neck, and stuck out my quills. Still fearful. Even after all I have learned.

Inside the operatic theater, watching a gaudy theater organ rise dramatically from the pit, looking around at the lively audience of homosexual couples (or maybe they were just friends, I said, and you laughed), listening to the live music, watching the organist feel his uncertain way to the side of the theater as the lights dimmed, hearing a voice
behind me say “He’s drunk again,” listening during the film to the vocal, sympathetic responses of the audience, I felt part of a lively community. In the dark, separated from the others by several empty seats, I could, peripherally, share the high spirits.

Good for you.

23 April 1994, Winnemucca, Nevada

Snow on Donner’s Pass, then down into the desert east of Reno. In just a few hours I have exchanged the busy streets of San Francisco for the spare, still forms of the Nevada desert. They aren’t, however, as spare as they once were. I follow a trail of tattooed mountains: S for Sparks, L for Lovelock, W for Winnemucca. As a junior in high school, filled with school spirit, I helped whitewash the F for Farmington. Now it feels like domination, an insult to nature, desecration, a mark of possession.

Take it easy, man.

WINNEMUCCA
AND WE’RE PROUD OF IT

Casinos, motels, restaurants, gas stations, and neon. I stay the night in the cheapest motel I can find. LOWEST RATS IN TOWN. The man who stumbles down a step to ask what I want is so drunk he can’t make the credit card machine work. I pay cash.

Lying awake in the dismal room, I think about my reaction to the male gaze in the Castro. I thought I had worked through all this. I have been writing my way out of the maze of homophobia for nearly three years. Why, then, the sudden recurrence?

There is no way out of the maze, I think. I am the maze.

24 April 1994

BOISE, POPULATION 125,738.

I find my way to the State Capitol Building where afternoon sunshine and open green spaces upstage the neo-classical forms in white stone. On W. Jefferson I pass the multiple law offices still in my memory from the trip three years ago, and arrive at #425.
Things change. You would have been kicked out.
Not the first time.

I find a room in a motel two blocks from the T&A Café and begin to call the people in your little address book. I start with Candy. A woman answers. Hello, this is Scott Abbott. Could I speak with Candy? You have a wrong number. It becomes a litany of impermanence: Cheryl, Chad, Daniel, Erik, Kurt, Evonne, Kathy, Lisa, Pam, Phoebe. No longer at this number.

Hungry, I walk past the Cactus Bar on Main Street to the Renaissance Restaurant.
You cooked in the restaurant for more than three years. You drank in the bar till you died.

At the Renaissance, “my” waiter describes what he has tonight: I put a different filling in the manicotti each night . . .

I begin my own Why-I-Get-Pissed-At-Waiters list.

The menu, at least compared to the one I ordered from at Van Winkle’s, is a marvel of complexity and subtlety. You must have known the inner workings of fine Italian sauces and soups, fish and beef, pasta, vegetables. While you were here the owner died and you had a chance to manage the place. You soon quit and went to work at the café.

I was a cook, not a manager.

Two women behind me talk about Christian marriage. A group of four, two of
them celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary, try to remember some sort of class they took, something about influence. Their grey-haired waiter suggests, in passing, Dale Carnegie, and they roar with relief.

   How to win friends and use people, you whisper.

   My waiter has a tightly bound ponytail. He caresses the napkin covering the bread. When he leaves a dish he trails soft fingers across the tablecloth.

   You stick your finger down your throat.

   Each time a waiter bursts through the kitchen’s swinging door, I get a partial view of stainless steel pans, racks of utensils, long counters, and dark ovens. The two cooks wear floppy white hats and starched white jackets like the ones you had, the ones we buried you in.

   The manicotti is over-cooked.

25 April 1994, Boise

   I walk around town this morning, trying to get a feel for your landscape. The route from your rooms to work. From work to the bar. Did you come to this downtown theater to see movies? Did you even like movies? On spring days did you frequent this park, this park bench? Was this where you got your used books? Did you buy newspapers along with your tobacco at Hannifin’s? Did you read newspapers? What were your politics?

   The citizens of Boise are fighting a bumper-sticker war:

   SAVE THE BABY HUMANS
   PRO CHILD: PRO CHOICE
   MOTHERHOOD IS A PROUD PROFESSION
   IT’S A CHILD, NOT A CHOICE
   IF YOU DON’T TRUST ME WITH A CHOICE HOW CAN YOU TRUST ME WITH A CHILD?
   A LADY WITH A GUN HAS MORE FUN
   ICA: DON’T SIGN ON TO DISCRIMINATION :ICA.

