2011

Leftovers

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Leftovers

By

Seth Calvert

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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In
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Leftovers

Seth Calvert

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Professor Richard Terrill, Advisor

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ABSTRACT

LEFTOVERS

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*Leftovers*, a collection of nine essays, is an attempt to understand the world holistically. The methodologies of each essay vary widely: different essays emphasize reported personal experience, academic sources, popular culture sources, remembered conversations with friends, and often literary allusions. Through the inclusion of disparate topics, the collection aims for a more comprehensive view of the world through the eyes of one particular man. The essays are not about a single person but they are ultimately so intertwined with his consciousness that he becomes a character. The essays continually evolve on the page so that the planned journey is rarely the road taken; it is this transformation essay that brings vitality to these pages.
LEFTOVERS

essays by

Seth Calvert
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical Introduction</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Greek and I.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Measure of Coffee</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Than I Should Say: Working the 2010 Census</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chess</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental Hygiene</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Censorship and Fallout from <em>The Satanic Verses.</em></td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Garbage Man</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Computers</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Revisited</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Most of my writing life has been an attempt at unity and perfect form. At my birth my mother was told that I'd suffered some form of brain damage though she was not given specifics. I believe that I was in physical therapy to strengthen my hands until I was five years old. I vaguely remember working a lot with tools and screws. But whatever had happened to me also affected my mental processes, specifically grammar and mechanics. It did not become an issue until I entered my second year of college and a professor flatly told me that the ideas in my paper were interesting but the form was atrocious. Red marks appeared in every last paragraph. Almost in every sentence. I was eventually tested professionally and the results were rather plain to the psychologist: I had a deficient ability to apply mechanics.

In graduate school this handicapped me in some professor's eyes. I did not confess my handicap because I thought I had largely taken steps to ameliorate it and because I was somewhat embarrassed. It seemed paradoxical that someone who struggles to cogently write sentences should enter a graduate program dedicated to writing. Some professors noticed my frequent mechanical errors and presumed it was a lack of effort on my part. Sometimes it was. But more often I put in a full effort and became frustrated that I was consistently marked down for the easiest possible things to correct. It is not difficult to tell someone where a comma should go but it is hard to teach someone how to think on the page. Furthermore, failure to use certain conventions does not indicate a lack of fluency or ignorance of the rules. (To be fair though, I do struggle with the correct place
for commas though not always for lack of trying.) Assumptions about my ability to write have vexed me until the present and made writing less enjoyable overall.

Yet, I want to write at least a little and did and even managed to write a graduate thesis though it took me a great long time to do so. Writing for me has become less about self-expression and more a way to explore along with an audience. I do not come to amazing conclusions or insights at the end of each essay. While there are many reasons for that, I believe that it’s the journey that most matters and I take satisfaction in making it, however meandering and seemingly chaotic the journeys are.

This collection is my second creative writing thesis and is, roughly, 100 pages longer than my previous. My undergraduate thesis was my first dedicated exploration of creative non-fiction and, as such, it suffered from my inexperience. I do not remember discarding a single thing that I wrote for that thesis nor did I manage to write myself into the piece very well. The twenty pages were chopped into little vignettes that felt very rushed and choppy to me but I couldn’t fix it.

Despite this, my undergraduate thesis was a solid enough writing sample that I was accepted into graduate school. Those pages seem like a step in my development as a reader/writer and so does this thesis. Perhaps the mere act of writing some 40,000 words is transformative in and of itself. Perhaps I’m trying to tie a nice bow on three years and pretend that it all went swimmingly.

*Leftovers* is a collection of creative non-fiction essays that are in no way connected other than the fact that I wrote them all in the same few years. I did not set out to write memoir or autobiography because those forms hold rather little interest for me. Instead, my gaze is almost always focused outward so that a reader may learn a great deal
about a given subject but rather little about me. There are certain personal facts and relationships that are discussed, but they are all relatively distant from the essential parts of who I am. I have little interest in telling individual people my deepest darkest parts let alone whoever may read these. Perhaps then it is my inherent mental defenses that directed me toward this series of essays. I note that none of the essays herein are about intimate subjects.

