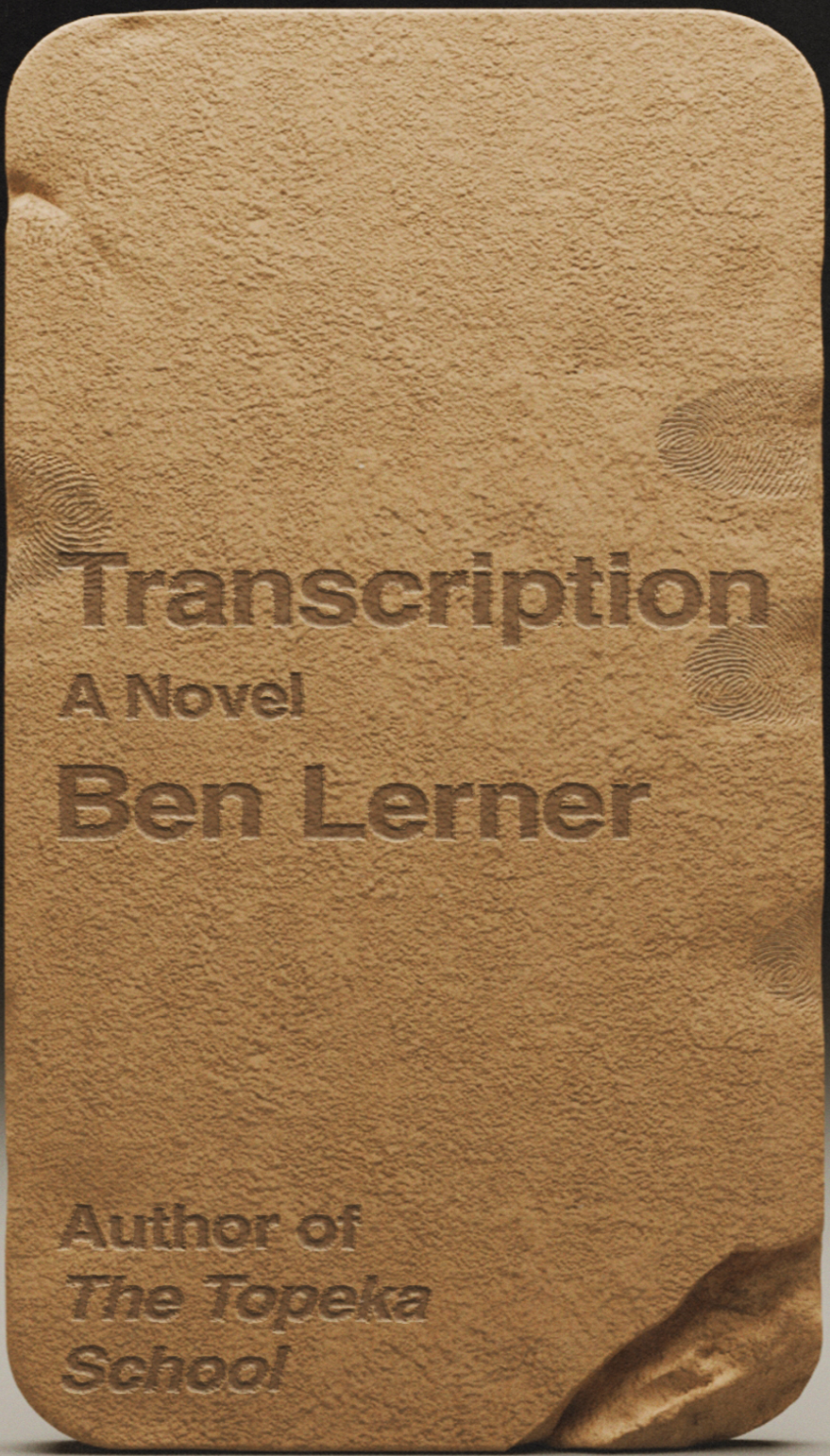

Transcription
A Novel
Ben Lerner
Author of
The Topeka
School



Transcription

A Novel

Ben Lerner



Farrar, Straus and Giroux | New York

Begin Reading

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Hotel Providence

I was falling asleep on the train. I was going to interview Thomas, who had just turned ninety. My seat was facing opposite the direction of travel, making it difficult to read his latest book, which I was holding in my hand. It upsets my stomach if I try to read while I'm looking the wrong way—or, as my ten-year-old, Eva, put it on a train to Lublin last summer, if I am "facing the past."

I sat staring out the window through the faint reflection of my masked face in the glass. I felt that I needed only to think of a good opening question for the interview and then the conversation would flow. My main concern was that I would somehow fail to record us on my phone, or that I'd manage to delete the voice memos when I tried to send them to the magazine.

I looked away from the window to text Mia: "That was a hard morning."

"We got her there," she responded immediately, probably from her computer.

"Barely."

"But still. Eckert would say to think of it as 'a win.'"

"Yeah. Lmk right away though if you get a call from the school. They always call you."

"Ofc but I doubt they will. I really think she is OK. And anyway the school day's almost done."

I made the thumbs-up. The man in the old-fashioned hat came by to check the tickets. I enlarged the little QR code and he scanned it. Then I put my earbuds in and began to listen to a talk, recorded in Paris in 1973, that Thomas gave about translation. I took a photo of the wintry, postindustrial landscape through my masked reflection as the train picked up speed, and then I checked and deleted the photo and shut my eyes and faced the past. My mentor paused, fifty-one years ago, and poured water into a glass. Someone in the audience coughed twice.

I was in Paris. (I don’t know how else the recording influenced the dream.) I was getting Eva from what must have been her school. I stood outside a tall and ornate wrought-iron fence, waiting for the gates to open. There were other parents and caregivers around, whispering to each other or into their phones. I don’t speak French, but it was clear that people were anxious. The wind was picking up. I heard sirens in the distance. I looked at my phone, but there were no alerts.

The gates swung open and I tried to pass through them, eager to reach my daughter, but a woman—dark, beautiful, familiar, her head covered with a scarf—stopped me, her hand on my chest, and said, “Impossible.” Then I realized that what I’d thought were only scattered groups of parents or caregivers was in fact a line that I’d unintentionally cut. I begged pardon, a thousand pardons, and stepped aside; well-dressed people flowed past me mumbling about my rudeness. I tried to find the back of the line and was shocked to see how far down the street it extended.

As I walked against the direction of the line, night fell. I could see night falling from the trees. Now the wind was pelting me with leaves or seedpods or garbage. There was some kind of grit—sand, maybe—in my teeth and I kept spitting; I was aware that the other parents were rightfully disgusted by me. I had no sense of how much time had elapsed, how long I’d been walking toward the end of the endless line. Then, from a thousand pockets, including mine, came a high-pitched screeching sound. I began to run. In my desperation to reach my daughter I was sprinting away from her.

★ ★ ★

It was a thirteen-minute walk from the Amtrak station to Hotel Providence. I’d selected the hotel online more or less at random; it was four stars, around two hundred dollars a night; the magazine was paying. It was thirty-nine degrees, partly cloudy. I’d turned forty-five a couple of months before Thomas turned ninety. I still had my earbuds in and I was listening to walking directions, even though I knew the way. It wasn’t yet four p.m. but dusk felt imminent, the sun low in the sky.

Hotel Providence was on Mathewson Street. It was across from a church I knew, where I had once seen a play (the fourth floor of the church

was an experimental “theater space”), and beside some sort of clinic. In front of the clinic a small group of people was smoking, arguing, maybe bartering. Two people—I thought I could make out two distinct bodies—were sleeping on the sidewalk in a complex of blankets and cardboard boxes. Across the street, near the front of the church, a drunk woman without a coat was yelling at a man who kept firmly but gently pushing her away as she tried to slap him. The facade of the hotel had been recently refinished, its polish incongruous with the old church and the clinic and the bare life on the street.

The interior of the hotel was vast. I could hear what sounded like live piano music, but saw no piano. I briefly considered masking. After I checked in, I was instructed to walk through the lounge, past various mismatched couches and chairs and stone vases of fake flowers, then to turn left and walk past the signs for the fitness center until I found the elevator, which took me to my room on the fourth floor. The room, like everything else, was oversized: a king bed, a couch, an expansive writing desk. There were two complimentary plastic bottles of water from two different brands.

I looked through my bag for the phone charger and plugged it in and turned on the TV and opened the blinds and half listened to the news as I sat on the bed and stared out the window, which offered a view of the church. I was trying to think of a first question, maybe something about translation, but I was distracted by the idea that a version of myself was still watching the play, which had been put on by friends.

I became aware that the news had shifted from Gaza to Paris: bedbugs in Paris, a recent scourge, maybe exaggerated, but negatively impacting tourism nevertheless. I got off the bed and pulled back the comforter and checked the white sheets for russet traces of dried blood, then lifted the mattress and inspected its bottom edge. They commonly travel in clothes or luggage, but they can also spread through books and dreams.

Eva would be home from afterschool, but before I called her, I needed to call Thomas and tell him that I’d arrived, would be over in an hour. I was strangely hesitant about calling; we never spoke on the phone. We emailed and arranged my very infrequent visits over email. Why was I more nervous about briefly encountering his disembodied voice than spending hours with

his embodied one? “You should write that down,” Eva said in my head. My daughter often said that I should write my questions down.

I muted the TV and called Thomas while hunched awkwardly over the desk so the phone could stay plugged in. I told him that I was here and would come over soon, if that was OK. Of course, I’ve been expecting you, let yourself in; he would have something for us to eat and drink. Then I got in the shower and tried to formulate a question, and when I emerged it was night, the facade of the church yellowed by streetlight. I put on the same clothes in which I’d traveled. I drank down one of the bottles of water, which in my mind was the water Thomas had sipped from fifty years ago in Paris. I unplugged my phone and FaceTimed Mia so I could say hello to Eva.

Eva herself answered. Mia’s phone number was connected to the iPad Eva used for screen time. “Hi, Dada,” she said, sounding calm.

“Hi, my love, what are you doing,” I said, relieved.

“Playing *Fruit Ninja*,” she said.

“That’s the one where you just cut up the fruit?”

“Yup. Mom’s making dinner and she said I could play till she’s done.”

“Where is Luna?” Luna was the rescue we’d adopted early in the pandemic.

Eva turned the camera of the iPad to show me the white dog sleeping on the blue leather couch. “Hi, Luna girl, what are you doing,” I said.

“She doesn’t hear voices or recognize things on screens,” Eva said.

“Why do you think that is?” I asked. And when she didn’t say anything: “How was school?”

“Fine,” she said.

I made myself count to ten to see if she’d elaborate, then: “For me the mornings are often the hardest part of the day,” I said. “For me the day often seems impossible in the morning and then OK once it gets going.”

“Yeah,” she said, maybe listening.

“I’m really anxious about this interview I’m about to do,” I exaggerated, wanting to normalize anxiety.

“You’ll do great,” she quoted.

“Want to see my weird hotel room?”

“I have to beat this level.”

“OK. I’ll FaceTime you later to say good night.”

“OK, promise?”

“Yes.”

“OK, love you, bye,” end-call sound effect.

I brushed my teeth. The sink didn’t drain properly. I had streaked my cheek with toothpaste so I washed my face. Then I reached for my phone, which I’d set in the small steel tray attached to the mirror. I somehow knocked the phone into the water.

★ ★ ★

For the duration of this sentence, it was submerged. I tried to dry it with a towel but my screen was cracked in places and the liquid had seeped in; I watched it spread, like the solution across a rapid antigen test. The screen wouldn’t respond to my touch except to blur a little where I pressed it. The home-screen image of Eva and Mia and Luna was growing abstract around the edges.

I rushed out of the bathroom and did a terrible thing: I plugged it in, perhaps with the childlike instinct that power would help it dry. An error message—I could make out a yellow triangle in a gray box—appeared on the screen when I inserted the cable, and then the phone went black mirror. I carried it in my palm like a small, wounded animal back into the bathroom and removed the wall-mounted hair dryer from its charger.

Eventually I abandoned the bathroom and sat on the bed with my hot device, holding down the side button, praying for the illuminated apple. The most immediate crisis: I now had no way to record Thomas. I hadn’t brought my laptop. He was the only adult I knew without a smartphone. I couldn’t imagine that he’d have any other recording technology. I looked at the alarm clock by the bed: 5:27. There must be an Apple Store in Providence? I hadn’t lived there since well before iPhones existed. I needed my phone to ascertain how I might replace it.

I left my room and called the elevator. Then I passed through the door marked EXIT and raced down the fluorescently lit concrete stairway. When I arrived in a sweat at the front desk, I asked the young woman—she wasn’t

the person who'd checked me in—if there was an Apple Store in town. Of course, she said, in the mall. I asked her if there was a way she could tell me the hours, and she blinked at me. I showed her my dead phone and said it fell into the sink, but it was clear she thought I'd dropped it in the toilet. She produced her own phone, an Android, to Google it; they were open until eight. I felt a wave of relief. I asked her if I could make a call from the hotel phone—there was one on the desk—and she said dial 9. I picked up the receiver, which was unpleasantly warm on my ear, and realized that I didn't know Thomas's number.

I hung up and asked the woman if there was a phone book and she said no; I asked if there was a business center where I could get online and she said no; I asked if I could use her computer really quickly to find a phone number and she said no, because she couldn't access the internet from her "terminal." I asked if I could use her phone, just for a second, to find the number I needed, and she looked alarmed, as though I'd asked to try on her glasses. Please, I said.

As I opened Google on her phone, I imagined telling Thomas that I'd taken a rapid test at the hotel out of an abundance of caution—Thomas had been hospitalized in the first wave—and was positive. I searched his full name and address, which luckily I knew, and the phrase "phone number," but none of the results—real estate sites, background checks—yielded anything. I went to the Whitepages website but it said I had to pay.

I was almost due at Thomas's; if I went to the store without calling him, I would be so late as to worry him, maybe frighten him. And yet if I arrived with no way to record us, how would I account for myself? To tell him the truth seemed impossible. How was it that even though I'd been concerned about bungling the technology I hadn't borrowed a backup recording device from my anthropologist wife? In my head a poet friend who was retraining as an analyst suggested I'd been unconsciously driven to sabotage my interview.

I shut him up and gave the woman her phone back and thanked her. Then I sat down in an oversized leather chair beside a vase of fake purple irises that looked like plastic but when I touched them felt like silk. Here's what you will do, I instructed myself in a voice that seemed to originate

from outside my head, from the chair a few feet to my right. You will go to Thomas's and say: I was thinking this evening we could just catch up, talk off the record about how we'd like to approach the interview, and then tomorrow I'll come over late morning and we can record when we're prepared and fresh.

I took four deliberate breaths. This sounded plausible. I'd be at the Apple Store when it opened the next day, although I hadn't retained the morning hours. One long session of recorded conversation would yield more pages than the magazine would give us anyway. Instinctively, I took out my phone to summon a car to Thomas's house.

★ ★ ★

The revolving door deposited me on the sidewalk in the cold night air. Again my hand reached for the corpse of my phone. I would typically start walking directions on the map—even though I knew the way. And I checked my phone whenever a transition presented itself, whenever I left one space for another, or changed from a standing to a sitting position (or vice versa), or started or stopped walking.

I headed east from the hotel, away from the people talking or sleeping in front of the clinic, and then turned left on Weybosset, passing the glowing red marquee of the Providence Performing Arts Center. I walked north on Weybosset until it curved toward Westminster near the Custom House, a three-story Italianate granite building that reminded me to look for the nearby Custom House Tavern, where I drank as a student, and where, on the eve of Y2K, I heard an elderly regular sing—there was an open mic on Fridays—a slow, deep, a cappella version of Meat Loaf's "Two Out of Three Ain't Bad." More than twenty years later, when Mia and I were in couples therapy, and the therapist asked us to think back to what had initially drawn us to each other in college, Mia mentioned how she'd been moved to see me cry at this man's cover during what she thought of as our first date. (I wasn't thrilled that this was what she managed to come up with.) The bar must have closed. If it weren't for the singer, Eva might not exist; songs are instruments of fate.

Eva: how would I FaceTime her good night as promised? As I crossed the Providence River on one of the brick pedestrian bridges, I felt the echo of the desperation from my dream. At least I did know Mia's number—the only active number I knew by heart; I also remembered the number to my childhood home—so I could call them from Thomas's landline before nine. (Eva would want to hear, again and again, and in forensic detail, the story of how I'd drowned my phone; like every kid I knew, she longed for one, which she insisted she should get when she turned eleven in a few months.) Thomas and Eva: the two people I loved who didn't have smartphones, excepting the dead.

But as I made my way up College Street, past the war memorials and the court buildings, the reality of Eva receded from me, or I thought of her as safe, singing along to "Anti-Hero" in an adjacent world. I was surprised to feel less upset about my phone as I walked, confident as I was that I'd have a new one in the morning. I was experiencing a withdrawal indistinguishable from mild intoxication, the landscape made strange, the stones stonier, by my being suddenly offline, incapable of taking pictures, sending or receiving data packets, sharing my location, getting a MyChart alert or a work email or a small toxic hit of news or shitposting; I was having an unusual experience of presence—more aware of silicates glittering in the asphalt, the little plumes of vapor that were my breath, the articulation of branches and their shadows on the sidewalk—but I was also walking into my past, because this was a landscape so dense with formative memories and events, and because only in the past would I be deviceless. If I had a working phone, I thought, I could take a picture of the front of the Providence Athenaeum on Benefit Street, where Poe courted Sarah Whitman, and send it to the forty-four-year-old Mia, but since I didn't, I half expected to see the twenty-year old version of her leaning against one of the columns, fishing the blue American Spirits out of her messenger bag, her black hair—not yet streaked with silver—wrapped up with a yellow cloth.

As I continued up College, the ghosts gained flesh: that kid with the hooded sweatshirt who just passed me head down—had he looked up, he might well have been Arjun a few years before he fell from the window in

St. Petersburg; the older woman in the long down coat leaving the List Art Center as I passed became Caroline Sharpe, a professor who told our class, after someone complimented her necklace, that she kept a cyanide capsule in its opal locket for use in case of nuclear war, a practice she and her friends had started in the late sixties, when they were students, and which had led me to half suspect that any pendant concealed poison. But it wasn't just people: the light arriving from the stars was younger, too, the birds dreaming in the tree cavities were the birds of the past, growth rings had vanished from the trees in which they slept—and this time travel depended on my being prevented from checking on Eva or Googling "songbird life expectancy" or "Caroline Sharpe" as I walked uphill.

When I arrived at the main gates of the campus, I recognized them from the dream, or recognized that the dreamt gates were based on these; I would have had to use my phone to find the phrase "déjà rêvé." Now I was back in the same world as Eva, I was forty-five again and worrying about my daughter, who was flirting with what the school counselor called "school refusal." They could be trying to reach me; Eva might have panicked about something, might need to hear my voice. I stopped alongside University Hall and got out my phone again, but of course it wouldn't light. I was trying to turn my attention toward Thomas and the interview when someone called my name.

The woman who'd hailed me must have emerged from one of the campus buildings, even though all the windows I could see were dark. She was wearing a wool poncho and carrying two reusable grocery bags, one on each shoulder, full of books and folders. She was my age, heavy, handsome. She approached me with the confidence of someone sure that she'd be recognized and she set down the bags in a way that implied she expected us to embrace. We did; she smelled like lavender and Listerine. What are you doing here, she asked when we separated, why are you wandering around this campus at night? I said something about being in town briefly to interview Thomas while I scrambled for her name; she discerned my confusion and offered, mercifully: Chloe.