   I’d like to read your mind on this one. The Oregon movement to disallow any special treatment or protection on the basis of sexual preference is alive here as the Idaho
Citizens Alliance.

I’M NOT RELIGIOUS. I JUST LOVE THE LORD
QUESTION AUTHORITY
WILD SEX FOR WILD FISH: FREE THE SOCKEYE
NO BOMBING RANGE
SUPPORT ORGANIC FARMERS
ECHOHAWK

Larry Echohawk, running for governor. The first native American elected
Attorney General of a state. He and his brothers John and Fred and Tom grew up in
Farmington, New Mexico in a house several blocks from ours. We went to the same
schools. Fred married someone I went out with. John was a lawyer for the radical
American Indian Movement. Larry played football for BYU. I feel a rush of pride. I
identify myself with his success.

You snicker.

The café is larger than I remembered. Naugahyde booths. Stools at a long counter.
Formica-topped tables with wooden chairs. Some framed nature photographs for sale. A
long slit of a window between kitchen and dining room. A metal wheel to hang the orders
on – order up! A HELP WANTED sign in the window. Between a cigarette vending
machine and the telephone just inside the front door is the place you stood for one of my
favorite photos.
The man who may have taken your place comes out into that area to smoke a cigarette. A pair of running shoes, slacks, a white shirt, suspenders, and a short apron. He’s a tall, heavy man, in his late 40’s. I read him as uncertain, bruised.

The menu offers what looks like a wide range of choices, most of them bearing a family resemblance to the hot beef sandwich with potatoes and gravy I order. It’s plain fare, served by thirty- and forty-year-old waitresses in black Levis and pink or blue T&A Café T-shirts. They don’t look at all like the leggy sex bomb of a waitress featured on the Ted-and-Alice napkins and T-shirts.

Good people to work with, I think. No wonder you spent your $100 advance on flowers for the waitresses.

A big piece of still warm lemon meringue pie follows the sandwich and potatoes. I want to ask the waitress who brings it about you, but ask instead about the chain hanging on the wall, the one with a steel hoop on one end and what looks like a nasty harpoon on the other.

I’ll tell you in a minute, she says. She goes to take an order, pours some coffee, talks with another waitress. I’ll tell you what that is, she says when she finally returns, but I’m not happy about it. It’s a bull cinch. You hang the one end over a fence post and
stick the other end up the bull’s . . . ah . . . ass. It’s a cinch he won’t get away. The boss says we have to tell the story if anyone asks.

And then she’s gone.

Love gets its name (amor) from the word for hook (amus) which means to capture or to be captured. (Andreas Capellanus The Art of Courtly Love)

Walking off the lunch and a vague sense of disappointment, I stroll along Main Street. Writers know things. They do research. They ask questions. They explain what is the case. My methodological decision earlier in this trip to look for you where you are not feels at the moment like a weak crutch.

MANITOU HOTEL. Faded letters on a blackened brick wall. $7.54 A NIGHT. The sign has faded slowly. What it meant is long gone.

I slow my steps in front of the Cactus Bar. A fat man in white cap, white knit shirt, white knee-length shorts, high white socks, and white Nike shoes looms in the door. I’ll come back.

7:30 p.m.

It’s not easy for me to enter a bar. Over four decades of Mormon conditioning.
But it may, finally, all come down to this.

I climb up on one of the two empty stools at the bar and order a drink.

A pool table dominates the back third of the long room, a jukebox stands against the wall in the middle, and scattered tables fill the rest of the space. In a corner behind the bar flickers a small TV, animated by miniature images of baseball players. The bartender is a bright-eyed, athletic young man and about half the clientele, the men and women of several races standing around the pool table or sitting at a table near the jukebox, are his approximate match. The others, all of whom sit at the bar, are Caucasian grey beards, neither bright-eyed nor muscular.

The man on the stool to my right has hollow cheeks and frightfully bony wrists, the consequence, you whisper, of sorrow and a liquid diet. His grey hair looks like it hasn’t been cut or combed or washed for quite some time and from his face hang a meager mustache and a week’s thin stubble. He wears a black polyester baseball cap with a grocery-store logo: Albertson’s Hawks. Around his pencil neck he has knotted a faded blue bandanna. His polyester shirt and windbreaker shade to a darker blue. Far too big around the waist, his green cotton slacks are cinched up by an ancient leather belt. Black socks disappear into new red-and-white running shoes. Between his nicotine-stained left index and middle fingers dances an unlit cigarette. Turning from the white-haired man he has been talking with to take a sip from the glass of beer in front of him, he finally notices me. He straightens his stooped torso, switches his cigarette to his right hand, holds it at arm’s length, twists his hand, and makes the cigarette disappear. He looks at me and raises his eyebrows. Another twist and the cigarette lies between his fingers.