Most of the creative non-fiction writers I love to read write in a similarly distanced way. Tracy Kidder is hardly present in *Mountains Beyond Mountains* but he is an essential guide to the locations and persons within the book. Perhaps the most revealing portions of the book come when Kidder wonders if Dr. Paul Farmer is indicting him, and thereby us the readers. Without the wonder and the brief self-reflection I do not believe the book would be as strong. Kidder pulls off an amazing trick of teaching without boring or distancing the reader. I’ve tried to ape that in my collection.

The above explains a great deal of my attraction to creative non-fiction. The ability to render complex, abstract thoughts in entertaining prose seems to me to be the highest calling a writer can undertake. When David Foster Wallace offers a nuanced explanation of why and how John McCain acted like a real human being while on national tour I am enraptured. When Gore Vidal explains the particular failings of politicians and the public I am awed because he crystallizes thoughts that had circled through my mind. It's this kind of thinking on the page I try to do when I'm writing non-fiction.

I have always considered creative non-fiction the genre most concerned with understanding. In the simplest sense this can be mere reportage of facts. But great
creative non-fiction goes deeper than facts to try to explain the way things actually are. This mode of writing and thinking often seems strange because it does away with preconceptions so that the reader may see things more as they actually are. Where appropriate, I interpret as much as I report so give a fuller picture of what I’m writing about. It is important that Tracy Kidder wrote about the bumpy ride to Haiti’s central plateau so that the reader might more clearly and deeply understand his book. I’ve been similarly holistic. That meant including strange little bits here and there that add up to a comprehensive picture. In “Washington Revisited” I wrote about using my cell phone on the national mall because doing so seemed uniquely American.

The title of the collection is a modest joke on my part. The essays themselves have always been the leftovers in my mind. That is not to disparage them but moreso an admission that these essays are what I happened to end up with much in the way my parents fed me random bits and pieces of previous meals even if the individual parts did not go together. Leftovers also concerns ideas that are generally ignored and or left behind. I did some work to find somewhat unusual subjects so that I might be a kind of evangelist for them. In my own way I hope to have helped preserve some kind of cultural memory, however minor and idiosyncratic.

The collection’s title further introduces informality to the collection. I do not intend to offer definitive answers in any given essay nor to have the last word. Rather I’d just like to be part of these ongoing conversations. Though I do resort to more than a few academic sources, which could make wonderful sleep aids, I did not let the sources dictate the tone.
Therefore, this thesis of mine is to date my best refutation of my struggles to write well. I have polished these essays until they became as good as I could make them with the result that I've read them all forwards and backwards numerous times. It is my declaration of competence and mastery of written English. I'd like it to be a final salvo in a long fought war.
Ancient Greek and I

Ancient Greek is a beautiful, hellishly complex language. It is highly inflected like German, but German has fewer principle parts per verb, fewer declensions, and is still spoken. However, Ancient Greek, from here on referred to only as Greek, is, dead and immensely rewarding for the patient student. I happened upon it by a tenuous thread: I only enrolled at my undergraduate university because a former girlfriend of mine attended it, that college happened to have a strong classics department, and I wanted to learn another language. So, on a lark, I enrolled in Greek in the fall of my sophomore year and continued on for six more semesters. I wanted to do Greek because of the literature, most of all the Greek New Testament, and I have a thing for ancient rhetoric and philosophy. Greek became my electives in college—a rather strange choice for an English Major.

The philosophies of the Greeks, though necessary, have declined in popularity over the past century. The schools of the 19th century required Greek and Latin and a thorough study in philosophy, religion, and even, sometimes, etiquette. This approach to school is archaic and perhaps that is a good thing, perhaps not. Nevertheless, I believe philosophy is the most important subject a student may enter upon because it defines how one should live. It defines and codifies those thoughts that we think before thinking¹. For example Heidegger tells us that when something is “ready-at-hand” we take no notice of it as a tool and as an object. But when it is broken we notice its thingness² and it becomes something “unready-at-hand”. We are unused to

¹Thoughts between or before thoughts are defined as interlanguage.
²A technical term.
this sort of thinking, but the Greeks did it constantly. They sat around and thought about things.

Plato's Symposium is a series of digressions on the origin of love³.

The word philosophy was a neologism coined by Pythogoras of mathematic fame because chose to be known as a “lover of wisdom” instead of a wise man. This neologism came from the verb ἀλέω and the word for wisdom σοφίς. Who does not love wisdom? I find the answer depressing generally. Despite being a statistical oddity I still tell people that philosophy is important. I even read it.