By the time she got to the second syllable, I knew her: Chloe had been close friends with Anisa, who was for a time Mia's best friend and

roommate. I vaguely remembered hearing that she'd been hired here, maybe in sociology. I hugged her again. We asked about each other's partners and work and exchanged some familiar language about the disaster of the world before I told her I wished we could catch up more but a nonagenarian was expecting me, etc. Let me give you my number, she said as we prepared to part.

"My phone is broken." It sounded like a lie, so I produced the phone to prove it, trying again to turn it on, explaining about the sink. She told me I should put the phone in a bowl of rice. Then she entered my number into her contacts and texted me so that I'd have hers if and when I "rejoined the world." (I don't understand where a message lingers, or for how long, when there isn't a device to receive it.) We laughed and said we'd be in touch, knowing we wouldn't, and as we separated, I heard myself ask, "Hey, what do you hear from Anisa?"

★ ★ ★

The fall of our junior year, Mia spent a semester in Granada, where she fell in love with a man named Andrés. When she told me—she was on a pay phone in Zaidín, I was on a dorm-room phone in Providence—I fell apart. It was conventional undergraduate stuff, but then, so is suicide.

I was in the hospital for ten days of winter break. When I was more or less functional again and was back on campus, I almost never saw Mia, even though we had friends in common and the social world was small. I saw her at one party at Arjun's; I caught a glimpse of her from a distance at the library; I'd seen her in the audience at a "town hall" regarding a string of sexual assaults. One unseasonably warm afternoon I encountered Anisa, who over the break had shaved her head and pierced her septum. She'd spread out a blanket on the green, as students did, and was reading *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I approached her and said hello and asked where Mia was. I didn't know how Anisa would receive me, but her look was kind. I sat down beside her.

She wasted no time: Andrés had moved to New York, was working construction with Mia's father, who was the foreman of a crew that laid subway tracks at night. They had an apartment in Washington Heights, near

the 191st Street stop. Andrés had managed to bring his dog from Spain, a big adjustment for Mia. Andrés was in the process of getting a work visa; Mia was trying to transfer to Columbia, where she'd get a teaching degree. Eventually she wanted to teach ESL at a small high school in the South Bronx, where her mom was once AP. Mia was barely on campus, Anisa said; she was taking a class or two, but she was almost always in the city, so it wasn't surprising that I never saw her.

I must have been very white as I listened to Anisa's brutally detailed account of Mia's new life. Whatever remaining hope I harbored of getting back together was destroyed. I lit one cigarette from another, unthinkingly pulling up handfuls of grass; Anisa saw how upset I was and, to my surprise, asked me if I wanted to come have tea at her (and Mia's) place, which was the first floor of a house on Waterman, not far from campus.

I can see us standing in the light-flooded kitchen, Anisa handing me the mug of hibiscus tea, which I didn't drink. Is it weird to be here, she asked. When I tried to speak, my voice cracked; I was overwhelmed by the mixture of proximity and distance, the presence of Mia's absence. Anisa put down her tea and came and hugged me, another surprise, at which point I started sobbing—despite my embarrassment and therapeutic dose of Prozac. She walked me to the couch—Tomás, the orange cat they'd rescued, fled at our approach—and I wept until I experienced a powerful, almost sexual relief. We went to eat at the Thai place on Thayer Street.

From that point on I saw Anisa frequently. I'd come by the house—did I just show up or call first on a landline? or email her to fix a time?—always hoping and fearing that Mia would be in town, but she never was. Anisa and I would hit her bong, watch a movie, or listen to what was for me entirely new music. (Anisa was studying musicology; she was always saying things I only half understood about the gamelan.) We quickly became what I thought of as good friends, although there was an unmistakable charge, a complex charge since part of it was my attraction to Anisa, and part of it my desire to access Mia through her. We'd end up entwined on the couch or on Anisa's futon staring at the ceiling as she let me know the latest from New York: Mia and Andrés had moved to Inwood because the Washington Heights place had black mold; they had to part

with the dog, which was tough; Andrés broke a couple of fingers and had to take a month off; they might go to San Juan until he can go back to work.

At first I was addicted to the pain of hearing news of their life together, but soon it became a way of measuring my pain's diminishment. I realized, as time passed, how much less upset I was by this or that detail or image than I would have been even a month before, not to mention three or four—I was still young enough that months were long—and so listening to the updates became reassuring, less melancholy attachment than a stage of mourning.

One early May weekend Anisa and I took the bus to Boston. I was visiting an aunt who was a nurse in Cambridge; Anisa was seeing a friend from home who went to Berklee College of Music. Anisa suggested that we meet up together late in the afternoon at the glass flowers, which I'd never heard of, at the Natural History Museum on the Harvard campus. (We had to agree on a time we couldn't alter by text; I had to have my aunt draw me a map.) We met at the museum entrance, which was flanked, at least in my memory, by blossoming cherries; Anisa kissed me hello on the cheek, something she normally didn't do.

We got our tickets and walked through the rooms of sparkling minerals and pinned iridescent beetles until we found the large, dimly lit gallery dedicated to the flowers, botanical models made by glass artists—a father and son—from Dresden a century ago. A woman sat in a chair at the entrance of the room to welcome visitors and instruct them not to take photographs (of course we didn't have cameras; now it's twenty years since I've been to a museum without one), not to touch or lean against the cases; it might be a false memory that she asked us to keep our voices low.

We entered a large room full of dark wooden display cases containing thousands of anatomically perfect flowers in perpetual bloom, but also models of fruit in intricate, perpetual decay: strawberries turning ghostly with mold, peaches collapsing inward on a branch, leaves curling at their edges. (I loved the names of the diseases on the placards, and read them aloud to Anisa as we moved among the specimens: brown rot, soft rot, blue mold, stony pit, pear scab, fire blight, leaf spot.)

I was astonished by what I saw. I couldn't quite believe that this moth orchid was glass, that this pear blossom was lampwork, that these objects had been blown and shaped and painted, that these impossibly delicate things were the result of a thousand rapid choices and adjustments, movements of the hand. (That I'd recently read about the firebombing of Dresden in one of my classes with Thomas, seen slides of the ruined city, added another layer of pathos to the brittle flowers.) I joked with Anisa that these must be actual plants that some conceptual artist was claiming were glass—they probably replaced them each night—but the joke masked the flowering of a new sense: I kept seeing the flowers as organic one instant and as artificial the next, a kind of duck–rabbit effect, not between things the object might represent, but between nature and culture, the given and the constructed. And I carried this new way of looking, or this new hinge in my looking, outside the museum: when my sister dragged me camping, for instance, I was typically unmoved by "unspoiled" mountain views; after the glass flowers, I would see cracks in the rock face as penciled, as a history of small decisions, and then experience the view as beautiful. I could will myself to see the rose and pink of a sunset as *applied* in touches or stains and then revert to seeing it as natural; and so on. It was with Anisa that I first became conscious of this quiet but crucial technique, somewhere between a child's game, a CBT exercise, and a religion. Eventually I'd call this "fiction."

And say that as I stood in the dim, quiet room with Anisa—there were few other visitors that afternoon— I sensed that the tiny stems and styles and petals surrounding us were vibrating imperceptibly, or maybe just perceptibly, from our footsteps and voices, that the little wires in the models could register even our breath, but also that the specimens were trembling from the exhalations and voices and footsteps of all the people who had ever been in their presence, still vibrating, too, from the journey by boat from Europe (how could the fragile things have survived such a trip in their velvet-lined cases?), vibrating with the street life of Dresden outside the workshop where the father and son sat softening tiny tubes and rods in a jet of flame. The flowers were recording instruments of exquisite sensitivity;

their glass anthers captured someone pouring a glass of water, the turning of a page.

★ ★ ★

We're not in touch, Chloe said, but I know from Instagram that she's in Atlanta. I think she's a dean at some kind of private high school. We were both silent for a moment before I said that's cool.

I exited the campus onto Thayer Street and walked toward Waterman. I turned right on Waterman so I could pass the building where Anisa had held me in the kitchen at the end of my childhood. I imagined that the untouched mug of tea was still steaming on the counter, where it would steep forever. Then I made my way east to Governor Street, where Thomas lived, near the intersection with Benevolent.

Every time I saw Thomas's red-brick-and-yellow-shingle colonial house —he once told me it had been built for a "prosperous hatter"—it seemed to have retreated from the street a little more. I'd never passed through the large front entrance with its projecting portico; everybody used the side door, which was left unlocked.

Thomas had said to let myself in, but I knocked loudly and waited for a while before I opened the door. (Whenever anyone told me to let myself in, I half expected to discover their body.) On the landing—to my right the stairs descended into a dark basement—I stomped several times, as if there were snow on my boots, although it had been a winter without snow, then I opened the interior door and entered the hall and called out hello.

It is unlikely that the piano music playing in Thomas's house was the same composition that I'd heard in the lobby of Hotel Providence, but I experienced it as such, the way some films hand off their theme from one site to another as the action unfolds. I remember the music now as one of Satie's *Gymnopédies*, but that's probably false; when Eva was three, she'd fall asleep to that piece (and that piece only), which I would play on my phone, watching her little carousel night-light throw its stars across the wall.

I heard Thomas moving around in the kitchen and so turned left and walked toward it and almost collided with him as he emerged with a tray.

Ah, good, take this, he said. I'd always encountered Thomas in medias res: when you visited, you were swept into some task or conversation, skipping over the conventional greetings. This was a relief because Thomas was one of those people I didn't know how to touch; a handshake would seem too businesslike; a hug was *impossible*—the word in my head was French.

I took the tray from his hands and followed him into the living room—his motions would have been quick for a man of seventy, a man of sixty—where he indicated the low table on which he wanted me to place the tray. Only when I set it down did I register its contents: a white porcelain carafe, one of those miniature stainless-steel pitchers for milk or cream, a plate piled with the French cookies that have the schoolboy embossed in chocolate on one side. Wasn't it strange to be serving coffee this late, and before any of the food he'd mentioned when I'd called? I'd expected his famous sauerbraten.

"It's so good to see you," I said.

"Good, very good. I'll take your coat." His eyes were renowned for their green. His white hair was thicker than mine and always carefully parted, unless it somehow fell that way. He wore, as ever, black slacks, a white button-down shirt under a black sweater. When out of the house, he added a black jacket.

I took off my coat and handed it to him, instinctually patting my pants pocket to confirm I wasn't separating from my phone. Throw it anywhere, I said, but Thomas left the room to hang it in the hall closet.

I sat down where I always sat, beside the screened fireplace in the surprisingly comfortable teak lounge chair with wine-stained beige cushions. The room was dim, its one source of light a shaded ceramic table lamp. Thomas must have gone to the bathroom or back to the kitchen, leaving me time to peruse the walls, which were almost entirely covered with frames of various sizes, a mixture of art Thomas had been given and bric-a-brac that he'd collected.

Here was a photomontage, by or reminiscent of Hannah Höch, in which an image of an African mask was spliced with the head of a girl who might have been Shirley Temple, displayed next to a small, only half-finished cross-stitching of the word "Bake," which I always misread as "Blake."

There were three different small canvases depicting the socialist fraternal kiss between Erich Honecker and Brezhnev in different styles—one depicted the kiss abstracted into cubist shapes and volumes, another was Caravaggesque in its chiaroscuro, the third involved a mixture of verisimilitude and blur that recalled Gerhard Richter. A series of little cameo portraits of German philosophers eventually gave way to several similarly sized cockleshells Thomas had collected from the beaches of Rhode Island. And Thomas Cromwell—it was a print of Holbein's portrait—stared out of the frame in apparent disgust at a Sigmar Polke image of a satyr coupling with a woman, little multicolored buttons affixed to the picture's surface. What ever happened to that digital model of his house and collections those grad students planned to make?

Most of the other rooms were lined with bookcases, but here the only books were piled on the couch and floor—recent arrivals that he hadn't yet finished or shelved. There was a stack of Alexander Kluge books (in German) still in their plastic wrap; a pile of Osamu Dazai books, which at that point I hadn't read; there was a new edition of Emily Dickinson's letters on top of some old hymnals he must have pulled from other rooms. Beside me on the end table were several recent poetry titles from a small press called The Song Cave. I picked up one of those.

But I couldn't attend to the poems. I wanted—I needed—to check my texts, my email, to swipe and scroll and photograph, to frame and filter and archive, to share my location, etc., so as not only, not fully, to be where I was; since at least 2008, to be where I was was too much for me, or too little. I put down the book and removed my phone from my pocket and pressed the side buttons and put it back in my pocket. I stood up to take a closer look at an area of wall where there were several studies of hands in red chalk, but I was faking it; my eyes were saccadic; my fingers were involved in some weird Saint Vitus' dance at my sides; I kept shifting my weight back and forth. I wasn't merely distracted, I was offline, a state of exception. When I was walking up the hill into the past, my body was able to convert the strangeness of being screenless into a kind of supersensitivity, but now that I had arrived (You have arrived at your destination, said the British GPS voice in my head), I was glitching, craving

my cellular phone on a cellular level, shamefully unresponsive to the old media that surrounded me: books, paintings, analog photographs, a vinyl record spinning somewhere in my mentor's house.

★ ★ ★

What I did not want or need was coffee. Thomas swept back into the room and said sit, sit, and poured out two cups as though he had already asked me if I'd like any. Your hotel is OK, he inquired, handing me the cup, which I felt unable to refuse.

"It's fine," I said, taking a fictional sip of coffee and setting the cup down beside the lamp. I wondered what time it was. "Nice. It's strange because it's across from where I once saw a play. The hotel has an ominous name. Hotel Providence."

"A good title, no? What is the theater it is across from?"

"It was in a church. The fourth floor of the church has a little black box theater. It was a student play. My room is across from it and I kept imagining that a version of myself is still in the theater."

"Yes. No one ever leaves a theater. A black box theater. Like the black box of an airplane. That is recovered. Like Schrödinger. The superposition of theaters." For Thomas, to listen to a story was to become involved in its composition. His speech was as rapid as his movements, often delivered in little puffs, often with his eyes shut, like a child—I'd once told him—dispersing the seeds of a dandelion after having made a wish. Yes, he'd said, or like the cave artists of Patagonia, who, nine thousand years ago, blew pigment from their mouths, creating a halo effect around the hands they held against the wall of their cave. "When the black box is opened in one universe, a dead cat is revealed. In the other universe—but what was this play, the one you are still seeing, forever seeing, across from your hotel?"

"I don't remember the plot or if it had one. But there was a scene I loved. My friend Arjun was one of the actors. He played a professor. He was giving some kind of lecture or preparing to. Do you remember overhead projectors, the ones where you placed a transparency on the glass __"

“Yes, the transparencies.”

“And you could write on them with markers, dry erase.”

“And the students are taking notes.”

“Yes, a primitive screen.”

“Or advanced cave painting.” The one color photograph I’d seen on Thomas’s walls was of the Cueva de las Manos.

“They were already antiquated by the time I saw the play. I remember them from elementary school. So Arjun was wearing this oversized suit, big shoulder pads; he looked really funny. It made his head look small. And he walks to the overhead projector that somebody has wheeled out to the center of the stage—”

“There is a stage? I don’t see it. There is a raised platform?”

“No, you’re right—not a stage, just the center of the space. There’s a pitcher of water and a glass on a little table by the projector. Arjun puts on a transparency, hesitatingly, a nervous professor getting ready to lecture. There is some hard-to-decipher writing now projected onto the wall. He tries to take a sip of water before he begins, but he somehow spills it on the transparency. We see the liquid wash over the projection, dissolving the ink. And it’s unclear if this is part of the play or a mistake.”

“Or part of the play *and* a mistake. This is the third option that becomes possible in art. What color ink?”

“Blue, purple, I don’t know. Not black, I don’t think.”

“A blue wash, lovely. I see it.”

“And then he mumbles some kind of apology—”

“Mille pardons.”

“—and puts another transparency up there and—”

“And he does it again. It is a performance.”

“Yes. He takes another sip and this time he coughs, the water has gone down the wrong pipe, and he spits water on the transparency, and then he wipes it with his hand, ‘So sorry.’ Or maybe he produced a handkerchief. And he gets another transparency, and then spills more water. Lots of laughter.”

“Erasing the writing on the wall.”

“And again. It stops being funny and grows strangely beautiful. Like watching a window in a downpour. And he’s making these mumbling apologies that soon become just noise.”

“Babble.”

“Otherwise total silence and total dark in the theater.”

“This is a good play, good pedagogy. I never lecture, but I like this lecturer. You can’t do such things with video. And Arjun, the professor, where is he these days?”

“I don’t know. How are you? You look good. You look the same.”

“You do not notice any changes in me?”

“No.”

“Good. Soon I am traveling to Switzerland. And your beautiful wife. And your beautiful daughter. What is their news?”

“I’ve never been to Switzerland. They are good. Mia sends her love. Well, Eva has had some struggles. Actually, do you know what time it is?”

“Struggles?”

“She has a lot of anxiety about school. Or she’s anxious about various things and it manifests in her not wanting to go to school. In fact I need to call her soon, to check in.”

“What is happening at school? Or has happened?”

“We don’t know exactly. I mean, one thing is that her best friend has kind of left her for another girl. And I think she’s scared of the transition to middle school. And I think, well, there are the disasters of the world. Everything with Covid. The sky orange with Canadian wildfire smoke. There was that day of floods, we were almost swept away on the expressway. There is the war—the wars—the political—”

“But there has not been a trauma at the school? An event she cannot share?”

It was as though someone had placed an ice pack against the back of my neck. “No, I don’t think any one bad thing has happened. We have asked her a lot of questions. We have—actually, let me call them really quickly to check in; can I use the phone in the kitchen—”

“Yes, yes. Or use your phone in any room.”

“I’ll be right back,” I said, and rose. I walked into the dining room en route to the kitchen but stopped at the sight of the dining room table: there was an unopened packet of smoked salmon, a basket of dinner rolls, a large plate of asparagus in some kind of yellow sauce, another plate on which a few slices of what looked like sandwich cheese had been piled. There was a bowl of strawberries; even in the dim light I could see a few were moldy. There was a bottle of red wine breathing beside the fruit.

In the kitchen, there were several plastic gallon bottles of water on the floor, maybe waiting to be moved to the basement. An ironing board was leaning against the oven. I felt cold air entering from the window by the sink; the top sash was hanging down a few inches from the frame. The little breakfast table was covered in old Sunday editions of the *Times*; it had been years since I’d seen so much paper news. On the counters were several half-full cups of water, coffee, maybe tea. I’d only ever seen the kitchen immaculate. The clock on the stove was flashing 12:00.

I removed the receiver, heard the dial tone, which sounded like the Tuvan throat singing Anisa used to play me. I dialed Mia and it went straight to voicemail. As I waited for her recorded voice to finish, I tried my own phone again and then scanned the shelves for rice. Hey, love, it’s me. I’m having trouble with my phone, I dropped it in the sink so I’m calling from Thomas’s landline. I will try again soon to say good night to Eva. I hung up the phone, then immediately lifted it again—like an actor doing another take—and then hung up when it again went to voicemail. I wondered if Thomas’s name and number would show up on her phone or if it would say “Spam Risk” or “Unknown Caller,” a phrase that sounded Victorian to me.

I rejoined Thomas in the living room and said I’d have to try again later. When I sat down I became aware of how hungry I was. “Did you eat?” I asked.

“Do you want something more to eat?” he said.

In my mind I said: “I mean did you have dinner,” but I didn’t speak. I was reviewing the incoherence of the dining room table, the disorganization of the kitchen. “No,” I said, taking a cookie. “These are great.”

“And the beautiful Mia. And your beautiful daughter. What is their news?”

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“So I thought we could just catch up a little and discuss how to approach this interview—I’m really grateful you agreed to do this; I know you don’t like to ‘sit’ for them—and then tomorrow we could record for a few hours. That will give us plenty. I mean, there’s no way we can cover everything, just a couple of the genres you founded or dissolved. And we’ll have to whittle it down to five thousand words.”