How did you do that? I ask.

He turns back to the white-haired man.

I watch the baseball game.

My neighbor lights his cigarette and leaves it burning in an ash tray on the bar while he turns to talk with young people at a nearby table. The ash grows to finger length. He turns back around in time for a last drag.

Do you have a good memory? he asks suddenly, his voice breathy, raspy.

It’s ok.

Is your memory good or bad? It’s a simple question.
Good, I guess.
When I went to college, he says, they were amazed at my memory. They did all kinds of tests. Memory tests. The sly brown fox jumped over the lazy dog. What was the last word I said?
The jukebox is loud and I can’t quite hear what he is saying. I nod my head. The sly brown fox jumped over the lazy dog. What was the last word I said?
Dog.
No, it was “said.”
I laugh.
Do you have a good head for math? he asks.
Not especially.
Can you do math? It’s a yes or no question. Give me the courtesy of a straight answer to my simple question.
Yes.
Try this then. There were three people who checked into a hotel room that cost $30 a night. Each one paid $10. The clerk later figured out he had made a mistake and that it was a $25 room. He sent a bellboy up with $5 in ones. The bellboy gave each of them a dollar back and kept $2 as a tip. Each had originally paid $10 and now with $1 back they had each paid $9 for the room. 3 times 9 is 27. That leaves $3 from the original $30. The bellboy kept $2. How do you account mathematically for the missing dollar?
I don’t know.
If that’s how you do bookkeeping they’d rob you blind.
So what’s the answer?
He turns back to the man on his right. They are speaking some Slavic language. I order another beer and watch the baseball game. When he leans back to flick his ash into the ash tray I ask what language they are speaking.
Polish. Do you know what city has the largest Polish-speaking population in the world?
Chicago.
That’s right, he says. I can see he’s impressed. He looks at me a little closer. My friend here is an orphan, he says. He grew up in Chicago in a Polish
orphanage. The Germans went to Wisconsin, the Poles to Chicago.

Where did you grow up? I ask.

You ask too many questions, he says. Too many questions.

He’s in charge of this conversation. I apologize, remembering my reflection in the window on Haight Street. I’m interested in stories, I tell him. I like stories.

He leans his head in my direction, stares at me with watery eyes and delivers himself of a bit of beery wisdom: Never answer a question with a question and never ask a question for which you don’t know the answer.

He pulls up the left sleeves of his windbreaker and shirt and displays a winged tattoo. I got that in Hong Kong for two packs of American cigarettes.

In Hong Kong?

Yes. I spent years in the merchant marine. I’ve seen a lot of the world. I speak seven languages. I have knowledge of what I speak.

Seven languages?

Yes. English, Russian, Polish, Yugoslavian, French, German, and Spanish.

You learned them while you were in the merchant marine? I ask. I see a down-on-his-luck man trying to impress a stranger in a bar.

I was a cook for the merchant marine. I could have been an officer. I know how to handle a ship but I hated all that yes-sir, nor-sir shit. You probably wonder what I’m doing here, all fucked up, drunk, sitting in a bar.

I’m sitting at the same bar, I reply. And I speak German too. Wo haben Sie Ihr Deutsch gelernt?


He sounds like he grew up in Hamburg. I’m skeptical no longer.

My brother used to come in here, I tell him, about three years ago.

That’s before my time, he says. I’ve got a friend in Boise, dying of MS. It just gets worse, not better.

You’ve got real talent, I say, to learn languages that well.

Those other languages are easy. English is the most difficult language on the earth. It’s an amalgamation of all languages. Tell me a word, any word.
Dog.

If you look that up in a dictionary you’ll find “derived from.” Not from German, that’s “Hund,” but from Latin or something else. All the languages converge in American. Not English, I mean American. I know English. I’ve been in Blackpool and I can speak their blimey buggered Cockney language.

He spouts a riff of impressive Cockney. Then, losing his train of thought, he begins to mumble Russian into his empty beer glass.

Can I buy you another beer? I ask.