The Greeks were very different from us. For the people of Athens it was disgusting to see someone eating in the street like a dog. One philosopher, Διογένης Diogenes, chose to live in the streets so he could pursue a more virtuous life. We are not sure whether he liked to be called dog-like, κυνίκος in the Greek, but he certainly acted like one. The word cynic comes from the word dog in Greek. It shouldn't be too surprising that the first cynic learned from Socrates because the Cynics bothered people as they went around town⁴. However awful the people of Ancient Athens smelled, I believe that the Cynics smelled much worse as they eschewed civilization.

Socrates inspire me though his methods of teaching were so radical that he eventually pissed off almost every powerful person in Athens. Socrates called himself a sort of gadfly and claimed that he did the city good by rousing it like a biting fly does a well-bred and lazy horse. Socrates would find people and then question them about things and prove that the persons he

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³Aristophanes proposes in this piece that people originally were beings with two sets of arms and legs but the gods feared our strength and cleaved each person in two with lightning. This was why we wanted to combine with one another again so we could be whole again.

⁴He must have driven them absolutely crazy. Imagine a man whose sole occupation was to make people look bad in public. Now imagine that this guy lives in your small town. That guy would be Socrates.
questioned didn't actually know what they said they did⁵. The closest approximation to this are those interviews with vice presidents, or vice presidential candidates⁶, in which the candidate proves that he or she has no idea what she is talking about. Though it will inevitably date this writing, I think of the Katie Couric interview with Governor Sarah Palin in September of 2008 as the perfect example of what Socrates did to the public persons of Ancient Athens. Socrates did it for so long that he became a celebrity in Athens and even had a satire about him performed during a festival of Dionysus⁷. This culminated in Socrates's death by execution at sunset sometime in the year 399 BCE.

But getting to the philosophy proved difficult. Our Greek started hard and didn't let up; the first day our professor assigned us the entire Greek alphabet as homework. The next day the class had shrunk by five or so persons while the ten of us left recited the alphabet orally: “alpha, beta, gamma,” etc. There were some easy parts that rhyme together; then there were extra letters like ξ or kṣi, pronounced ka-sai, that friends of mine referred to as a squiggle when it cropped up in their physics texts. The Greek alphabet is written different than the English alphabet in though many of the phonemes are similar. Greek has no letter that is equivalent to h in English, instead Greek uses two marks at the beginning of words that begin with vowels and the letter rho called breathing marks. The mark that opens to the right (like the first parenthesis here) is a rough

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⁵ Plato’s Apology 30e
⁶ See the Platonic dialogue “Euthyphro” for a wonderful, and relatively short, example of this kind of questioning.
⁷ Aristophanes's play The Clouds has a character named Socrates who teaches the main character Strepsiades how to make the weaker argument the stronger. I recommend The Trials of Socrates edited by C.D.C. Reeve for a humorous version of the Aristophanes play. For instance, some of the students at Socrates's school in the play are looking at the ground very closely bent over at the waist. Strepsiades asks what they're studying and the student replies, Astronomy!” It's funnier when a Professor of Classics reads it aloud in class.
⁸ The festival of Dionysus happened once a year in the spring and it included a full day of theater including tragedies, comedies, and Satyr plays. The plays produced here were never revived so each play was performed only once. This might help explain why the Greeks remembered these plays so well and for so long. In the case of the Apology there was a 24 year gap between the play and then the later trial.
breathing mark that supplies the h noise to some words. While the breathing mark that opens to the left is a smooth breathing mark and is not pronounced at all. This is why hoi polloi has an h despite the absence of a comparative letter in Greek. Greek also differs from English because it has both long and short vowels written out as different letters. In Greek there are two letters equivalent to the English letter o and e: omicron and omega make o sounds and epsilon and eta make e sounds. These different sounds are difficult to identify when spoken aloud.