“You will also contribute, yes? How you came to be here, and your art, should be part of it.”

“It’s you they want to hear from. The ‘interviewer’ is pretty anonymous, they’ll edit me out. I thought—”

“How you have arrived at Governor Street, from Oklahoma—”

“Omaha. Nebraska.”

“The Nature Theater of Omaha. But also the elements of your body formed in stars. And some lithium from the big bang. Like the lithium in your phone. It is the lightest of all metals.” This was how Thomas always talked, sudden changes of scale, rapid juxtapositions of images and registers.

“I’m aware you don’t often discuss your childhood, your family, but these interviews involve a lot of biography.”

“I am happy to speak of my family. And they speak through me, my accents.”

“OK, good, because we are supposed to start—not with the big bang, but early.”

“Yes, we begin with my first memory. Which is the radio. But you should start recording us now?”

“I was thinking that we could do the actual recording tomorrow. But to prepare a little: Are there things that you don’t want me to ask about? Obviously, we can always cut things, but if there are topics—”

“Yes, but the cut, the meaning is in the cut, the splice. So what you cut is present, the dark matter. So better not to ask. Valéry says God made the

world from nothing but the nothingness shines through. Tell me, do you know Werner Schroeter?”

“No.”

“He is my family, in a sense. I saw him in a dream last night. There is a portrait of him somewhere on the wall. He was like a brother, but I knew him very little.”

“Right, you’re talking about influence, family resemblances among artists? But it sounds like there is nothing that’s really off-limits?”

“I do not talk about Max in interviews.” I was a year ahead of Max in college. At one point we’d been close friends, helping each other through our respective crises.

“Totally fine. Though I am curious about why.”

“Only because I don’t want to speak for him, especially with you. He became very angry at me recently for my forgetfulness. He angers easily. That is from his mother.”

“How is he? Is he still in L.A.? We haven’t been in touch in a couple of years.”

“Mostly they are in Los Angeles with its fires and atmospheric rivers, and sometimes they are in Berlin. And he is always traveling because the law firm has offices everywhere. Like you he loves Madrid. He is good. He has his family, his daughter, too.”

“Yes, I’ve met his sweet girl, Emmie. No questions about Max. I didn’t really have any. But send him my regards.”

“Yes. My granddaughter has some trouble with eating, she will eat very little, but it is fine now, I think. You take more coffee?”

“Oh no.”

“Wine?”

“Oh yes.”

Thomas laughed, got up quickly, was back in no time with the bottle from the dining room table and a water glass. “This is OK?”

“Sure.”

Thomas filled the glass with red wine. “Are you having any?” I asked.

“I give it up for now,” he said.

I took two large, delicious swallows. Thomas watched me closely as though to track the effects of a medicine or poison he had administered. (A medicine *and* a poison, the third option.) Our eyes met and we both laughed at his attention to my drinking. He refilled my glass to its previous level and set the bottle down. The alcohol said: So a man of ninety is forgetful, has some gaps, moments of confusion. So a ten-year-old has growing pains. Apple Stores will open by nine. “The radio,” I said. “Your first memory involves the radio?”

“Yes, but you are recording?” he asked. “Otherwise we repeat ourselves and it grows unnatural. We will sound like bad actors. Even the transcript will show that we have rehearsed.”

“Right,” I said, “let’s wait until tomorrow for the first memories, the radio.”

“But here we are talking,” he said. “So we begin, OK? That’s why I turned the music off. And we do not know what a day brings forth.”

I swallowed more wine. “OK,” I heard myself say.

“You are already recording?” Again I met his eyes. I felt the room had grown darker. Did he think, in his confusion, that I had already set up a device? Or did he somehow know, with his famous powers of observation, that I’d arrived without the necessary tools? Or did he mean something figurative by “recording”?

“Yes,” I said, removing the phone from my pocket and placing it face down on my side of the lamp. “We are recording.”

Thomas smiled: “A little black box.”

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“You were saying that your earliest memories involve the radio?”

“The first experience of voice is disembodied, yes? Voices heard in utero: your mother’s voice, your father’s. The postman’s. Your sister singing ‘*Ein Männlein steht im Walde*.’ The uncle. They talk to you, ‘Hello in there,’ but also you overhear. When my uncle visits my father, for instance, my mother, carrying me, brings them their coffee. Perhaps on this tray. In utero, you hear news, jokes, locutions. Maybe I hear the joke, my

father’s only joke, about the student and the cup of coffee. Do you know this joke?”

“I don’t think I know any jokes about students or coffee. You were born in Augsburg, right?”

“Augsburg, yes. The joke from the inflation. That he, the student, sees on the menu the coffee for five thousand marks. That he has two cups of coffee but they total fourteen thousand marks. That the waiter says, With this inflation, if you want to save money, you must order your coffees at the same time. My father would always laugh, but his laughter was lined with anger. Do you take more coffee? Wine?”

“Wine, thanks. They—the magazine—want background, basic facts. How did your father make a living, for example. He was an engineer?”

“Yes. Bridges, dams. But what I am saying is that radio, it is a recovery. Of the voice without the body. That like everything new, it is also ancient. The truly new touches something before the merely recent. This I like about Freud—much I don’t like—that every discovery is rediscovery. Cinema recovers cave. This is Plato, too. Anamnesis. Because for all of us the first experience of language is voices traveling through the mother’s body.”

“Including hers.”

“Yes. And we are driven to recover this. But on the radio, you see, it was Hitler’s voice, rising and rising in pitch. And this is my first sound memory. Maybe that is all we say in your interview about Hitler?”

“You were born in 1933?”

“Thirty-four. In my memory his voice rises without end. It’s strange that our brains will allow this—to hear a scale as eternally ascending, an impossible staircase. This is a wondrous but terrible fact of our wiring, how clockwise movement across the pitch class creates this impression. Pitch circularity, it is called. Or a Shepard tone. In psychoacoustics, which is a beautiful field, a quantum field. You must read my friend Diana Deutsch, as I’ve told you before. C-sharp is heard as higher than C; D as higher than C-sharp; D-sharp as higher than D; and so on endlessly. I think if I were interviewing me, what the businessmen call the ‘exit interview’—”

“This is hardly an—”

“—I would begin by asking about the airwaves of my youth, the ether. That I was a child when there were these angels and devils that spoke at a distance. It was not so new, of course, the radio, but it was all I knew, it was never off. And none of this was so for my parents, when they were born. I am making this distinction.”

“It was always on at home?”

“It is maybe silly to be so literal now? It is late for the literal, no? We practice literature, not law. It was on even when off. Because it structured experience even when quiet. I will make a scene for you, establish a shot. When I go to my uncle’s farm after the bombing begins, in the winter, we take—we get yelled at for taking—a little of the warm water to the goats. They cannot drink very cold water. I am giving you this image of my walking carefully so as not to spill the water, and it is the air of 1945 around me now, when I am your daughter’s age; voices are darting through it, the air, they might perturb the surface of the water, a different medium that I carry over frozen ground, you see? How does your lovely daughter, somehow her name, I lose the names—”

“I call her Eva in this book.”

“How does Eva conceive of the air, the ether, with its signals? This is the question—the state of the ether— I take up in all my writing, films, plays. So it would open with my walking with warm water for the goat, Amalia, funny that I have her name, and the air is full of voices, yes? We begin with the voices, not the bombs. And it is a split screen, with my father walking over the same frozen ground, also with his water pail, but it is 1901, and so the air is distinct. Different waves move through it. We make this film, OK? The question is how to depict the historical changes in atmosphere.”

“OK.”

“In the film I am imagining, we will place a radio in every scene, maybe a Telefunken like my family’s. My mother would sometimes cover it with a cloth at night, as with a mirror during mourning. But the boy—I am the boy —cannot himself see it in the shot; it is there on the farm, half covered by hay, and then in the rubble when we go to the city, but the people cannot see it, they are hauling away bodies, debris, but their hands or shovels pass

right through the Telefunken, the way angels are often invisible to the human figures in a painting. And yet the film music issues from this radio inside the frame. There are different frequencies."

"So was cinema also there for you from the beginning, even from a young—"

"You should be asking me: What is this film music? What music do we hear that the child can't, that the people looking for heirlooms or potatoes in the rubble can't? Air looms. I am sorry to tell you what to ask. But there is always music playing that we cannot hear: beneath twenty hertz or higher than twenty thousand. We are deaf to the bats singing in ultrasound, or the elephants conversing in their infrasound, slow waves that travel miles and pass through rock. We did not know the elephants spoke until someone accidentally sped up a field recording—at least we Westerners had no idea. But none of us truly knows what's in the air; that is one of few universals. A negative universal. The air is alive with messages. Messengers, angels.

"Negative angels."

"Yes, good. The question is: Do we have ears to hear? Although sometimes we listen without them. Beethoven would bite a stick connected to the piano so that he could 'hear' through the bones. I like this: 'Ode to Joy,' the anthem of Europe, through a stick. There is listening beyond the cochlear, yes? And all of this is true of time, too, not only sound. Vibrations from the past or future may also be received, perhaps also through the teeth. Or through your pen, the poet as seismographer. Anyway, you know my first publication was on film music. And it caused me problems with Hanns Eisler."

"Remind me, who is Eisler?"

"We start over. Tonight we work our way to the first question. When we are sure we have the first question we can stop. There is a long stretch of black leader. We remain in the black leader of our interview. Then the camera is looking down into the warm water, then you ask the first question in voice-over. You can ask me again about my father."

"He was an engineer?"

"He was a coward. Not physically. Metaphysically. Like most people he needed the radio to tell him his beliefs. Radio beliefs whistled through him.

He joined the party very early. My mother felt he looked like Willy Fritsch. Do you know that Fritsch says the first line in a German film? The first talkie, I mean. Something about saving money to buy a horse. How strange to be the first to speak in a medium. It is hard, with inflation, even for a star to save money for horses. He did, my father, have beautiful eyes. Beauty in the eyes is not only a question of color. Their far look when he was calculating, when he lifts his eyes from the paper: f is the force, ρ the density of water, g is the acceleration due to gravity, and so on. I've always liked this locution, 'a far look.' Distance flooding into features. He would be calculating what they could withstand, his dams. We lived between the Lech and the Wertach."

"Those are rivers?"

"Yes. But these were the wrong calculations because he was not considering destruction from the air. That hadn't occurred to him because ours was a town of no strategic importance. Water was the wrong medium. But a good first question for a magazine interview, no? 'I come from Omaha, I have traveled for many years'—how old are you today?"

"Forty-five."

"'I have been traveling toward you for forty-five years,' the interviewer says, 'to ask you to describe your father's eyes.'"

"What color were they?"

"My father's?"

"Is that where the green comes from?"

"I think blue. It is strange not to be sure. Or maybe I repress it? Mengele injected adrenaline into children's eyes to change their color."

"What about your mother's?"

"I see them as black-and-white, as in the photographs, but they were light brown. More than color, I recall their far looks. For my mother, this is only at the piano. The appearance of a distance. The blue of your—of Virginie, Max's mother, remains available. That data is stored in my body here. And here."

"I fell asleep on the train today and had a dream. There was a woman in it and I wonder if she resembled Virginie."

"Tell me this dream."

“I was picking up Eva, I guess from school. But it was in France. It was dusk and there was a lot of tension in the air. I kind of cut in line, and a beautiful woman wearing a headscarf stopped me, and I think maybe it was Virginie, my approximation of her from photographs. I don’t know why it would be her, maybe just because I was coming to see you?”

“Did she speak?”

“She told me I couldn’t pass.”

“Those are her words? No, I don’t imagine her speaking these words.”

“I think she said, she put her hand out to stop me and said, ‘Impossible.’ Just one word.”

“In English or in French?”

“French. It would be great to talk about her poetry, maybe tomorrow, about your translations—”

“Yes, that was one of her words. I can hear it. And you see your daughter in the dream? Her face?”

“I never see her in my dreams, not even when they’re about her.”

“But perhaps it isn’t about her, perhaps she isn’t in the dream? Instead you are picking up Max from his primary school. It was on the rue du Ranelagh. We lived in Paris seven years. It is my dream, I believe. Or Max’s. A problem with Freud is he thinks we dream only our own dreams. She could be speaking to me—she gives you that word to deliver to me because she doesn’t want me to go to Switzerland. That I am cutting in line. I cannot remember my own dreams, so she visits you.”

“But last night, you said you dreamt of Werner—I can’t remember his last name.”

“Werner Schroeter? I told you that last night?”

“Yes. No, I meant—”

“I have not dreamt of him. I have not recalled a dream since I had glass in my lungs, the ground glass.”

“I must have misunderstood.”

“Virginie had nothing to do with Werner. She admired *Der Tod der Maria Malibran* but they did not know each other to speak of. You are confused on this point.”

“I see. I’m sorry.”

“But we said we would not speak of Virginie—not when we are recording? I have received her message from you. Otherwise—”

“I thought you said—”

“—we give her her privacy. She was also forty-five. No, six. Forty-seven. I lose the numbers and the names. We could say that there is a dam in the eyes that breaks—and then the distance rushes in. And she could not tolerate this. Did you know all melanin is brown; it is how the light strikes the iris, how it is reflected to the eyes of the other, that gives them color. Blue eyes, it is Rayleigh scattering—”

“Like the sky.”

“The blue sky. It would be good in a movie to have the eyes of the actors changing color across scenes, I mean without anyone within the story knowing. So in a sense her eyes aren’t blue unless we look at her. This is true of green, too. Until you interview me my eyes are brown, no? Like everyone else. Unless I look in the mirror. I like this phrase: ‘All light is social.’”

“Who said that?”

“What?”

“‘All light is social.’”

“You did, in your poem.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then I say it, just now.”

“Right. OK, no questions about Virginie or Max. A little about your childhood and then we can really focus on the work. Tonight is the leader and tomorrow we dig in. It is astounding, humbling, to think that by the time you were my age—”

“But we must finish the dream. What happens after you—but you are me—what happens after we are stopped by Virginie, after you receive her message?”

“I tried to find the back of the line, to get into the line, so I could get Eva.”

“And you find the end? And you finally enter the courtyard?”

“No, I woke up while I was trying to get to the back of the line.”

“And you hear sirens.”

“Did I mention sirens?”

“It’s because of the attack, it is September ’86 in this dream. Max is seven. And I am always late. I am reviewing proofs of my history of illumination—”

“I want to ask you about that book. Speaking of social light. You suggest this continuum—”

“—and the girl, the woman, who was helping us returned to Poland. I don’t have her name. It cannot also be Amalia. And Virginie, she is at that point nocturnal. The afternoon is the dawn for her. A mother who kisses her child good morning at night, good night in the morning, that is hard for the child, yes? So we arrange that this is my one task that fall, to walk you from the school back to rue Nicolo. But my head is in 1881, the exposition at the Palais de l’Industrie. I am studying the volt, the ohm, the ampere. And Virginie begins to refuse her lithium, a soft metal she needed. And I am maybe in denial of this point.”

“It must have been really difficult to—”

“The electrical exposition is easier for me. But that was a very bad day that we are dreaming. The bomb thrown on the rue de Rennes. There was no danger for us but the city was panicked—a city in panic is one organism—and I was very late to get you. And we had no mobiles. And then begins one of the worst of her episodes. Virginie on the impossible staircase, the mood ascending until there is no atmosphere to breathe. And she is not eating. And she cannot be reached. And in the mind of the child these become linked: the sirens, the late father, the mother who begins to disappear. So I understand this dream, why you always return to this scene. But when I find the end of the line, what then?”

“I didn’t find it. I woke up.”

“But waking does not end a dream. I am sorry to be firm. This is an error in dream interpretation; this is an error we Westerners make. This is not the error of the Ongees, for instance—this is not how they dreamt at the Bay of Bengal. You must read my friend Vishvajit Pandya; I have told you this before. We extend the dream when we share it. You call it fiction, but it is more. Like the eyes, all dreams are brown until they are shared. You asked me a beautiful question when you were a child: Were there dreams

before cinema? And then: Were there color dreams before color film? The last thing you do with such a question is answer it."

"Maybe this is a good place—"

"I mean that all children wonder this. But politics is when we sit around the fire and make the dream social, no? And that is a test of the fire, of the culture. This is better than psychoanalysis, which makes it property of the individual. So we should continue our dreaming now. I reach the end of the line. I face the other way. I follow the line of the women—save for me they are all women—into the courtyard. Virginie is gone. Not gone but we cannot see her anymore. The way angels are often not visible—"

"Speaking of children, of being late—"

"—to the human figures in a painting. In the courtyard there are these gorgeous trees, *les marronniers*. You sit under one—"

"—do you know what time—"

"—crying."

"But it wasn't the 1980s—that was clear. Everybody had a phone. I had mine."

"'Mine?' The dream logic of a lawyer. You have a phone, a pocket watch, a newspaper, a lantern in the era before electrification, no? A tallow candle? In icon painting these are called secular details. I am a historian but historiography yields before the dream. We can burn these details off. We can change the year in which we set the film. In the dream you have a light source, yes. But it is not actually night when you pick up a child from school. It is not a night school for workers. This dusk you speak of is not literal. These are the contingencies of the dreamer, and some must be let go when the dream becomes social. We must not cling to them, OK? I do not mean to be hard with you, but you cloud things with these claims. The dream is opposed to your phone, where no dead or distances are able to appear. Which is also their appeal, their function: to screen the dead, like we screen a fireplace. Screening out the calls of the dead, yes? You screen time. You hear them now, the opposed senses?"

"Yes. I wanted to ask you about smartphones, actually. Maybe that would be an interesting place to begin—but tomorrow, OK, since it's late?

Tomorrow we can start with my asking you if you feel that they, that these devices, constitute another—”

“I don’t understand how you permit them. That she sat in my house, my granddaughter, a little *Hungerkünstler*, head bowed over her so-called tablet. That she cannot lift her eyes to mine. Even if the light is blue it is a black hole for the eyes. You know that I do not suffer from nostalgia. I am a partisan of the new, but only when it admits distance. Head bowed as if in prayer, this tiny creature. I do not criticize you. These are very powerful, yes, I barely escaped them. I am lucky to be, as you say, too late for them. But you accuse me, it seems. That I was late. That I could not bring down your mother—”

“Max’s mother.”

“—with talk or metals or salts. That she has to put stones in the pockets, that she exchanged the medium of air for water. And yes, that I was distant in my research, studying the systems of incandescent lamps. But there is some irony in this, no, that a son accuses his father of such distance while his own daughter, I do not say starves. I sound angry but I think it is yours, the anger, reflected in me. To forgive each other we must acknowledge that these forces are too great. That *die Familie*, it is a tiny station in a grid. Economic and electric. Or a dish, receiving from space. The love, it must go on forever in both ways. In that spirit I asked you to go with me.”

“Where?”

“Switzerland.”

“You asked Max to go to Switzerland?”

“But then you tell me this untruth. You say, ‘I’ve never been to Switzerland.’”

“I think you are—we might both be getting a little confused.”

“You told me that, no? ‘I’ve never been to Switzerland’? We confirm on the recording if there is confusion?”

“I did say that. I haven’t been to Switzerland. But I think you’re conflating me with—”

“You went to La Cure. You came from Madrid to help me with the short about Godard for RTL. The English voice-over. This was the spring of 2004. Soon after the bombings in Madrid. You flew to Geneva. I booked the

flights. Because I lose some names and numbers you think I have no memory?”

“Yes, OK, right, but La Cure, it was France? I thought it was French. I’m sorry. We Nebraskans—”

“No jokes, please. La Cure is both, as you must know. In La Cure I showed you the Hotel Arbez. But anyway, what is Geneva?”