He nods and turns to talk with a young woman who has come up beside him. Age addresses youth. Sickness confronts health. The end admires the beginning. I signal the bartender, then try to ask my neighbor what he wants. He likes Buds, the bartender says.

Turned back to me, a fresh beer before him, the thin man tells a story. Two old maids opened a cat house. One week later they had sold five cats.

I laugh.

There were two whores, he says, one with hemorrhoids, one with adenoids. The one didn’t give a hoot about her shitter, the other didn’t give a shit about her hooter.

Some combination of the blaring jukebox, the baseball game, shouts at the pool table, and his delivery keep me from hearing the whole thing. Would you repeat that? I ask. He does, with some relish.

I was in a ship once, he says, in the Baltic Sea. We must have slipped into Russian territory because they began jamming all our radar and sonar and everything. The captain called over the horn to see if there was anyone on the ship who spoke Russian. I took off my apron and went up onto the bridge and started talking Russian into the radio, trying to explain it was a mistake.

He speaks a stream of Russian into his beer glass. All I can understand is Nyet! Nyet! Nyet!

There’s no lines painted out on the Baltic Sea, he explains. So it’s easy to be a few hundred yards into Russian territory. I talk a blue streak into the radio and the captain slams down the throttle and we’re flying outa there.

The jukebox blares out “Cecilia, you’re breakin’ my heart” and he begins to drum on the bar with open hands. “I’m losing my confidence daily.”
I’ve got the gift of gab, he says when the song is over, and a brilliant memory. That’s why I can speak so many languages. I have knowledge of what I speak. The wise man can be a fool, but the fool can never be a wise man.

I have to agree.

You can’t judge a book by its cover. But you look at me and you think besoffener Scheißkopf. Isn’t that right?

No, I say. We’re sitting at the same bar.

You can’t judge a book by its cover, he repeats. You look at me and don’t know that I’m rich. I’m as rich as God. As rich as God. I believe in God. I do believe in God.

I nod.

But, he says, pausing for effect.

I raise my eyebrows.

But the God I believe in was standing too close when the Big Bang happened.

Now he’s blind and deaf.

He squints at me to see if I get it.

His white-haired friend comes by and they speak Polish, loudly. The friend leaves muttering bullshit, bullshit.

It’s time for me to leave as well. Goodbye, I say. He looks surprised. Before I can move he reaches over, takes my hand between his, looks into my eyes, and says through his crooked teeth: Our feet are the same.

I laugh, squeeze his shoulder, and say Auf Wiedersehen.

What’s your name? he asks.

Scott Abbott. What’s yours?


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Transition Between Light and Dark, Zions National Park, Utah

I’m sitting alone on a sandstone boulder under the towering cliffs called “Watchman.”

In the last sunlight, the sandstone cliffs above me flush vermilion, maroon, magenta. The mineral colors leach out of the shadowed cliffs across the canyon. Bright,
white wisps of cloud. A white, sharply defined full moon.

The moon was in this phase when I stood with Žarko on a moonlit lake shore. Awed by the moon’s dark reflection in the still lake, we reflected on standing, on stasis, on being. Standing as a created moment of transition, the place between one movement and the next. The brief moment when the full moon floats free, neither waxing nor waning. The brilliant, fleeting, satisfying, empty interstice.

Chattering, darting swallows hunt high-flying insects. High above them, two tiny jet planes turn silently to the southeast. Briefly their skins flash bright silver, reflecting the ball of flames below the horizon.

Down the slope from where I sit, Maren, Joseph, Nathan, and Thomas throw a frisbee.

Deer feed along the road, shyly pursued by a boy who wants to feed them and more deviously stalked by a woman with a camera. The animals keep the same distance from both. A buck stands to the side, his antlers heavy with velvet.

The moon grows steadily brighter. Bats join the swallows. The black and brown mammals flutter and jerk ragged lines through the sky. The birds wheel and sweep and dart. Smooth lines.

Insects have buzzed and clicked in the background all day long; but now, in the gathering darkness, as the colors fall silent, the chirpings and high hummings grow more insistent.

The last faint colors coalesce into blackness. A stubby bat skims my forehead. Two deer race by, their quick, thrusting sounds more visible than their shapes.

Timothy and Samuel and Benjamin return with Susan from the cool eddies of the Virgin River. Dark forms trailing across the field. They join the other children and I hear cheerful talk about dinner.

Below me rasps a single cricket. Like a dry quill on rough paper.

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