“OK, but I just flew in. I was only at the airport. That doesn’t—”

“We eat at Les Armures, near the cathedral, near the university. We had the large table outside, there were at least seven of us, all coming in for the little film. This was not easy to arrange. First it is raining and then the clouds break up and there is sun. We have this lovely meal in Switzerland. I make a toast to our film, no?”

“That sounds right, yes, I just misremembered that as already in France, or wherever La Cure is. But you’re right, I’m sorry. It was more than twenty years ago.”

“Then we stroll after. The cobblestones are slick from the rain but the sun is shining now. We walk through the tiny cathedral, Saint-Pierre. We climb these smooth steps to take in the view of the city. And they have Calvin’s chair. It is funny, this simple wooden chair, this gilded sign, ‘Chaise de Calvin.’”

“To be honest, I don’t remember the cathedral. I’m sure you’re right. Your memory is—”

“And then we drive, three vans. You drive with me and our equipment. And we stop again before La Cure. For views of the lake. It is very blue. It is reflecting the clouds, they begin to turn pink. We see a kingfisher and I say this is auspicious for our little film. And while we hike you tell me nature has no power over you. But that you have a child’s trick to change it, no? And I speak to you of Dresden, of the reconstruction of its Frauenkirche. The line, very fine, very faint, between memorial and erasure. The different colored sandstones they use to conserve the destruction. Did none of this happen? You take a meal in Switzerland. You visit a cathedral. You view the famous lake. In La Cure we see the Hotel Arbez. But now you sit in my simple chair—”

“Thomas—”

“—and claim you have never been. Why? Perhaps this ‘why’ is our first question, no? And I ask it of you. Why you will have nothing to do with Switzerland. Why no light escapes from it for you. When I go there—but I go to Zurich, to Dignitas—I disappear from memory? Instead you offer me an article for a magazine. For a coffee table. And you revisit Virginie, which causes pain. And yet to do that you leave your own child, your daughter who struggles? That is your word, ‘struggles.’ A *Hungerkünstler* —”

“Eva eats. And I’m only gone for one—”

“—head bowed. It is late, as you say. So we stop it now, the recording. So that you can call your lovely daughter. That is a better use of your device. But does it still have power?”

★ ★ ★

A couple of weeks after I’d seen the glass flowers with Anisa, I was walking toward downtown Providence at dusk to meet a friend; it might have been Max. We planned to walk around WaterFire: floating, burning braziers were set in the Providence River at intervals on the first Friday night of every month. I liked watching the flames cast moving shadows on the water, and I liked the smell of woodsmoke.

When I was passing the Athenaeum I saw Mia leaning against one of the columns, fishing a pack of blue American Spirits from her messenger bag, her black hair wrapped up with a yellow cloth. I stopped, along with my breath, my hands suddenly cold. But I had techniques now, breathing strategies and the mental checklists they’d taught me in the hospital, and soon I’d recovered my balance, warmed my hands.

While I was composing myself, Mia saw me. She smiled tentatively, raising the hand that held the lit cigarette. I debated if I should just walk on, or if this was the time to say hello, to have a polite interaction. I felt it would be best to continue downtown, that a distant greeting was enough, but the last time I’d seen her, many months before, I’d screamed terrible things at her, and I didn’t want that to be our final exchange.

I walked toward her. She came down the steps and we met on the sidewalk, where we embraced and separated quickly. I asked for a cigarette.

When I'd lit it, we stood there awkwardly, but instead of the disorganizing rage I'd feared, I felt calm, reassured by the steadiness of my own voice when I asked:

"How are things in New York?"

"Fine, I guess," she said. "How is your family, how are things in Omaha?"

"OK," I said.

"It's good to see you," she said. "Finally. I mean, I've seen you a few times at the Rock but I never knew if I should say hi."

"But you're not around much," I said.

"No," she said. "I'm kind of commuting this semester. To help my mom with Abuela."

"And how's it going with Andrés?" I asked.

"With Andrés," she repeated, maybe correcting my pronunciation, implying it wasn't my business. I felt a flicker of the fury.

"Yeah, how are his fingers," I asked, hoping the specificity would freak her out a little.

"Fingers?" She did seem startled.

"Anisa told me his fingers got fucked up at work."

"Whose?"

"Anisa has kept me current. Did you get to San Juan?"

"Every November. But Ponce."

"It's OK. We don't have to get into it. But I'm wishing you guys well." I was amazed to almost mean it.

"Nisa has kept you current," she said, flatly. It was the jealousy I'd longed for. But I felt no pleasure.

"We're friends. Of course she's going to tell me—"

"What else did she tell you," she asked, no longer smoking, no longer moving at all.

"Just the basic stuff," I said, worried, but unsure about what. "That you're living together, that he's working with your dad."

"Nisa told you that?"

"Yeah, that you two have a place in Inwood. That you're going to—"

"Andrés is in Spain," she said. "In Granada. She knows that."

My hands went cold again.

“Andrés has never been to the States,” she said. “At least not that I know of. I haven’t talked to him since the end of break.”

“Where do you live?” I demanded.

“What?”

“Who do you live with?”

“I told you I’ve been helping Mami with Abuela. I’m going half-time this semester; I’m usually here only one night a week. I stay at home when I’m home.”

“But you told me he was going to move here,” I said, almost pleading. “You told me that that’s what you wanted.”

“That’s what I wanted for about two weeks.”

“Are you fucking with me?”

She didn’t respond. She dropped the cigarette she’d let burn down, tried to shake out another.

“She said you had a place in Washington Heights. She said you had to move. That you had—” Of all the details that I was rapidly reviewing, it suddenly seemed incredible to me that Andrés would have brought a dog from Spain. “Why would Anisa say—”

“I don’t know what she told you or why.” She put the cigarettes back in her bag without removing one. “Or what is up between you and Nisa. What I am telling you is that Andrés and I talked about his moving here but there was no way. It was a crazy time, Spain, being abroad, alone, and I’m sorry. But it was never—I mean, the man has a daughter.”

★ ★ ★

I retrieved my phone from the table, did some tapping and swiping, the way Eva used to pretend to send text messages from one of her wooden blocks or magnet tiles. When I’d stopped and saved the nonexistent file, I slipped the phone into my pocket.

Let me help you clean up, I said, indicating the tray, the empty bottle of wine, but Thomas said, smiling now, Leave it, leave it, and then, in a gesture without precedent in our relationship, he leaned toward me, took both my hands, squeezed them briefly; mine were cold, his were warm. The

speed with which his equanimity had returned further confounded my sense of what had just passed between us. He rose easily from his chair, humming, and left the room. I wondered what I'd do if he asked to see a transcript.

I expected him to come back with my coat, but I heard him on the stairs. He ascended slowly, and the humming stopped, presumably so he could focus on the effort the climb required; ascending puts a different pressure on the joints and lungs. There was something disturbingly voice-like about the creaking of the stairs.

I'd heard voices before. When I had my breakdown in college, I reported two kinds of auditory hallucinations, although the doctors reassured me that it was a good sign my "reality testing" was intact—that I knew I wasn't hearing what I heard. (Sanity often requires the disavowal of the senses.) The first voice was my own, if a little deeper than when I actually spoke: on more than one occasion, my thoughts escaped from my head into audibility, into space, usually seeming to come from a few feet away, always to my right. There was nothing unusual about the internal monologue itself—the thoughts might even be encouraging, "Here's what you do: take four deep, deliberate breaths," etc.—but the externalization, the leakage, was horrifying. It happened only a handful of times, but I will always worry that too strong, too loud, a thought might break out of its silent casing into sound.

The second kind of voice was more like the creaking stairs: I started to discern—barely, but unmistakably—language in mere noise. The beeping of a large truck backing up, an exhaust fan running somewhere in the house, a woman's high heels echoing on the pavement outside my window at night—words and sometimes phrases would surface from and dissolve back into these noises, noises that were briefly voices; I heard laughter in the rustling of dried leaves.

Thomas had helped me with this. When I was back on campus, and I was again his undergraduate research assistant (which just meant I brought him books from the Rock and typed up some old manuscripts), I told him all about my crash, about the voices—and my fear that the phenomenon would return, deepen, take hold, as it ultimately did for Arjun.

At the time, he was collaborating on what he called an electronic opera with a musician in Warsaw, a woman named Anna Bartosz. One afternoon Thomas asked me to meet him at a campus recording studio so that he could play me something. (Among the world's most renowned thinkers about art and technology, Thomas didn't know how to execute basic tasks on his computer, so he would book such spaces when a laptop would have served.) He had me put on headphones and told me to shut my eyes.

First, Thomas had the engineer play a recording, an MP3 file, of Bartosz singing "The Internationale" in English with a piano and other instruments behind her. He had me listen a few times. Then he had the engineer convert it to a MIDI file—which abstracts and flattens the instrumentals and vocals into one track. Thomas asked the engineer to play the new file back for me on a virtual piano.

What I heard was the piano software playing every note in the original composition, including the vocal tones. At first it was chaos, cacophony, but soon I could pick out not only the melody but, if barely, Bartosz's voice and some of the lyrics to the song.

But there is no voice, no words, Thomas had explained when I took off the headphones. All of that was removed in the conversion of the file. What you hear is a ghost. Your brain adds the voice to the tones based on what it believes is there from listening to the first file. You see, we all hear phantom voices. It is a question of the right conditions. Or the wrong ones. Unconscious inference, our brain guessing, making us hear what it thinks is likely there. We hear *as if*. We are together, erring. You are not disappearing into privacy. Hallucination, too, is social. We must sometimes adjust our antennae, no?

If Thomas came back downstairs, I would remind him of that day in the studio, explain how it had in fact made me feel less fucked up and alone, how I often had occasion to think of it, his art therapy. I would tell him: that moment could stand for a hundred others in his teaching that, taken together, might have saved me.

Now I heard him moving in his office. Did he expect me to follow him upstairs? I'd been in his office only a couple of times—to see his daguerreotypes, to help him move boxes. Was I to let myself out? Did he

think I was staying the night—or that I had been staying for nights—in the attic guest room?

After I don't know how long, I gathered everything onto the tray and left for the kitchen, but when I reached the dining room table, I set it down and ate four dinner rolls, one after the other, tearing at them like an animal. Where is your dignity, I said to myself, "dignity"—it was not one of my words—surfacing because Thomas had mentioned "Dignitas," which I assumed was a small museum in Zurich; I'd Google it before coming back tomorrow.

Was I coming back tomorrow? I walked into the drafty kitchen and stood before the wall-mounted phone and tried to guess the time. I could picture the alarm clock displaying 5:27 in Hotel Providence, but how many hours had passed since then—two? five? I feared I would be calling a concerned and furious Mia, Eva having cried herself to sleep beside her. Or maybe I'd call and years would have passed, Eva a grown woman, Mia with a new partner, or Mia with Andrés, Eva unconceived.

I lifted the receiver from the cradle, again heard the ancient tone, punched in Mia's number. It rang twice. "Hello," a voice said, both alien and familiar. It was Eva—no, it was Mia, her voice rendered tinny, made into soft metal by the landline. I hesitated. "Hello," the voice repeated; it was Eva's.

But the voice was also mine—my voice at the age of six, when it resembled hers in pitch, saying hello to my father when he'd call home from D.C., and, for a second, I wasn't only in Providence but also in the kitchen on Douglas Street, wrapping the white plastic cord around my arm, staring out the window at the black walnut tree, watching its leaves move in the wind.

"Hello," I said to her, my father said to me, speaking to the boy I was, the comforter pulled back where he'd checked for russet traces of dried blood, the hotel phone held between ear and shoulder so he could ash his cigarette, muted coverage of the Paris bombings on the TV. I was experiencing the superposition of voices, creating a halo effect around the hand I now pressed, to steady myself, against the wall in Thomas's kitchen. "How are you, love?"

“Fine. But you said we would FaceTime,” Eva said, but FaceTime hadn’t been invented yet. My daughter and I had only ever communicated, when I was away, by screen.

“I know, but I dropped my phone in the sink.”

“Mom told me. You have to put it in a bag of rice,” she said. Her voice, isolated from her image, was aged. I don’t mean that it sounded like the voice of an older person, but that the sound itself, like starlight or the light in an old painting, had traveled many years to reach me, bore the traces of that transit from the future or the past, the sound of a distance brought near, but left intact.

“I guess the rice absorbs the water. I guess—” the rice absorbs every message ever left, every voicemail and text, every conversation you’ve ever had. I’d detected, or had imagined, the soft click of someone coming on the line, as if Thomas had picked up his office phone, covered the mouthpiece. Now I was in that room, too, had a sense of its dimensions; I was hovering above me. I remembered eavesdropping on my sister’s calls—less on the conversation than on their breathing, her friends’ breathing during the long stretches of silence while they watched TV; I’d hear nearby thunder and then, a second later, hear it across town through the receiver.

And now I felt that Thomas had arranged the exchange he was listening in on (but surely he wasn’t listening), that my mentor was conducting this electronic opera, orchestrating these interferences, crossing wires, worlds. Impossibly thin glass filaments underground, underwater, in the lungs, in the cochlea, vibrating when the small waves hit them—You call this fiction, but it is more.

[Hotel Villa Real]

After my talk at the museum I walked back to the Hotel Villa Real and wrote a few emails in the business center. Then I opened a new browser and entered Andrés's full name, Googling him for the first time in years, maybe since Eva was born. And there he instantly was, still in Granada, the middle-aged version of the man I'd first seen more than twenty years before in a cavernous bar, Mia's eyes red from the light bouncing off the backs of her retinas.

The digital Andrés was only marginally heavier, and wore the same close beard. Here he was the previous summer splashing around with a woman and three kids on a beach in Porto, his left shoulder tattooed with writing I couldn't make out. And here he was on a hike with his arms around two friends, unless they were his brothers, in front of what looked like a Tuscan landscape. There were several recent images of an old, quizzical Newfoundland mix; in one, a boy from the beach, presumably Andrés's son, had affixed a paper party hat to the patient dog. But where was his twentysomething daughter?

When I left the business center, I went to my room, showered, changed, and drank one of those Nescafé espressos from the machine, since dinner wasn't until nine. Then I FaceTimed Mia, who was having lunch in Washington Square Park; she held up her phone so I could see the gathering of the Neturei Karta men beside the fountain, their Free Palestine signs. The sky behind her—or, depending on the position of her phone, above her—looked blue and cloudless, identical to the sky in Madrid. There was drumming somewhere nearby. I told her the talk went well. It must have been hard, she said. Not really. I don't know. Maybe. I asked about her day, after Eva, who was fine, more than fine, Mia said, a lot of laughter in the morning and at bedtime, although Eva had recently told us to stop saying bedtime.

The restaurant was called Moratín. It was a short walk from the hotel, but I set out early, wandered up and down the Paseo del Prado, then sat and

watched some kids play in the little *parque infantil*. Near the red slide, a man, a young father, was swinging his son around by his arms, the boy screaming and laughing. When Eva was four, I'd dislocated her elbow that way. Now I watched as the boy gained terrible speed, his body at moments parallel to the ground. Or was I seeing it wrong, was my anxiety accelerating what I perceived? I sat and watched and waited for the shrieks of pleasure to turn to pain when a radius slipped out of place.

I got out my phone to check my messages. I confirmed the address of the restaurant and wandered toward the Fuente de Neptuno. I became aware of distant drumming, as if from Washington Square Park. I walked down Calle de Cervantes and turned left on Calle de Jesús until I reached Calle de Moratín.

I was surprised that the interior walls of the dimly lit restaurant were lined with bookshelves. They held leather-bound Spanish classics, art books, some bottles and dried flowers spaced at intervals. I told the waiter I was part of the group from the museum; he said I was the first to arrive. I wanted to flee, but followed him to a long table in the corner, accepted a menu and list of wines, which I pretended to ponder, resolved not to reach for my phone. By virtue of arriving first, I suddenly felt like I was the host, that I was responsible not just for the dinner but the entire conference. ("Conference" wasn't the word, but neither was "festival," neither was "exhibition," and you can only have a Festschrift for the living).

Thomas had had a long history with the Reina Sofía, and one of the curators, Rosa, whom I'd known for many years, was intensely devoted to him. So a display of materials in what the museum called its Space D, more of a library than a gallery—along with screenings, talks, readings—had made sense to me; maybe some version of it could go on to travel, starting with Germany. I proposed the thing, made a list of suggested works and participants, and agreed to give the talk I'd delivered that afternoon. But it had come together, with improbable speed, without me; Rosa and her colleagues had organized everything.

I gave in to my phone and Googled a couple of people who would be at the dinner, then scrolled through the day's disasters, putting the device quickly away when I saw Rosa and the others arriving. "Pang" would be

too strong a word for the disappointment I registered at the presence of her husband, Samuel, a doctor who taught at the Complutense. Everyone kissed or shook hands, and Samuel said my speech had been—he searched for a word—courageous. Rosa sat down across from me, making a little show of dispatching Samuel to the far end of the table, “I see you all the time,” where he could entertain the young couple—to me they looked like teenagers—of documentary filmmakers from Berlin.

And soon there was cold wine and bread and olives on the table and a mixture of ease and energy I associated with southern Europe. There was general conversation you could join, or you could address someone nearby privately, form a little pocket of intimacy. Plates arrived at intervals, people left to smoke or returned from smoking and dove back into the river of speech and laughter; this seemed like the most natural thing in the world, this microclimate of conviviality, and yet it was a rare experience for me.

To my right was a young man from Copenhagen, Christian, who could do a startlingly good impression of Thomas, and cracked us up by reading the dessert menu in his voice, as if it were a mysterious text of great antiquity. At some point Rosa switched places with Christian so we could show each other pictures of our children, although Rosa’s “child” was a greyhound, no, a whippet. (Only since lockdown had I learned the names of breeds.) I found a good one of Eva and Luna, and handed Rosa my phone; she studied it for a long time, blue light in candlelight, before returning it, *qué belleza*.

I was a little more than tipsy by the time she clinked her knife against her glass and stood. “Dear ones,” Rosa said, “dear ones, I am not going to make any kind of speech, I just want to acknowledge how far many of you have traveled, or for Marta and Antonio, how hard you’ve worked here at home, to make this occasion, this ‘little symposium,’ possible. I am very sad and I am very happy (and I am a little drunk) and I think that all of that is as it should be since we are marking the passing of someone dear to us. For my part, it’s dizzying to think how my first book originated at a lunch with him—a big group, twenty years ago, Geneva; of course I have been thinking about Switzerland—but somehow we struck up this conversation about reversal in printmaking, how nobody has really written the history of

reversal, its centrality to so many arts, and there you go: I had my topic, and the transatlantic phone calls began, I had my oracle to consult in Providence. And I won't get into it now, some of you know the story, but on one occasion he really saved my life. But my point is that what you have shown with your presence and contributions is that his work goes on, it will shine in new constellations. To see—just to speak of this afternoon—Yasmin's profoundly moving film, or to hear, Aleksy, your wonderful talk about Thomas's influence on your 'counter-memory' series—it is not just mourning that we have been doing but expressing our confidence that his work will radiate out, that it will send its strange signals into the future; his voice will continue to speak to and through us. But Thomas would not want to be idealized. And so let me say that your"—here Rosa addressed me—"your willingness to wrestle with the complexity of his influence for you, to reckon with how the myth and the man might get entangled, I found that powerful, and true to Thomas's spirit, as he always sought to unsettle his audiences, right? OK, enough. I loved him and I am feeling much love for all of you. Let's raise a glass to Thomas."

We drank. "And with gratitude to Rosa," I said.

"To Rosa," everyone said, and drank again.

In front of the restaurant, after I checked my messages, I begged a cigarette from the young Berliners. I was dizzy when the nicotine hit my bloodstream, but had otherwise been sobered. While the filmmakers and I made small talk, I replayed my interactions after my event, the slight awkwardness at the beginning of the dinner. The other guests had started to trickle out and said goodbye, including Rosa's husband; he shook my hand and said Rosa was settling the bill and made a joke about the Kafkan process that awaited her as she sought reimbursement. Soon the Germans departed; it was probably early in their evening. They'd said something about a "space" they knew in Malasaña.

Rosa smiled to find me waiting for her. That place is fucking expensive, she said, speaking Spanish now. She took my arm and we started walking downhill toward the Paseo. She leaned into me a little; she smelled like tobacco and bergamot. We passed a group of women, twentysomethings, all wearing plastic tiaras, all singing and clapping—a bachelorette or birthday

party touring the bars. Right behind them, I saw an older, well-dressed couple on a late stroll—like chaperones from another era. Here and there, kids darted among the tables of the bustling outdoor cafés, despite the hour. They seemed to belong to everyone and no one. Why hadn't I managed to raise Eva in such a place, I asked Rosa—a place with less anxiety, less need for surveillance? *Vigilancia, supervisión, inspección*—I gave her a spread of Spanish words from which she could select the one I meant.

We turned left on the Paseo, the leaves of the century-old plane trees rustling in the breeze high above us, flashing black and silver in the streetlight. I made myself wait a full minute. "Samuel said I was 'courageous'? My talk 'unsettled' you?"

"Well, I basically meant what I said about it being true to him."

"Basically?"

She stopped and disengaged from me and looked in the clutch she was carrying for the pack of those slim cigarettes she'd always smoked. I took one when she offered. "Yes"—Rosa lit her cigarette, handed me the lighter, exhaled—"that it was more in his spirit to be real, to take a risk, than to deliver an encomium."

"But I genuinely don't understand—what was so risky? You just mean that it was more personal, not a conventional lecture?"

"You're not being serious."

"I'm totally serious."

"You, well, you more or less confessed that you falsified a big part of what many of us thought of as his last, I don't know, testament. A deepfake." She said the last word in English.

I laughed, but it sounded off. She was silent. We resumed walking, but now we weren't touching. "That's ridiculous," I said.

"OK."

"I told the story of—I told the embarrassing personal anecdote about breaking my phone and, yes, I explained how part of the interview was therefore reconstructed."

"Yes."

"But that is entirely typical of interviews, like journalists often take some notes and write them up or condense—"

“Funny to think of you as a journalist. You’d be the world’s worst journalist.”

“And in all of the interviews in that magazine, the editors move stuff around, make composites, I was not at all ‘confessing’—”

“If it is so typical, though, if it is standard practice, why talk about it at all, and why with such—”

“Such what?”

“Emotion. And you made it clear that you never showed it to him.”

“I didn’t have the chance.”

“More than one person quoted the interview in their talk. His first interview in decades, his last interview ever. There’s a quote from it in the pamphlet. So people were suddenly wondering what they’d reproduced.”

“It wasn’t the most important part, what I had to reconstruct—”

“Reconstruct from what, exactly? You presumably weren’t taking notes while pretending to record?”

“A section of the interview was based on memory. That’s a scandal? I was trying to describe this kind of field of force around him. It was my setup to talk about his thoughts about recordings, ‘technologies of capture,’ and so on, right? And if anything I was making fun of myself. And believe me, I left out plenty of personal—”

“It was conducted under false pretenses. That’s what you revealed.”

“It’s routine for these interviews to involve—”

“Come on. It’s not routine to be told you’re being recorded when you’re not. It’s ironic, since most people are worried about being recorded unawares. And also the man was cognitively diminished.”

“I was honest about this childishly dishonest thing I did, yes, about how I regressed or was feeling—I don’t know. As I said, he seemed to even suspect—”

“That was unsettling, too.”

“What?”

“Your speculating that he knew it was all a game, performance, or whatever.”

“I somehow think he might have.”

“It sounds like self-justification. Of a bizarre sort.”

“You’re making it seem like my whole talk was this big revelation and confession, as if I didn’t then—”

“It began with a big revelation and confession, yes. Even your tone was confessional. You were very—moved.”

“I always get anxious when I speak in public.”

“I have heard you speak many times before. Look, the thing is, I actually think—the reason I’m not like personally angry—”

“Angry?”

“—is because I genuinely think he would have loved it. Loved the idea that his last published statement was—unstable. I don’t know if that makes it right, but it definitely makes a difference. But how you can act shocked at people’s shock, or angry at people’s anger—”

“Who is angry?”

“Max, certainly.”

“He gave me a big hug after, said he wished he could come to dinner.”

“Trust me, Max is furious. You will have to talk to him. Not right away—I heard you tell him you’d be coming to L.A., do it then. And I think Yasmin was very uncomfortable. Man, everybody was uncomfortable! But whether they’re right or wrong, you can’t have possibly—”

“I have to wonder if you’re not—what is ‘projecting’ in Spanish? Maybe you’re upset with me about something else, or are dealing with your own shit about Thomas. Who was not an uncomplicated—”

“Oh please. Not this again.”

“Again?”

She smiled. We’d reached the Fuente de Neptuno. We turned left on the Plaza de las Cortes, past the statue of Cervantes, and walked in silence until we arrived at the hotel. “Do you want a drink?” I said.

She offered the same smile.

“I mean at the hotel bar. I mean here.” I indicated its outdoor tables in the plaza.

“*Claro*,” she said, and we found a table and she hailed a waiter and ordered us wine. She sent someone a text. “I can’t believe you have a dog,” she said as she put her phone back into her purse, offering me the chance to change the subject.

I didn’t say anything. She found and lit another cigarette. Our waiter arrived and poured out two glasses of white wine and set down a small metal bowl of mixed nuts. He replaced our ashtray with a fresh one. “Why couldn’t you just tell him you broke the phone?” she asked, still smiling. And then, when I didn’t answer, without the smile: “What would have happened—he might have been annoyed? Were you that afraid of his disapproval, like a little boy? Or was it some defense against the reality of losing him—a way to turn it into fiction? Or was it revenge because he was—how did you put it—‘not uncomplicated’?” Her own anger was becoming available now. “And if you were going to invent things, to lie, whatever your fucking excuses, why confess it here, in this way? And then you feel shocked, victimized, when there’s a reaction? And then you are going to tell me that I—”

I’d involuntarily lifted my hands, palms toward her. The printout of my talk was in my room, which overlooked the plaza where we sat. I had the sense that the text was, at that instant, rearranging itself—that what had been some personal introductory remarks about my foolishness, my always acting like a clumsy student around Thomas, was recomposing itself into a startling confession I’d have to confront when I went upstairs. Maybe he would be holding the papers in his hand when I entered my room, his green eyes capable of seeing in the dark. “I’m fine,” I said, but Rosa hadn’t asked.

Hotel Arbez

“The last time my father was in this house, it was full of candy. If you opened a drawer: Hershey’s Kisses, marshmallows, every kind of Haribo gummy—bears, peaches, Sour Streamers, snakes. Blues and pinks that don’t appear in nature. Save in instances of aposematic coloration. Cupboards stuffed with cookies. You couldn’t find a slice of sandwich bread for all the chocolate chip muffins, babka, pastry. The fridge was stocked with yogurts that contained more sugar than ice cream, and the freezer was stocked with ice cream. It was like a fairy tale, one that featured evil stepparents, witches.”

“A German fairy tale.”

“Set in L.A. Because how could real parents preside over such a home? While we still made normal meals, of course, and insisted Emmie sit with us at the table, we were not to try to make her eat; following Dr. Saro’s advice, we’d apply no pressure; we wouldn’t negotiate, no ‘just one more bite of chicken, love.’ She could have whatever she wanted, whenever, wherever: take a box of Oreos to the bath, Twizzlers to bed. So we were suddenly living in a gingerbread house. Or it was like Willy Wonka. I was Wonka, establishing a bizarro kingdom of corn syrup and dyes, but a confused, desperate Wonka—Wonka remade by Bergman. (My dad was kind of a cross between Wonka and Bergman, if you think about it.) Or maybe I was more like Faust, a pact with fructose.

“The idea was that there had been too much focus on her eating, years of surveillance, too much anxiety and regulation around it, and that Emmie was shut down, that she’d grown averse to ingestion of any sort. If all the rules were lifted, if she could just, say, grab a handful of M&M’s without overthinking it—and I would have wept with joy to see her eat a handful of M&M’s, especially peanut—she’d eventually crave something more substantial; she might work her way back to hunger, balance. We are attempting a radical reset, Saro said. And we have reached a point where calories are calories. Where any kind of eating is a win (he often spoke of

‘wins’). The way, with a very young child, sleep begets sleep, a good nap leads to a good night, so eating might beget eating. Then we would wean her off refined sugar, the unpronounceable chemicals. Since the only ‘food’ for which she’d ever consistently expressed any desire was candy (and occasionally ice cream or cake, though she tended just to eat the frosting), Saro suggested we start there. And what if it doesn’t work, I asked. Well, then we need to revisit the medication conversation. And what if the medication doesn’t work, Adelle asked. Well, there are inpatient options that can coordinate an ensemble of therapies, treatments. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

“I remember the trip to the grocery store, the Vons in Echo Park—there was a lot of smoke in the air that evening—when we explained to Emmie that she could get whatever she wanted. Dr. Saro had said to ‘be honest, but be light, almost playful’ about what we were doing: We’re going to conduct an experiment where we just eat what we want without rules for a while and see how that feels for all of us. So anything that looks good, just put it in the cart. Without missing a beat, Emmie asked: Soda? (I froze: we hadn’t discussed soda with Saro. Drinking sugar wasn’t eating. We’d never had soda in the house.) Sure, Adelle said calmly, put it in the cart. Nutella? (God yes, that’s eleven grams of fat a serving; she must have forgotten how we’d tried to get her to eat it one entire summer in Berlin.) Skittles? Starburst? These mini cupcakes with pink frosting? She was hopping around the store in her favorite peach-colored jumpsuit, pulling the forbidden fruits (that weren’t fruits) from the shelves. Anything, yes, put it in the cart, no need to ask. It looked like we were shopping for Halloween. It looked like we were kidnappers. At one point I started to push this peanut butter swirled with white chocolate—Doesn’t this look amazing?—and Adelle touched my arm. I guiltily returned it to the shelf. What I would have given to see her eat nut butter of any sort; it could have cocaine in it for all I cared so long as she got the calories. I could barely meet the gaze of the young woman who rang us up. Do you want another glass?”

“I’m OK. Actually, sure.”

“He left behind cases of this stuff. To a certain extent, the problem had always been there: Emmie was a few weeks premature, had a little trouble

nursing, difficulty ‘latching’; she was always small, it always worried me, but it was never a crisis. She was at the bottom of the pediatrician’s growth chart, then off the chart entirely, but the pediatrician said the chart didn’t really matter (so why have a chart?)—what mattered was her own personal curve, that it was moving in the right direction. And it was. And then it wasn’t. But then it was again—if barely. She was not a sickly baby or toddler. And she did eat, just very little, as if a sip or two of milk and a miniature spoonful of mashed avocado genuinely satisfied her. And so many parents we knew were struggling with their kids’ eating to some extent, it was just a place parental worry went. And parental worry could cause a problem where there was none, right? I remember the relief I felt when, at her three-year checkup, her pediatrician said she looked great, even if she was of course quite small: keep offering healthy choices, encourage meals over snacks, make sure she doesn’t drink a lot of water right before mealtime, and—above all—try not to make it a power struggle. But then, only a few months later, she got a mild flu, and we saw a different doctor in the practice. He weighed her, looked at something on his little laptop, and said—gravely, accusatorily, and in front of Emmie—Your daughter is extremely underweight. By all the available diagnostic measures, this is FTT. When she’s over the flu, we need to run some tests. And you should meet with a nutritionist.

“I had to Google FTT. *Failure to Thrive*. That language knocked the wind out of me. It was like a biblical curse. It was on repeat in my head, sometimes set to the music of ‘Bad to the Bone.’ (Now they often say ‘weight faltering’ or something less damning, less devastating, though still cruelly poetic.) I called our main pediatrician, trying hard not to yell: How can we be told everything is great by one doctor in the practice and that there’s an emergency by the other? Look, our main guy said, it’s not an emergency: it can both be true that she’s doing fine, doing well, *and* that it’s worth running some tests, consulting with a nutritionist, developing strategies to support her growth. Bloodwork. Bone density. Mainly ruling things out. Genetic conditions, allergies, intolerances; you know, there could be celiac, for instance. Kids have trouble describing symptoms; they have no language for it.

“Thus began the cycles of ruling things out, acquiring meaningless metrics, of having nutritionists say things like ‘Have you tried putting an extra spoonful of olive oil in her mashed potatoes?’ (as if she’d eat mashed potatoes), ‘Have you tried nut butters?’ As if we’d only been offering her celery—Gee, we’d just never thought of giving her high-calorie foods that might help her put on weight. No wonder she has failed to thrive! Anyway, we did the tests, they were always fine or inconclusive, and then her weight and height would tick up a bit and the concern would recede, time would pass, good times, and it was as if we’d hallucinated the whole thing. But then she’d eat less again, just saying she wasn’t hungry, and if we pushed, she’d take these cartoonishly small bites: imagine her sheathing each tiny prong of her tiny fork with a tiny macaroni noodle, then eating them off one by one—‘OK, I’m full.’ Her weight would drop, and Adelle and I would panic; our emotional states were now pegged to the smallest fluctuations in her consumption, which then compounded the problem, because, try as we might, we couldn’t hide our fear from Emmie. A circle, a spiral. Needless to say we felt like horrible parents.

“Needless to say we sought advice. (This was before we were working with Saro.) The advice was: back off, no child ever starves herself to death. The advice was: intervene immediately, get her on growth hormones, these are crucial years. The advice was: if she wants junk food, let her have it, go to McDonald’s twice a day. The advice was: you must form healthy lifelong habits now, avoid the hormones and chemicals in junk, that’s more important than her weight. The advice was: she’s a happy kid, don’t make this bigger than it is, no therapy, do not pathologize. The advice was: this must be displaced anxiety or trauma, she must be suffering, something must have happened at school, get her in therapy now. We had no sense of what she might be ‘expressing,’ if anything, with her eating or not eating; we asked Emmie every imaginable question, but asking questions seemed to make it worse, more pressure. And I can’t emphasize this enough: she was a smart, social, generally happy kid who played all day, slept well, had only the normal seasonal illnesses. And while she was always a bit smaller than the other kids, you wouldn’t have thought: There is something wrong with this girl. I mean, you met her a couple of times in Providence. I have a

picture somewhere on my phone of her and Eva playing dress-up. I know Eva had her own struggles with this stuff."

"Eva eats. But no, I would never have thought Emmie—"

"But then, in third grade, a few years ago now, it got very bad. Not long after she turned eight. She'd have or fake a sip of a smoothie at breakfast, her lunch would come home untouched—except if she gave something away—maybe she'd eat a few pretzels from the little bags they gave out at school, although mainly I think she just licked the salt off, otherwise no snack, and then she'd push around her dinner food. It was suddenly undeniably extreme. (This sounds crazy, Wonka-ish, but when I would pick her up off the ground, or spin her around on the playground, I felt more like I was keeping her from floating away than that I was exerting myself to hold her aloft.) It was an utter mystery how she could move through her day running on fumes. And now she *was* clearly experiencing some general anxiety, some upset: she wasn't being bullied, but there was social drama among the third-grade girls. Her best friend kind of left her for another kid, she was openly sad about it, and the sadness often came out around mealtimes. She also started talking a lot about climate change; wildfires upset her particularly. She began to say her stomach hurt, which she didn't do before. And maybe she did seem a little tired? Fewer cartwheels? Fewer requests for the playground? Certainly less laughter. I began to fear that her hair—I'd furtively inspect it when she got out of the bath—looked thin; I got this weird fixation on her gums, imagining that their color was off, though the dentist didn't say anything.

"What was cause, what was effect? Anxiety is worse when you're hungry, and she must have been hungry all the time, even if she didn't think so, but it's harder to eat if you're upset. We would ask her every morning what she'd want for dinner, every evening what she'd want for lunch and breakfast the next day. We'd write it all down on a little dry-erase board, as someone had suggested. She'd always request foods as if she genuinely craved them: bagels, pizza, sushi. I'd go get the best bagel (Belle's), make really good pizza (I bought a pizza stone), drop a shameful amount of money on ikura—and then watch her not eat those things, just kind of slowly deconstruct them. It was like some kind of horrible performance art:

I'd cut half a bagel in half again and she'd eat less than half of that. She'd scrape the cheese off the pizza and fold and unfold her slice and then take one bite. Excruciating origami. She would balance a single salmon egg on the end of her chopstick, spend fifteen minutes ingesting the little orange, gemlike spheres one by one—what is that, twenty calories? Then she'd ask if she could have a lollipop and I would say no way. OK, then can I have screen time?

"One night the dam broke for me. I'd been at a work dinner, boozy, martinis before the wine—we'd just settled a big case with the county. I ended up sitting by a colleague of mine, Jan, a woman whose thirteen-year-old had been diagnosed with lymphoma the previous year, and maybe that conversation did something to me, made me feel how Emmie's struggles, such as they were, were entirely *optional*—it wasn't like there were runaway cells multiplying in her body. I expected her to be asleep when I got home, but when I peeked in her room, I saw that she was reading with this little headlamp my dad had bought her—it was very cute, it made her look like a spelunker, a little elfin miner.

"Without really having any plan or sense of what I was going to say, I walked into her room and sat at the foot of the bed. The headlamp was shining in my eyes, so I couldn't actually see her face. And then this language just poured out of me: Emmie, *liebe*, *amor*, you are old enough to understand now that you simply must eat more, you simply must gain weight, if you don't, you won't grow enough, you won't feel good, you won't be strong enough, bad things can happen, eventually we will have to go to different kinds of doctors who will try various things, and yes, that means more needles, it might mean pills, it could mean tubes, you might even have to stay in a hospital, I don't really know what it will mean, but I'm just telling you the truth, that it will be hard for all of us, we must turn this around, and we will, starting now; from now on you will eat, you will drink down the smoothies, at least two smoothies a day, you will have some peanut butter or something similar, we'll give you some choices about *what* to eat, but not *if*, and if we have to take privileges away, we absolutely will. I'm sorry, but this is not a game, this isn't about trying to get a baby in a high chair to eat her vegetables, OK? You're a brilliant girl, you read *The*

Hobbit at six, you explained photosynthesis and leaf color change to us last night, so you can certainly understand that your body needs more and better food, that if you're not eating enough, you're harming yourself, it's called 'self-harm,' and Mom and I can't take that, it breaks our hearts, although don't worry about us, it's just that I don't want to put you through more and more doctor's appointments, I don't want you to have to take medicines, and they wouldn't be syrups this time, so even if you have to force it down, even if it grosses you out, you have to do it, I'm not asking, I want to be clear that I'm no longer asking, Emmie, love, I'm your father, and starting with breakfast tomorrow, you will eat the food we are so lucky to have—you know that people are starving, you know that when Opa was your age they had nothing to eat, people would fight in the street over a potato, they wouldn't have been able to imagine this situation. I'm not trying to scare you, I'm not trying to make you feel guilty, but this is over now, this refusal, this stops now, you don't have to eat as much as I do—here I tried (and failed) to lighten my tone, patting my belly, which she used to love to pinch and squeeze, but it was way too late to inject any levity into what I was saying—but you will eat real food and gain weight and grow bigger and stronger and that's the end of the story, do you understand?

"I stared into the light. It felt like minutes before she said, very quietly: OK. Great, I said, I love you, now go to sleep. I kissed her and went into my room and got undressed and got into bed beside Adelle and lay on my back and waited to see if I'd drunk enough that the room would spin. It didn't. Instead there was this wave of relief. I almost laughed out loud at myself, thinking: You're such a moron, all this time you just needed to be a father, make a rule, a law, you've become one of these ridiculous progressive parents who can't take a position, you were ruined by going to Brown, you've been listening to all these similarly spineless people who make their kids delicate by treating them over-delicately. Now you've put your foot down and voilà. I was simultaneously congratulating and upbraiding myself when I became aware of what sounded like a teakettle. Or maybe a distant train whistle. Or something in the pipes. Unless it was singing. And slowly I realized that the sound, the high-pitched whine, was Emmie, that she was making this unfamiliar and very animal cry. I was

instantly sober, cold. I wanted to move, to go back to her, but could not. Then Adelle shot up in bed and rushed into her room. What's wrong, I heard Adelle ask, alarmed, but trying to sound calm. What's wrong, my love? And Emmie didn't say anything, just kept howling, like she was channeling some ancient, terrible force, and Adelle said: It's OK, you just had a bad dream, it's OK, sweetheart. I just lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening. Emmie said nothing; Adelle rocked her to sleep.

"The next morning it felt like I'd dreamt the whole thing. Maybe, I thought, Emmie felt it had been a dream, too. Maybe Emmie had been half asleep; she'd drifted off more than once with her headlamp on, a book on her chest. While she was getting dressed for school, I made the smoothie I always made—yogurt, milk, berries, banana, protein powder, a little peanut butter. (Adelle and I typically had a glass.) I also put out some brioche toast and butter. But then I didn't sit at the table, I gave Emmie some space, I took my smoothie to the reading chair in the corner of the dining room and pretended to read. Emmie came in, all smiles when I said my 'Good morning, beautiful.' She sat in her chair, which meant her back was to me. She was wearing her paisley dress. Her calves looked so thin to me, her sneakers so big. I felt sick with guilt about my speech from the night before and for the first time in my life I didn't really want her to eat; I would have been relieved to see her have her one fake bite, her one fake sip, because that might mean my speech wasn't such a big deal. For years I had been told never to threaten her, never to command her, never to beg her to comply, and now I'd wandered into her room, smelling like alcohol, and threatened and guilt-tripped and pleaded. Now I was struggling to drink *my* smoothie, feeling like shit—guilty, hungover—watching her tiny back. And she took the bite of the toast that was less a bite than a way of compressing the toast to make it seem as though she'd taken a bite; for once that was a relief."

"Right, I know how hard—"

"But then she stood up and lifted the red plastic cup of smoothie. She knew I was watching; she was waiting for her mother. And then Adelle came into the dining room with her own smoothie and the black tea she always drinks. She stopped at the sight of Emmie standing there. And now

that Emmie had both of our attention, she downed the smoothie—one gulp, two gulps, three gulps, four. Gone. You must understand, this had simply never happened in our house before. And now, in my chair, I swung back to feeling like I did the previous night, I mean before the howling: look, all it took was one stern talking-to and the problem was solved! And then Emmie said, very calmly: Mama, can I please have more? We had never—*never*—heard her ask for more food or drink. Stunned, Adelle caught my eye; I shrugged. Adelle handed Emmie her own, much larger glass of smoothie. And Emmie chugged it: one gulp, two, three, four, five. And Adelle said—laughing nervously—you're thirsty this morning, sweetheart. Emmie laughed in response, carefully set the empty glass down on the table, and vomited a long arc of smoothie all over herself, the table, the floor.

"This was a turning point, this broke things open. That afternoon Adelle and I had a lunch date, and I confessed to her all that I'd said the night before. She was livid, furious, until I just started crying—maybe one of three times I'd managed to cry in ten years—blubbering in this bustling restaurant about how I just didn't know what to do, how scared and ashamed I was, and then Adelle started crying as well. Two parents, two lawyers, two self-loathing elites, weeping over overpriced salads—people at the other tables pretending not to look—because our child, for reasons we couldn't fathom, would not let nourishment pass her lips, because we'd failed to help our child thrive. The shame would be difficult to overstate. It is one thing to fail to provide for your children because you live under brutal material conditions, because you are impoverished or displaced, because your city is being firebombed; it is another to have every privilege, every resource, every fucking organic berry and cut of grass-fed beef, and to see your child starve herself, to see her—this is how it felt—refuse life, the life you have offered. Is it because the life on offer is a lie? Is it because she knows that privilege involves the immiseration of others? Is it because she is registering a sense of futurelessness, catastrophe—fires, floods, fascism? Was Emmie on a hunger strike? Of course she couldn't tell us; she didn't have the language for it.

"We found Emmie an individual therapist we all liked, and Adelle and I started consulting with everyone with a claim to expertise. Emmie had long

outgrown FTT, and soon we had a new acronym, ARFID—avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder. You go in with a problem—‘My daughter won’t eat’—they ask you some questions, then they give you a diagnosis that repeats what you said with more technical-sounding language, as if this process of translation constitutes a gain in knowledge. And then there is a second translation, an epistemological sleight of hand, the magical contraction of the diagnosis into an acronym. ‘My daughter won’t eat’ becomes ARFID. The acronym is like a code, moves the alpha toward the numerical; numbers are objective, right, suddenly it’s science! No matter that ARFID denotes the same mystery, is just an envelope for ignorance; ARFID just means: we have no physiological explanation but it doesn’t yet seem to involve the body-image issues we associate with anorexia or bulimia. Why couldn’t they think of an acronym that doesn’t basically begin with ‘barf’?”

“And that isn’t so close to ‘afraid.’”

“Yeah. What we immediately liked about Saro—all roads led to Saro as the ARFID oracle of L.A.—was precisely his humility. It took a lot of hustling to get in to see him, but we got a slot at his office in Santa Monica. The way the initial meeting worked was that all three of us met with him to say hello, then an assistant of his took Emmie off to play some games in the next room while the grown-ups talked. To my surprise Emmie didn’t express any anxiety about or resistance to the idea of our consulting with somebody else about eating. If anything, she’d developed an almost alarming passivity around it; I remember looking at her in the rearview mirror as we drove to the appointment, how calm she seemed in the back seat, smiling when she caught the reflection of my eyes. There was something angelic about her, but I mean that in a frightening way—like she was a patiently suffering messenger, like her suffering had some obscure meaning that had not been revealed, that she forgave Adelle and me for dragging her around from appointment to appointment because we knew not what we did.

“‘We don’t understand this’ was the first thing Saro said to us when Emmie was out of the room. Saro was a trim and ageless man; he could have been forty-five or sixty; he wore glasses, but he immediately took

them off each time we met, putting them back on only to indicate our time was up. ‘What we do know is that it’s happening a lot, mainly with girls, and that it’s absolutely not your fault.’ I’m embarrassed to tell you how good it felt to hear him say that last part. He asked a million questions, some sweeping (Are there stresses in the marriage or elements of your family history that might help me understand Emmie a little better?) and some very specific (Can you show me on this paper how you sit at the table during mealtimes?). He told us that this was more of an art than a science, that every kid was different and we were going to have to experiment, and that we were going to have to have *faith* (not a word I expected to hear): faith that things might change, that a little difference might eventually make a big difference. You don’t need me to tell you, Saro said, that one of the most difficult things about kids and eating is that the more the child feels focused on, the harder it is for her to try new things, to find a different relationship to food. That’s the paradox. So in a situation like this, one of the things I want to start with is a radical reset. And after a couple more conversations, and a call to the pediatrician to confirm she had a normal A1C, we decided to embark on our Willy Wonka experiment.

“And into the house full of sugar my father came, his first visit to Los Angeles in five years, the first visit Emmie could remember; we typically saw him in Providence or Berlin; he hated L.A., it was like the entire state of California—about which he knew basically nothing—was some kind of cultural insult directed at him. He wanted to see where Brecht, Adorno, Mann, and other expats had lived; that was the extent of his interest, though he was supposedly an expert on Golden Age Hollywood film. On this occasion he was being honored at the Hammer, some kind of lifetime achievement thing; he didn’t really come to see us, but to my surprise—the man loved hotels—he decided to stay here.

“It must be said that he absolutely adored Emmie, and he was great with Emmie in his way; their connection was deep. My dad spoke to children like they were miniature adults and somehow it worked, especially with her, maybe because she is, as everyone has always said, an ‘old soul.’ If anything he was *more* formal, more of an old-world European gentleman, with kids: he would rise when they entered the room, at least if they were

girls. ‘Good evening,’ shake hands, note how the color of somebody’s shorts complemented the rubber bands on their braces or the color of their eyes. Adelle thought it was sweet, hilarious; I’m sure I would have found it hilarious if I hadn’t grown up with it. He had zero interest in Emmie when she was a baby—if you handed him an infant, he’d hold its body as far away from himself as possible, failing to support the head—but as soon as she could really speak, he was smitten. She would sit on his knee on Governor Street and he would tell her long stories in German that must have been utterly incomprehensible to her, and yet she was rapt, her green eyes staring into his. And he would read to her endlessly; she would fall asleep and he’d go on reading, as if following her into her dreams. When she was old enough, they would have these long sessions over the phone—he’d be in his office or traveling and she’d be in bed with my iPhone on speaker; we could hear him from the hall. It was like a radio play. ‘Emmie, before we return to the adventures of this redheaded young woman, I will play for you a passage of music by a man named Debussy that I believe will resonate with our text.’ And then she would slowly read *The Adventures of Pippi Longstocking* to this cultural giant who was following along; he’d make little exclamations or comments here and there, help her sound out words; somehow his presence, the quality of his attention, would fill the house. They loved each other. Emmie used to sleep with one of his scarves; I’d be startled by the very faint smell when I’d come in to check on her: traces of the eau de toilette and sandalwood aftershave I remembered from when he used to kiss me good night, which he did for a year or two after my mom died. For the last thirty-five years, we only shook hands.

“But there was no point, none, in telling him about her struggles. Just as there was no point, there had never been any point, in telling him about my own personal problems, ups or downs. Because all you got back was some weird allegory, some kind of prose poetry, or an impossible string of references (many of which were probably fictional). Adelle had a cancer scare at one point; I told him we were waiting to get the biopsy back, that I was terrified, that I was spinning out, imagining the worst, etc. ‘Ah, *bios*, *opsis*—what a beautiful combination. Life, sight. Did you know that it is al-Zahrawi in the eleventh century who first uses a needle to puncture and

examine the material. He also, they say, invented lipstick, but this is disputed. He was born in what is now Spain, Andalusia. I have walked down the street named for him in Córdoba.' He might throw in an 'all will be well,' but my whole life he would meet anything personal with some demonstration of arcane knowledge or lyrical improvisation. It was always this way, no doubt it was his defense mechanism."

"Against what?"

"Against reality. When I was very depressed junior year of college, kind of frighteningly crashed—you were a good friend to me then, by the way—the shrink I was seeing raised the question of bipolarity, and drugs, which I found painful and complicated for a variety of obvious reasons, and when I tried to talk to my dad about it, I got this lecture about Robert Bunsen—his discoveries about the emission spectra of heated elements, the intense crimson color lithium gives to flames. I just got up and walked out of the room, 'I'll see you later, Thomas'—I called him Thomas for a decade after that, which I believe hurt him. I wanted to hurt him. Once—only once—did I tell him about my concern with Emmie's eating, and before the word '*Hungerkünstler*' was fully out of his mouth, before he could quote his beloved Kafka at me, or launch into some discourse about the history of pre-Christian asceticism, I snapped at him in German: This is not fucking theater, Dad, this isn't art or literature, Emmie isn't a character in a fiction, she's my fucking daughter. 'Of course,' he responded calmly, 'and all will be well.' I simply never mentioned it again. He would ask, 'And how is the lovely Adelle, how is the lovely Emmie?' and I would say fine, share a funny anecdote, but never a worry or concern. I guess the upside of this is—unlike Adelle's parents—he never gave us parenting advice or seemed to pass judgment.

"No advice, no judgment, until that last trip, when he walked into our experiment. I understand it must have been extremely disorienting for him. He had no idea how bad things had become with her eating, and certainly he couldn't have anticipated that we'd have swung from being micromanagers of her diet—stopping him from giving her one of those Petit Écolier cookies because she hadn't had enough protein at dinner—to letting her have a Klondike bar for breakfast (though she'd just nibble some

chocolate off it and leave the ice cream to melt in her bowl). Now I feel clear that not preparing him at all was acting out on my part, that I wanted to shock and concern him—to dare him to question my fathering given the kind of father he'd been. I had candy and assorted junk around the house like others might put out fresh flowers or bowls of fruit; I was making a defiant display of what we were doing far beyond what was necessary, using as a justification the fact that Saro had said Emmie should always be able to reach whatever she wanted without having to ask a parent.

"So he gets out of a cab from LAX, rings our bell, and a very thin, wan Emmie answers the door, runs into his arms, takes the box of cookies he brought, then leads him into a house full of the bright foils and plastics of the sugar-industrial complex. And this was a man who traveled with his own Bircher muesli, who was as fastidious about eating as he was with everything else (although now that fastidiousness was being challenged by age: there was dandruff on the shoulder of his jacket, his breath often smelled—that never used to happen). That first night Adelle had roasted salmon for us on a cedar plank, prepared *Spargel* on the side, and Emmie, sitting beside my father at the table, was dining on a bowl of Lucky Charms. He was baffled; he kept trying not to stare; he managed to restrict himself to effusively praising Adelle's cooking, but when he suggested to Emmie that she 'really must try' the fish, I interrupted: 'Emmie can eat whatever she wants.' Only later, when I was making sure he had towels and whatnot, did I say: Oh, by the way, on the advice of a doctor, we're just letting Emmie make all her own food decisions for a few weeks; *Schlaf gut!*

"I acted out in several ways. We'd all been invited to the Hammer, but I said it was too late for Emmie, so only I went—and I came from work and left early, before the dinner; there was probably an empty seat at his table. And I insisted we take a walk the next day in Runyon Canyon, even though it was hot and the AQI was bad. He took all this more or less in stride, and he didn't talk about the food or Emmie's weight (though you could see he was bothered by the situation); instead, he got focused on screens—asking how much we let Emmie be on the iPad, saying arcane things about algorithms and reaction times, what blue light might do to circadian rhythm. At that point, Emmie didn't really use her iPad that much—we let her watch

one to two episodes of *Octonauts* a night, the school had some stuff on Google Classroom, she occasionally FaceTimed a friend. I heard him talking to Adelle about it in the kitchen, about ‘the division and monetization of her attention,’ I heard him talking to Emmie about how ‘these screens, my love, they dull our senses,’ and then finally he told me—we were having a glass of wine in the living room while Adelle was putting Emmie to bed—how he simply could not forget how, when Emmie was only a few years old, we had let her watch the iPad in Providence, we had ‘let her disappear into the screen,’ we had ‘perhaps been too willing to leave her alone with the so-called tablet.’ For a long moment I thought I was having a stroke before I realized that what was overwhelming my body was pure, primal rage. I am of course a very flawed father, but I was not prepared to hear from him—”

“How old were you when your mom—”

“Also eight, yes. And when I spoke to him I spoke to him in French, my mother’s tongue, quietly, but with undisguised fury: ‘I’ve never left Emmie *alone* with anything. You have no idea what you’re talking about. And I assure you I am not in need of any feedback on my parenting from you of all people.’ I don’t remember everything I said, or I don’t want to remember, but I felt like strangling him, and eventually he did that thing where he just kind of threw his hands up, palms toward me, as if to say, ‘You win, you win, you’re the lawyer.’

“All this displaced stuff about the iPads had an unexpected, paradoxical effect on our household. Because I was angry, cumulatively exhausted, worried, I did this childish thing of saying to Emmie—when my dad was in the room—that she could watch as much as she wanted, and that in fact we should probably go to the Apple Store to get her a new device. Adelle was startled, then pissed that I’d unilaterally announced this, but I managed to convince her that it was consistent with what Saro was suggesting—that we’d had struggles, too, over screen time, that it was caught up with food because we always deferred screen time until after a meal, ‘You can watch after you eat,’ and also because we’d always had the strict rule that she couldn’t eat in front of a screen, that mealtimes were for us to be together. But given the point we’d reached, why not reset that, too? And that made

some sense to Adelle, she was at least willing to try that for a few weeks; I don't think she suspected that I was primarily trolling my dad.

"He went back to the East Coast—he flew out very early, he always said his goodbyes the night before; he was terrified of goodbyes—leaving us to our laissez-faire world of screens and sugar. And that's when the miracle happened, the not untroubling miracle. It took a few days before Emmie realized she could combine the two things we were no longer regulating—that she could not only have whatever she wanted (including nothing) for dinner, but she could, at least for the duration of the experiment, watch at mealtimes, or watch and eat simultaneously at some other time. She was disturbingly excited about the prospect of being able to watch while she ate (or declined to eat), maybe because the screen screened her from our gaze, helped her create a bubble around herself. At first Emmie very politely sat with us as we ate our dinner—she might fake a bite—and then she would ask, Now that we're done, may I watch? Of course, sweetheart. And then a few days in, it started to happen—she started to ask us to bring her snacks while she watched. Saro had told us to encourage her to get her own food, 'to feel ownership over the kitchen,' so we said, Just grab whatever you want, love. And she did—at first just junk, not that much, a couple of cookies. Then we would hear her pause her show and scurry into the kitchen and scurry back and unpause it. And then, once she was again transfixed by the screen, she'd eat. And there was a difference in *how* she ate—she wasn't nibbling, she was taking real bites (albeit of an Oreo). And then soon it was, Dad, can you bring me a snack? Just grab what you want, love. But I want you to cut me an apple. An apple! I remember texting Adelle, who was in Chicago: 'Emmie just asked for and ate almost an entire apple.' 'OMG, what size apple?' 'Like a full sized apple.' 'OMG.' There was still a lot of candy, cookies, but now she wanted milk with the cookies—for the first time in years, she drank a cup of whole milk, that's eight grams of fat. And then one evening she asked me to sit and watch with her. She had a bowl of cheese puffs, which she held toward me; she offered me some. And as crazy as it sounds, that was also entirely new, unprecedented, important somehow—her treating her food not as an alien substance forced on her but as a desirable thing she might share. 'They're good, right?' she

asked as I munched. ‘So good,’ I said. And that’s when I actually became aware of what she was watching.

“It wasn’t *Octonauts* anymore. She was watching these ‘unboxing’ videos on YouTube. Do you know what those are? It is a video of somebody opening a package, taking out the merchandise. Emmie loved watching the unboxing of ‘squishies’ in particular—little foam toys, often shaped like food, cupcakes with googly eyes or whatever, that you can squeeze. So in these videos, somebody—Emmie preferred women—just takes the toys out of the packaging, plays with the things a little. Everything is heavily miked; the titles of the videos often include ‘ASMR’: the clips are full of the sounds of plastic wrap crinkling, paper rustling, and the gasps and infantile gurgles of excitement from the unboxer, who taps on everything with her long pink nails. And these things are viewed millions, tens of millions, maybe hundreds of millions of times; there must be some very rich people who accumulated their wealth by removing plastic ponies or whatever from a box while giggling and cooing and smacking their lips.

“My instinct, of course, was to shut it down, to say, You’re not watching this garbage, but that wasn’t really in the spirit of the experiment, of deregulation, and it’s not like it was porn. Except it *was* like porn—I asked Emmie, as I made myself eat my cheese puffs, what she liked about these videos, and she said without missing a beat, ‘It’s satisfying.’ Does Eva also use that word?”

“All the time.”

“I would never have described anything as *satisfying* at that age. And she seemed to mean the satisfaction of a kind of physical need: while she was watching a flattened image on a screen, all those mouth sounds and little taps and crinkles provoked a low-level somatic response, scratched a kind of itch. It’s like the device takes you out of the real world, shields you from all the pressures and information, but then it administers this series of subtle sensory inputs and muffled shocks, these mild effects, as compensation for the unmanageable reality it’s made disappear. Which really is like pornography, maybe just *is* pornography, reducing all the complexity and messiness of an intimate encounter and offering a safer, addictive, milder, repeatable version of satisfaction in its stead? Regardless,

you have to picture me sitting on the couch, seeing myself through my father's eyes: 'My son is eating neon-orange puffed corn, watching a babbling, purple-haired woman opening Mini Mystery Plushies on a tablet with my starving granddaughter.' I mean, my dad used to go to concerts with Adorno!

"But she ate. Watching unboxing videos, Emmie ate like never before. Those videos, the way they filter out the world and give you these little buzzes and clicks in its place—as you watch candy-colored products being disgorged from their packaging—those videos put her in some kind of fugue state, some kind of mild trance, where she could ingest, where she could tolerate food inputs. ASMR treats ARFID. Soon we were letting her sit on the couch with the iPad, letting her skip the table altogether. We'd put a plate near her with a small portion of whatever real food we were having for dinner, 'just in case you want it.' And to our amazement—Adelle and I would be at the table, faking a grown-up conversation—Emmie would consume a few raviolis, a little chicken, steamed vegetables, whatever. Then she would put it aside, pause her video, scuttle to the kitchen for some junk, scuttle back, unpause. So Emmie was now—without fail, without fuss—getting real bites of real food in addition to the junk calories, and all without any anxiety or struggle. Soon she was even expressing food-related desires: pizza bites, chicken nuggets—which were health food, as far as we were concerned. And she was, praise God, asking for fruit. I remember one time we got sushi and she ate both ikura and half of a California roll and was actually disappointed when we didn't have more. She was even a little rude about it. And then my daughter ate an entire banana.

"We were so relieved, the breakthrough in her eating was so profound, that while I dutifully expressed my concerns to Saro about all the screen time, asked if our linking screens and food might be damaging in some way, I was hoping against hope he wouldn't tell us to intervene. I could have hugged him when he said, 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth,' that while all parents were going to have to struggle with these devices, Emmie was in a moment where getting the actual calories and 'getting comfortable with eating' trumped everything else. Besides, the actual number of minutes a day she was spending on the device was unremarkable; she probably

watched less than many of her friends. (He didn't ask *what* she was watching.) He suggested that what we might 'phase out' was the Wonka experiment, that we could just frankly tell Emmie that while she could still have plenty of desserts and sweet things, and while we still wanted her to make a lot of choices when we shopped, we were going to try to be a little more balanced in what we had around the house. We could narrate this as 'following her lead' now that she'd expressed some hunger for real food. So we told her; she didn't care at all, just said OK, but could she still have mini blueberry muffins for breakfast and Oreos as a treat? Absolutely!

"Adelle was, needless to say, as thrilled as I was about Emmie's eating—we felt we could already see that she had more energy, was already putting on a little bit of weight—but Adelle was more bothered than I was by the fact that we'd disbanded family meals, was even more disturbed by the weird 'content' Emmie loved. We'd started arguing about the iPad when Emmie wasn't around; Adelle kept saying we could at least return to her having to sit with us at the table first, and I kept saying—with way too much intensity, of course—that we must not change a thing, we must not look the fucking gift horse in the mouth, at least not until she'd really practiced her eating, had a doctor's visit with an encouraging growth curve, maybe shed her diagnostic acronym. And at some point Adelle said, 'You know, your dad is right,' meaning about the obvious evil of screens, but 'Your dad is right' was a surefire way to make me lose my shit, and soon we were yelling about everything and nothing. We would have gone on struggling about screen time if all of life hadn't suddenly moved online."

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"He was on a call with Emmie when we heard him coughing. She'd wanted to read him some of the poems she'd written for school—which, it turned out, was a couple of days from shutting down; we'd been debating whether to pull her—and she had my phone on speaker so she could gesture and declaim. Adelle and I were in the kitchen disinfecting vegetables—we'd watched a video that said the virus could be all over our food like 'invisible glitter'—and we both stopped when we heard him hacking. Before Emmie hung up, Adelle took the phone, took it off speaker, and asked how he was

feeling. He said he felt fine beyond the cough, which he claimed was familiar, seasonal, and Adelle thought he sounded otherwise OK—energetic as ever, calm, clear. And he also explained that he was now entirely a recluse, a hermit, that his friend and neighbor, Daniel, had forced him to accept that he must have his groceries delivered, must avoid all people, 'withdraw from the realm of appearances,' etc., and so there had been no opportunity for the virus to find him. ('Unless it found me on the flight back from Los Angeles'; even though he'd left us a month before he got sick, my dad would claim until the end that he must have caught it on the plane.) Adelle said he went off on some tangent about the development of germ theory in the 1860s—in other words he seemed like himself.

"I didn't call him the next day. I don't know why. Like everybody else, we were losing our minds: I was staying up all night refreshing the *Times*, reading tweets from epidemiologists about protein spikes and droplet dispersion, CFI and CFR, super-spreader events at conferences, on cruise ships. I passed hours frantically sending and receiving contradictory links, but I heard the echo of his coughing in my head. Finally I did call. Nobody answered. So I called again. And again. I pictured him on the floor, gasping. I didn't have Daniel's number—I was stunned to realize I knew basically no one in Providence, and also, if he did have Covid, who could I send into the house? (In fact I was close to texting you—not to ask you to go to Providence on a suicide mission, of course, just to see if you had any ideas.) Then finally he picked up, sounding sleepy but OK, and he chuckled at the urgency of my concern, but the chuckle led to coughing, then to wheezing. 'I believe I have a severe cold,' he said, 'so I have been napping, and in my bedroom I have no telephone.' He didn't give clear answers to my questions—did he have a temperature, was he eating. I wanted him to go to the hospital right away, to call an ambulance, but of course the hospitals had become the last places on earth you wanted to go; if you went without Covid, you'd leave with it—or rather, you'd never leave. And despite everything, his spirits seemed fine, unchanged, I remember there was a Satie record playing in the background, which reassured me more than it should have. I made him promise me that he would call me each day until he was feeling better, 'otherwise Emmie will worry,' and he did call me the

following morning, sounding tired, hoarse, but talking about the swallows nesting outside his kitchen, ‘their liquid, high-pitched song, three notes,’ but he didn’t answer my call that night. Or the next day. So after consulting Adelle, I hid in our bathroom—the most private room in the house—and called 911. It took ages, I kept getting hung up on, but finally I got someone and explained that I needed to be patched through to another state, and I was finally connected with Rhode Island; they said they would send an ambulance to Governor Street. Adelle and I decided not to share any of this with Emmie.

“I don’t know if he managed to give them my number, if he wanted them to call, or if I was in the system from his hip replacement years before and contacting family was procedure; I guess it must have been the latter. A Providence number showed up on my phone, and again I hid myself in our bathroom and answered; it was a nurse. She quickly but calmly explained that my father had arrived at the hospital very ill, that he was receiving oxygen, that no visitors were allowed (she thought I was in Providence), but that they were trying to arrange brief ‘virtual visits’ with ‘patients and their loved ones’; she didn’t say ‘to say goodbye.’ I remember I was looking at myself in the mirror as I tried to get more information about his condition, but she just repeated—she must have had a long list of calls to make—that he was very ill, would I like a virtual visit. ‘Yes,’ my reflection said. She explained that I would receive a Zoom link by text, that I should log in and go to the virtual waiting room, and at some point—‘I wish I could tell you when’—I would be connected with my dad. ‘Understand,’ the composed but no doubt exhausted woman said, ‘that these visits are going to have to be brief, that our resources are stretched very thin.’ I remember her saying that I should prepare what I wanted to say to my father in advance, but I might be making that part up.

“I left the bathroom in a daze. Emmie, who was now in virtual school, was on the couch, eating grapes, which we still cut lengthwise for her, an infantilizing practice I kept meaning to stop; she was watching some video on her new iPad, animated triangles singing about their angles. Adelle was at the kitchen table on a work Zoom, wearing earbuds; she was using my laptop because she’d spilled coffee on hers a few days before. I went to my

office, where I'd docked my own iPad, and found the link in my messages and got into the waiting room. 'Waiting for the host to start the meeting.' I got up and shut the door, then texted Adelle: 'Thomas is in the hospital very sick and they are going to video call me but I don't know when.' 'Oh my god Max let me get off one second.' 'No just do your call, I have no idea when it will be let's not disturb Emmie.' 'One sec I'm coming.' 'No please don't really please stay in your meeting I think I need to do this just me I don't want Emmie to see him with tubes etc just keep an eye on Emmie please.' In my mind these text messages were darting through the air in our house, hopefully staying out of range of Emmie, who might pull them from the ether.

"I could just make out the sound of Emmie's iPad, now some song about rays and lines—'Lines go on forever in both ways.' I could hear birdsong nearby, and in the distance sirens. I could hear a few planes en route to LAX—probably ghost flights. Then Adelle came in quietly, hugged me, tears in her eyes, earbuds in her ears; maybe she was still in the meeting. She asked in a whisper about what I'd learned, what she could do; I repeated that I just wanted to do the visit myself, if it even happened, that I just wanted her to mind Emmie, to have Emmie put on headphones so she wouldn't overhear; I was sure my dad wouldn't want Emmie in the Zoom. Adelle said OK, that she loved me, and she left me in the office. I confirmed I was still in the virtual waiting room and then I realized: I looked like shit, my hair unkempt ('unkempt' was one of my father's words), I hadn't shaved (but there was no time for that), I was basically in pajamas, T-shirt and sweatpants, regressive lockdown attire. It was crazy, who cared what I looked like, they wouldn't even see my clothes, but I took the iPad and hurried into our room, changed my shirt, and found a jacket, then took the iPad into the bathroom, almost dropping the thing into the sink. I brushed my teeth, combed my hair, watching the screen out of the corner of my eye. Then I went back into my office, feeling like a kid who'd put on his father's suit, who was pretending to be a grown-up for some sort of interview.

"And what would I say in this brief interview, this exit interview? I remember I had the fantasy, as I stared at the screen, that the 'virtual visit'

would suddenly open on all the devices in the house, that it would cut into Emmie's programming. Maybe he'd appear on every screen in the world—like in movies when aliens take over and announce a new regime to the earthlings. But it wouldn't be my dad in a paper gown, hooked up to machines; he was going to be elegantly dressed and coiffed, saying goodbye with a smile, 'But before I leave you, my dears, I will play for you a passage of music.' Then I had the fantasy that my mother would appear, beautiful but way too thin, wan. I shut my eyes and pictured the empty house on Governor Street with unusual vividness, a kind of lucid dream or simulation: I climbed the stairs, I turned off the record player, I opened a window. And then I pictured the apartment off rue de Boulainvilliers, turned left at the hall, and went into my room, saw the clothes strewn on the floor, the Tintin books stacked on the desk, my Maradona poster on the wall. I was a ghost, an avatar. At some point Adelle came in and put down a glass of water beside me, smoothed back my hair, kissed me, left. And then I saw that the meeting was starting.

"It was a choppy mess of green and purple scrubs, fragmented voices. Then a woman's masked and goggled face was in the frame: 'OK, Max?' 'Yes,' I said. 'OK, Max, can you hear us?' 'Yes,' I said. 'OK, Max, I have you on an iPad here and, let's see, I'm going to show you your father, OK, and what I'm going to do is then hold the iPad close to his ear, to make sure that he can hear you, understand?' 'Yes,' I said. There was a lot of commotion in the room. I couldn't tell how many people there were, if there was another patient nearby as well. I wasn't sure if they were administering some kind of care to him, or if people were just rushing somewhere else. It said my internet connection was unstable. But there he was, upright in a bed, tubes in his nose, his mouth; the image kept breaking up and reconstituting itself. He had some kind of shower cap thing on. I mean, a couple of days before he was at home, talking about birdsong; now I couldn't tell if he could see me, if his green eyes were focused; this was all on the small screen of the iPad, remember; it was like trying to communicate with someone in outer space, all these glitches and delays. 'Dad,' I said, to say something. 'Papa,' I said in German. But I was being too quiet, I didn't want Emmie to overhear in case she didn't have her

headphones on. ‘It keeps freezing,’ one nurse said to another. I was looking at my dying dad as he tried to look for me on the tablet, ‘these screens, my love, they dull our senses.’ And then it cut off: ‘This meeting has been ended by the host.’

“I just sat there. My phone rang. A Providence number. ‘Hello,’ I said. ‘Hi, Max, I am so sorry but Zoom isn’t really working, I’m Laura, I’m a nurse here with your dad, and this is my personal number. We can try FaceTime or I can—if you want to talk to your dad—he can’t talk but he can listen, he definitely can listen to what you want to say to him— I can hold the phone up to his ear. Do you want to try FaceTime?’ ‘No,’ I said. ‘I will just talk to him.’ ‘OK, I’m going to put the phone on speaker and I’m going to hold it near his ear and you take a few minutes to tell him what you want to say.’ And then I heard her address my dad: ‘I have Max on the phone, your son, and he is going to speak to you, OK? Thomas is nodding,’ Laura said. ‘Max, I am now holding the phone where Thomas can hear it. Please speak loudly.’

“I could hear him listening; I could somehow sense the shape of his attention. I can’t do this, I was thinking, maybe I even said that out loud, I can’t do this, but then I just was doing it, a rush of German and tears, no longer concerned about being overheard, things I never would have said if his image or his body were before me, or if anyone could see my face; I could only say them as a disembodied voice: ‘I know you did your best, I know you love me, I know you loved her, I do not blame you, no one is to blame, she needed more help, maybe no amount of help would have helped, there are forces much bigger than us, but you left me alone, way too alone, there are many things that should have been different, I should never have been sent to boarding school, I know you didn’t know what to do, I know it wasn’t that you didn’t care, I want you to be at peace, we will honor you, Emmie will carry you with her, she loves you so much, the love goes on forever in both ways, we will take care of all the art and she will have it in time, I know you want her to have the Höch montages, I will manage it all, your things and your work and your stories and your voice, I will always hear your voice, I’m so glad you saw Emmie here, she is doing great now, she is eating plenty of healthy food, I’m sorry I was such a child on this last

trip, you were right to be concerned, she was struggling, but now she is OK, it is good that you were concerned, it was love, you are a good person, let's forgive each other, I forgive you and I love you, you can go, you can be at peace now, goodbye.'

"'Max,' Laura said eventually, the phone no longer on speaker, 'Max, I think your father heard and understood what you said. I know he did. Someone will be in touch with you'—she meant, it was clear, when he'd died—'and I am really glad he had this chance to hear you. I need to end the call now; please know we are going to make him as comfortable as possible, OK?' 'Thank you,' I said. 'Laura, thank you so much.' And then it was all over. I put my head on the desk.

"We decided not to tell Emmie anything until we got the call, the news, which I assumed would be soon. I remember we got her off her iPad and masked up and went for a walk—again, this was early lockdown, we were barely going outside—and I felt, I was surprised to feel, this incredible gratitude. Emmie was between us, holding both our hands, swinging like a little kid, but feeling a little heavier. I was so grateful for her, for Adelle, I felt so grateful for Laura, the nurse, her kindness, so grateful that I'd had the opportunity to say what I'd said. (It's silly, but I felt connected to her because I'd said those things on her personal phone, not a hospital platform—it made it a different kind of contact, that medium. So strange to think I'd said what I'd said on a device that she'd take home, that she would touch with her hands and face, that she would charge beside her bed.) I felt that my dad was already dead, that he wasn't suffering, and that his death, instead of severing our connection, had opened this channel between us, if that makes sense. Maybe some of it was the oxytocin and endorphins that crying releases, I don't know, but the feeling was profound. Childhood memories I normally would have tried to block now broke over me as we walked, but gently, warmly: my dad cracking my mom and me up with his Charlie Chaplin imitation, how long since I'd recalled that? The tears on his face at the Cueva de las Manos—that trip we took after my college graduation. I knew plenty of anger and pain would come back, I knew I might get hit at any moment with real grief, I knew the terror of the virus

and everything else in the unraveling world was going to return, but I felt, at that moment, compassion, peace.

“The call came around five in the morning L.A. time. I sat up, took a deep breath, and accepted it as Adelle stirred beside me; she took my free hand. It was a male nurse this time. He introduced himself and confirmed who he was talking to and delivered the news: ‘We completed extubation last night; that’s when we remove a patient from mechanical ventilation.’ ‘Right,’ I said, relieved that he’d been released, no further heroic measures, that it hadn’t been some drawn-out thing full of suffering; I had known he was gone. I squeezed Adelle’s hand to indicate his passing. ‘And he’s continued to be stable overnight,’ the nurse said. ‘Stable,’ I said. ‘His vitals are good, his blood oxygen levels are fine, he’s still quite sedated so he can’t talk yet.’ ‘His vitals,’ I said. ‘He’s breathing OK on his own,’ the nurse went on, ‘the course of this illness is so variable, but he seems to have turned it around, you can call the nurse’s station for updates, things are hectic here, but we wanted to keep you posted. I want to be frank that we’re seeing some patients steadily improve, get discharged, others crash again, so we’re not entirely out of the woods, but it’s looking good. Your father—but you must know this—is a very strong man.’”

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“I still have it in my call history, or at some point I took a screenshot of my call history, and I have that: a record of a three-minute-and-twenty-seven-second incoming call with Laura (I put her in my contacts for some reason) at 2:13 on April 21st, 2020, when she held the phone to my father’s ear and I said the things I couldn’t say again, things that he had no memory of hearing—at least no conscious memory: ‘When my body was in the hospital, my mind was on a distant star.’ I uploaded that screenshot to the cloud.

“I can’t communicate the strangeness of that first trip to Providence after he was home. I hadn’t been to a grocery store, to the office, I hadn’t been inside a friend’s house; Emmie’s handful of awkward playdates had been outdoors, distanced (now the extremity of our caution embarrasses me), and suddenly I was at LAX, where some of the (few) people were

wearing improvised hazmat suits—masks, but also face shields, goggles, plastic gloves (I remember shower caps, but that can't be right)—while others appeared totally unconcerned, drinking beer in the airport bars, two realities in one space; now I'm unclear which reality was more real. Then I was up in the strangely smooth air, there wasn't a bump, it was as though we'd never really taken off—only a few fellow passengers, nobody sitting beside me. (I was sure I was going to get Covid, that I'd end up immobilized in my father's house; I wouldn't take off my mask for a sip of water.) Everything had the lubricity of a dream; now I was in an Uber, my window down, my head half out the window, half listening to the driver explain how Soros was behind the virus, and then I was standing on Governor Street, sanitizing my already raw hands, calling my dad from just outside the side door; I didn't want to go in unannounced. Do you know that weird effect where you hear somebody in real space and through the phone simultaneously? I could hear his voice coming through the kitchen window and, with the tiniest delay, I could hear it through the device pressed to my ear; there were two of him now.

"I go into the house—unmasked because of his immunity, my ears sore from the straps of the KN95 I'd been wearing for nine hours—and he immediately hands me a tray with a coffeepot and cups and cookies on it, the tray designed to make an embrace out of the question, and he takes my bag and leads me into the living room. Sit, let me look at you, he says, as if I'm the one who was on a ventilator a couple of weeks before. It is good to see you, I said. Good, he said, very good.

"Maybe some of his movements were slowed? His breathing was sometimes audible, deliberate. But really what was remarkable was how little he'd changed, at least physically. He was still coughing some, he had an inhaler now, steroids I guess, and he said he napped twice a day instead of once, though I'm not sure I saw him nap at all on that trip. He said the illness had robbed him of many names, meaning he felt his memory had suffered, but you'd never have thought he'd been so near death. Maybe he hadn't been? All he recalled of the ordeal was being 'awoken' by the EMTs, as if he'd just been dozing in his chair, and then he recalled 'the cacophony' of the hospital, but mostly it was 'empty space, just a long and dreamless

sleep’ until he was off the ventilator, feeling sore and woozy. He wasn’t much changed, and yet he was utterly changed; I don’t know how to put the contradiction; it was as though everything in the house had shifted a few millimeters, as if the musculature of his face had been slightly altered, so that his expressions and intonations were just a little different, but more different for only being a little different. I used to have the fantasy as a kid that my parents had been replaced by actors or robots—did you have that?”

“Yes.”

“It was kind of like that, but then, I remember thinking as I sat there drinking my coffee, scanning the walls, the piles of books, that the change might well have been in me—that I’d been altered by what I’d said, even if he’d never heard it or couldn’t remember it (are those the same thing?). I’d never had the chance to say goodbye to my mom and now I’d said goodbye to my dad but he’d come back from the dead and here I was to check on him. And as we made our polite conversation—he asked after the flight, Emmie and Adelle, I gave him some drawings Emmie had made—I found myself watching him closely for any sign that he *did* remember Laura holding the phone to his ear. I couldn’t shake the suspicion—a suspicion that was a childish form of hope—that he had taken it in, that it hadn’t disappeared, that it was transcribed somewhere inside him. He kept saying, in that first exchange, things like ‘I hope Emmie can forgive me for not having yet responded to her beautiful letter,’ ‘I hope Adelle can forgive me for not having managed a birthday present,’ and I kept thinking: this talk of forgiveness—is this an oblique acknowledgment of what I’d said into his ear as he lay (not) dying? It was ridiculous; why couldn’t I manage: ‘Dad, when you were in the hospital, I said some things you don’t remember, and I want to say them again, now, because they’re important,’ but that was impossible. Instead I was listening for traces, one moment suspecting he was just lying, he remembered it all, word for word, and then another moment wondering if it had perhaps entered his unconscious, which is why I kept asking if he was absolutely sure his ‘long sleep’ had been dreamless, which caused him, of course, to launch into a treatise on dreams, psychoanalysis, how this tribe in the Bay of Bengal ‘knits’ one collective dream out of many.”

“I read an essay about that. By his friend Vishvajit Pandya. He recommended it to me the last—”

“I know. Adding to the strangeness of the trip was the fact that I wasn’t really sure why I was there, exactly. When I’d been in L.A. it had seemed obvious—of course I had to go to him, check on him, make sure he was doing OK, had everything he needed, even though it was complicated to travel because Adelle and I had decided I’d have to quarantine in a hotel before rejoining our household. But once I was sitting in the teak chair where I always sat beside the fireplace, I couldn’t account for my own presence. I mean, he did his own grocery shopping (I didn’t), he even ‘dined’ inside every few days at that Thai place on Wickenden—apparently one of the only places that allowed it—because he was ‘awash in antibodies.’ It was as if he was stronger, less fragile, than I was. I gave people a wide berth if I passed them outside, imagining each person as a cloud of pathogens. ‘You are immunologically naive, whereas my T cells, they have long memories’—he delighted in all the new language, the poetry of disease; as ever, he was at the vanguard. I mean, there were a few trivial household tasks I could help with—I changed a couple of light bulbs in the basement; I fixed a sagging window in the kitchen—but there wasn’t much for me to do, and if we were in the house we’d have to talk, but I couldn’t do that for twelve hours a day, so I went on walks.

“Which in my memory merge into a single walk: gorgeous late-spring weather, tulips and dogwoods flowering against an impossibly blue sky. Everyone had said, no doubt wishfully, that the pandemic had given the natural world an opportunity to breathe, recover a little. There did seem to be more birdsong and insect noise, more movement in the grass and trees, or I was more aware of these things, resensitized by the relative absence of traffic, construction, and so on. And all the mundane rhythms had ceased—nobody cared that I wasn’t going to be on work Zooms for a few days—so that I felt, as I walked, like I was traveling back in time. Adelle and Emmie became a little unreal to me; they belonged to a future world. I was an undergraduate again, an aspiring writer, not a lawyer; I didn’t even check my phone; it hadn’t been invented yet. Except the other students were largely missing—the college, of course, had ‘gone remote’—the green was

open but empty, or almost empty: a few people were here or there on blankets, and from a distance I fantasized they were our classmates from the end of the last millennium: that young woman sitting on the steps of Sayles Hall, reading a book whose title I couldn't make out, that was Anisa Hiller—I was obsessed with her my sophomore year. And that sixtysomething man leaving one of the buildings (I guess people still had access to their offices) was Professor Rosenblum; he taught the legendary constitutional law course I took my senior year and was on the flight that hit the Pentagon. When I walked west between University Hall and Manning Chapel, I passed two people—we were close enough that I looked away, held my breath—and I imagined it was you and Arjun. And so on: the campus was empty save for birds, squirrels, ghosts. And I can see myself going down College Hill, past the Athenaeum, finding a bench near the river, watching the sunlight play on the water for a while. Remember WaterFire? We met up there once. In my mind WaterFire was for my mother, because all rivers are one river for me, flowing against time. My mother, who had no funeral. In the eighteenth century they would float a plank of wood on the Seine, bearing blessed bread and a candle for the dead, and that was for my mother, too, even though she was a Jew.

"I'm trying to give you some sense of that state I was in on my last evening with my father when a long talk was unavoidable. How everything was wobbling for me—like when you press down on an icon on your iPhone screen and all the icons begin to wobble, and you can move them around or delete them; I realize it's a stupid analogy. On the last night he'd insisted on making dinner—he'd been letting me cook so I could feel useful—and when I entered through the side door, it smelled like roast meat and red wine. It smelled like it used to smell on the rare occasion I'd have dinner with him when I was an undergrad, which, as you know, were bizarre meals for me."

"Sauerbraten."

"He never made sauerbraten."

"I thought that the dish he made—"

"He never made sauerbraten in his life. He made a version of beef bourguignon."

“I see.”

“An unusual bourguignon because he learned to make it from Amalia, who was Polish, from Lublin—a woman who lived with us in Paris when I was a kid. So it was like a cross between beef bourguignon and bigos. I loved her. She must have been really young—eighteen? Twenty? I’ve always wondered what her relationship with Thomas actually was. I don’t want to think about it, really. Maybe it was fine. But she also more or less disappeared without saying a real goodbye—just weeks before.”

“Have you ever Googled her?”

“I don’t know her last name. I don’t think I ever knew it. Anyway, for the record: you never had sauerbraten on Governor Street.”

“Understood. Sorry. So on the last evening—”

“You know I never lived in that house, none of the rooms was mine. He sent me to boarding school when we fled Paris for Berlin, then he sent me to boarding school in New Hampshire when he decided to come to the States. (At least at boarding school he couldn’t forget to pick me up at the end of the day.) I must have hoped for some kind of connection with him when I decided to come to college in Providence—though it’s hard for me to reconstruct what I was thinking—but our proximity just produced the most intense forms of estrangement. Here is a house that has all of the things from my childhood home in it (except my mother), but it’s not my house at all. I was a guest there like any other guest, or somewhere between a guest and a ghost; I could only be hosted where I should have been at home. I was on the wrong side of a mirror. That’s where we first met, wasn’t it, at one of his ‘little symposia,’ as he called them? He loved having students over.”

“Yes.”

“And I remember you were shocked to learn I was his son.”

“I was surprised because—”

“Because there was nothing about my way of being in the house, or his and my way of relating to one another, that indicated that we were family. I remember when I first got to Providence, I wondered aloud if I might have a key. ‘But there is no need for a key,’ he said.”

“‘The side door is always open.’”

“Yes. And on that last night of the Covid trip, when I finally walked back to Governor Street, I felt—perhaps as intensely as ever—the *unheimlich*. Maybe the real son would just come downstairs, maybe you were the real son, maybe I was the clone or robot or doppelgänger. I felt eight and eighteen and forty-five all at once, my grasp on reality was tentative, an extreme form of the effect his presence always had on me, a nightmarish form of what others so loved about him—how he seemed from the future and the past simultaneously, a gentleman time traveler, how he reenchanted the air around us, made other worlds seem possible, as you might say. But trust me, no matter how great it was to have him as a mentor, you don’t want a spirit medium as a father. Anyway, we small-talked our way through the meal—I remember the dish was strangely flavorless; either he’d forgotten something, I thought, or I’d lost my taste as part of the onset of the virus. And then it was time to sit and have wine, although he wasn’t drinking, in the living room, which was always dim, which somehow always seemed in the process of getting dimmer, as though the houselights of a theater were being lowered forever without the room ever going dark.

“Before I’d left L.A., Adelle had made this suggestion that I’d instantly dismissed, almost felt offended by: that I might make some recordings of his speech, his stories. (She’d made a bunch of recordings with her mother a summer or two before—although that had been prompted by an oral history project around the SPLC.) He’s a weird and legendary talker who we almost lost, she’d said, and you’re going to have all this time to kill, and we’ll want them in the future, for Emmie. Besides, Adelle said, it might actually shield you from some of the intensity—it will let you pretend to be a journalist. No way, I’d said, mainly because it would create all this pressure, make it feel like the last conversation we’d ever have, and also he’d probably want to hear the recordings, rework the material somehow; I did not want to end up in his art. I’d thought her suggestion revealed how little she understood my relation to my father, but when I found myself sitting in the chair across from him that evening, drinking his Clos de Vougeot, trying to hide how crazy I felt, the notion of recording suddenly returned to me—not because I wanted to preserve his voice for Emmie, you understand, but because I wanted to preserve my connection to reality. To know that there would be a

transcript, even if I never consulted it, to know that I would, for once, in regard to my father, have something objective to test my experience against."

"Was he open to being recorded?"

"You're not understanding. I'd already plugged my phone charger into the outlet near the table, one of those wireless chargers where you just lay your phone against the plate. I pressed record on my voice memo app and set it down on the charger. It was obscured from his view by the lamp—not that he would have paid much attention to it anyway. Except I did hear in my own voice that tiny alteration, that trace of self-consciousness, that always occurs in the presence of some recording technology. Just as your face is always different in the presence of a camera. And I did wonder, despite myself, if he somehow could pick this up, if he would discover what I was doing—but surely that was just childish guilt or a regressive belief in the omniscience of the father or something. No, I didn't tell him that I was recording, I have no real reason to think he suspected anything, and I just lobbed some questions at him about his past—'I can't remember who cooked in your house growing up, was it only your mother?'—and then let him hold forth. And I did in fact feel strangely stabilized, comforted, by the presence of the device.

"I was only half listening—I'd let my device do the listening as I sipped my wine and nodded—and so I felt freed up to really look at him. I felt, without actually believing it, that his eyes had changed, that the green had turned a little gray around the edges. It did seem to me that his lips moved differently as he spoke, something I'd seen in a colleague after he'd had a TIA, and it had the strange effect of making his speech seem dubbed. But overall, he looked *too* good to me, *too* strong, even the slight decline in the fastidiousness of his appearance that I'd noticed in L.A. seemed reversed, and I had this crazy fantasy that he'd faked the whole thing, that it was some kind of theater; he'd enlisted a little troupe of grad students to stage the brief hospital Zoom; or, OK, he'd been in the hospital, but somehow he'd deceived Laura and the other caretakers into thinking he was much sicker than he was—these were the paranoid notions flitting through my mind while I watched him in the dim light, as I kept him talking to my

phone about those first few years in Augsburg, where I've never been. At some point I asked him if he had any interest in going back to his hometown, which is like an hour outside of Munich, a city where we'd stayed together more than once without ever mentioning the possibility of visiting the place he was born—would he like to see the medieval canals again, for instance, which he'd always described as his father's 'one pure love,' or to revisit his home or Brecht's? He must have misunderstood me, because he responded as though I'd proposed that we make such a trip together, as a family. He said that he did like the idea of showing Emmie both the little bell tower and the (restored) synagogue, but that he felt 'it was late now,' that while he still had some energy, he didn't 'have the energy to travel back in time'; there was, however, another European trip he wanted to discuss with me, though there was no particular urgency.

"I couldn't follow him at first. He was going on about the giant clockface at St. Peter, how I'd loved it when the three of us had gone to Zurich when I was a little boy, a trip I don't recall. Then he was talking about the *Phaedo*, quoting some Greek at me, then talking about his 'friend, his brother,' Philippe Ariès, about how I should revisit *L'Homme devant la mort*, and then he's talking about a man named Minelli, 'who is, like you, a partisan of the law.' It took forever for him to say the word 'Dignitas,' and then I realized what we were discussing. 'I do not say we go now,' he said, 'but having narrowly escaped the hospital, and having been permanently weakened, I would like to have access to contemporary hemlock, which I assume is pentobarbital; perhaps it is appropriate that I would have to return to the Old World to exercise this ancient right.'

"Initially, to my own surprise, I didn't have a strong reaction to him broaching this subject. That came later. In fact, if anything, in the moment it helped me compose myself, to feel more like a grown-up. He was approaching ninety, he'd barely made it home, I absolutely believed in death with dignity, in making contingency plans, so this was an uncomfortable but far from abnormal conversation to be having with one's elderly parent—in fact, Adelle had encouraged me to initiate some end-of-life planning; we didn't even know if my father had anything like a current will. So in a sense it was grounding—because it was appropriate—for our

conversation to have taken this turn. And I just said that I didn't see any harm in our learning more about what it meant to preregister for Dignitas, to have the relationship established should it ever be something he felt he needed to pursue. Then I asked some questions about the status of his documents, executorship, etc., and he answered directly, without his usual poetry; I was grateful to think all of that would be on the 'tape' should I need to review it. I guess I hadn't really responded—both because I didn't want to contemplate it and because it didn't seem immediately relevant—to the idea of my accompanying him to Zurich if and when the time came. 'And you will take this journey with me, no? You have not been to Switzerland since you were a young child. And when it's time we'll return together?'

"I've been to Switzerland, what, ten times? Fifteen? We have an office in Bern. When Adelle and Emmie and I were based in Berlin, we traveled together to Basel. We traveled to Lucerne. We sent him postcards. But what dizzied me about this strange assertion was that he was erasing our trip to La Cure, when I was working in the rights department at Canal Plus in Paris and helped with Godard permissions. The trip where I introduced you both to Rosa, with all that would entail. He must think of La Cure as France, I decided, trying to stay calm, very deliberately refilling my glass of wine; it's true that after we met up in Geneva, we were mainly in Les Rousses, the French part. But it was impossible that my father had forgotten our tour of the Hotel Arbez—which you remember."

"Vaguely."

"Come on. The one that's famous because different parts of the hotel are on different sides of the border. The lower half of the stairs are in France, but, beginning on the seventh step—"

"You're in Switzerland. Right. Jesus."

"And during the German occupation, the Nazi soldiers could enter the French side of the hotel, but not ascend to the upper rooms, where Max Arbez helped shelter Jews and members of the Resistance. A kind of impossible staircase. Remember we went up it, ascended to Switzerland? This story was important to my dad—didn't he talk about it in that essay about Joseph Roth?"

“I read that essay in manuscript. How is it possible that I—”

“There is even a photo of the three of us there, I can look for it. We’re flanking him. He’s in a white linen suit, holding a walking stick.”

“Of course. Yes.”

“And my dad told me, told us, that Arbez was ‘one of the three Maxes’ for whom I was named. Horkheimer, Arbez, and my mother’s favorite uncle. I have my doubts about this, though, as I never heard of Arbez growing up. It was also, this hotel, the site of the Évian Accords. I can hear him saying, ‘It is a complex space. Non-euclidean. So such things can happen here.’ He kept talking about the voices in the air.”

“The ether, with its signals. I can’t believe I told him—”

“And so, that night, instead of answering his question about a future visit to Zurich, about taking him to kill himself, I corrected him: of course we’ve been in Switzerland since then, I’ve been many times, but we were there together in 2004 for the RTL short. And he said, ‘I do not recall that. The virus has robbed me.’ ‘You don’t recall making the film in La Cure?’ I asked. ‘No, no,’ he said, ‘I of course remember the short film. I just do not recall that we were together there, then.’ When I didn’t say anything, he added: ‘That you were indispensable to getting us rights to clips from *Une femme coquette* and *Opération béton*—this of course I remember very clearly.’

“It was as though someone had placed an ice pack against the back of my neck. Was he trolling me—did he in fact know I was secretly recording him and so he was getting his revenge by erasing me? ‘Rosa and I took the TGV from Paris to Geneva,’ I said flatly. ‘We had lunch near the cathedral. I remember your toast. I drove one of the rental vans. We stopped on the lake. In La Cure, we visited the Hotel Arbez. You lectured us about Max Arbez and his wife.’ ‘I am not a lecturer,’ my father interrupted, as if that were the important point. ‘You and I, just the two of us,’ I ignored him, ‘we hiked the La Dôle loop from Saint-Cergue. That is some ten miles. It is impossible that you do not remember this. Impossible that you recall I secured permissions for clips from *Operation Concrete* but not that we made this trip together.’ ‘This is some twenty years ago,’ my father said, smiling, as though it were silly of me to take this ‘lapse’ so seriously. ‘In

my mind many trips merge or disappear. But yes, now, as you describe it, I begin to see it.' 'No,' I said, 'I do not want you to *begin to see it*, I am not painting a picture for you. I am not asking you to use your imagination, I'm telling you what *happened*.' 'Yes, of course,' he said, 'of course—for a moment I was distant, it is late for me, but now the memory becomes clear. On our hike we saw a kingfisher?' 'I don't know,' I said. 'I don't know anything about birds.' 'Yes, we saw a kingfisher. And kingfishers are auspicious. Announcing halcyon days. And I remember, too, that you told me about the flowers, we have this conversation about art and life, the hinge between them.' 'What flowers,' I said. 'The glass flowers—the father and son who performed this delicate lampwork, shaping the tiny stigmas and styles in blue flame. They are buried together, in Dresden, you know.' 'I don't know,' I said. And then he did this thing he hadn't done to me in ages, maybe since I was a little kid. He leaned toward me and took both my hands, like this. 'For fear of vibrations, low voices in their presence. Did you not teach me this beautiful rule?'"

Many people think that we have some secret apparatus by which we can squeeze glass suddenly into these forms, but it is not so. We have the touch. My son Rudolf has more than I have because he is my son and the touch increases in every generation. The only way to become a glass modeler of skill, I have often said to people, is to get a good great-grandfather who loved glass; then he is to have a son with like tastes; he is to be your grandfather. He in turn will have a son who must, as your father, be passionately fond of glass. You, as his son, can then try your hand, and it is your own fault if you do not succeed. But, if you do not have such ancestors, it is not your fault.

LEOPOLD BLASCHKA, ***letter to Mary Ware, 1889***

Also by Ben Lerner

FICTION

The Topeka School

10:04

Leaving the Atocha Station

NONFICTION

The Hatred of Poetry

POETRY

The Lights

Mean Free Path

Angle of Yaw

The Lichtenberg Figures

SELECTED COLLABORATIONS

The Clichés (with R. H. Quaytman)

Gold Custody (with Barbara Bloom)

The Snows of Venice (with Alexander Kluge)

Blossom (with Thomas Demand)

A Note About the Author



Ben Lerner is the author of eight previous books of poetry and prose, as well as several collaborations with visual artists. A recipient of Fulbright, MacArthur, and Guggenheim fellowships, Lerner has been a finalist for the National Book Award for Poetry and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, among many other honors. He is a Distinguished Professor of English at Brooklyn College. You can sign up for email updates here.

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