The next problem Greek presents to an English speaker is accents, those odd marks above letters in other languages showing emphasis. Greek has three accents the acute, grave, and circumflex. These marks may have been inflected by a change in pitch but it is impossible to say for certain. In any case, the rules for using accents are so complicated that I've allowed myself to forget most of them. Suffice it to say that a simpler rule states that an accent may fall no earlier than the third syllable from the end of the word. The English word misanthrope with its four syllables in the Greek, μισάνθροπος (mis-an-thro-pos), could not have an accent fall earlier than the άν because it is the third syllable from the end of the word. Furthermore, the accent could not be grave because that accent can only fall on the last, or ultimate, syllable. Greek has proven itself to be the only class I've taken that uses the words ultimate, penultimate, and antepenultimate consistently. In addition to these marks there are also smooth and rough breathing marks present at the beginning of words that begin with a vowel or rho. The smooth breathing mark is not pronounced but the rough is pronounced like an h; note that it is not a specific letter that mimics the English sound.
Sadly, all of that is only the difference in the way Greek appears on the page. We also had to learn how to inflect the nouns correctly. In German\(^9\) nouns are three genders\(^{10}\) which require an \textit{e, en, or es} depending on case\(^{11}\) and declension\(^{12}\) of the noun. Greek has five cases and three declensions of nouns and, unfortunately, there are many, many rules to remember. The first declension is inflected in the following way if the noun is masculine:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Singular form</th>
<th>Plural form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nominative</td>
<td>στρατιώτης stratiotes</td>
<td>στρατιώται stratiotai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genitive</td>
<td>στρατιώτου stratiotou</td>
<td>στρατιώτον stratioton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dative</td>
<td>στρατιώτ stratiote</td>
<td>στρατιώταις stratiotai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accusative</td>
<td>στρατιώτην stratioten</td>
<td>στρατιώτας stratiota</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocative</td>
<td>στρατιώτα stratiota</td>
<td>στρατιώται stratiotai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that the ending for the nominative and vocative is the same in the plural form. The feminine nouns are inflected differently as are the neuter nouns but I will not include them for brevity's

---

\(^9\) A modern language that inflects nouns and a language I happen to be familiar with.  
\(^{10}\) The three genders are male, female and neuter. Genders here do not refer to anything other than the end of the noun a tree is not more neuter than a young man in a linguistic sense. Swahili has between 13-15 total, only six to eight used regularly, and there are so many that they’re referred to as noun classes. This comes from my sister who studied the language while in Tanzania where it's spoken.  
\(^{11}\) There are four cases in German nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive. Ancient Greek adds a fifth called the vocular and Latin adds another still called the abblative. For the record, I know little Latin.  
\(^{12}\) The nominative case refers to the subject of a sentence, accusative refers to the object, dative is used to describe to whom or for whom, genitive refers to the ownership of on item, and vocative refers to nouns that are addressed usually proper nouns like names. I have no real idea how the abblative case works despite listening to classical scholars discuss it.  
\(^{13}\) A declension is a group of nouns that follow similar patterns. German has three declensions that follow different rules for each gender.
sake. The above table should suffice to prove that this language is more complicated on a word level than English. It would take a good, long time to speak it fluently.

The last straw that broke our collective backs was the conjugation of verbs. I’m used to conjugating verbs having studied Spanish for more than four years but Spanish is very simple to conjugate. If I know the infinitive of a Spanish verb then I can conjugate any and all tenses and aspects without problem. There are always exceptions to the rule but the exceptions in Spanish are relatively few. German is much more irregular than Spanish, and Ancient Greek is much more irregular than German. Beyond the constant irregularity of verbs in Greek the verbs themselves act in ways rather differently than English verbs do. For instance English has only one kind of infinitive for each verb while Greek has an infinitive for each tense. That is to say that a simple verb like to loose in English will always be to loose following a verb that can take an infinitive i.e. “He stopped to loose the man” (past tense) will share the same infinitive as “He stops to loose the man.” Those simple sentences are Παυσά λυειν τον άνθροπον Pausa luein ton anthropon and παυσά λυειν τον άνθρωπον Epausa luein ton anthropon respectively. The concept of infinitives changing in various tenses still confuses me. Regarding tenses, English has three while Greek has seven and all of these are conjugated differently. Additionally, English has a subtle system of aspect that differentiates whether an action was completed, ongoing, or habitual. For a simple, visual explanation of English tenses refer to the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Tense</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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14 While taking an advanced introductory course on German we had weekly quizzes that were comprised solely of irregular verbs. I learned more than 100 irregular verbs in a semester, from *bissen to zeigen*!

15 I am embarrassed by the amount of time I needed to write those sentences out in Greek.

16 English has the present, past, future, perfect, past perfect, and future perfect tenses while Greek has the present, aorist (simple past), future, imperfect, perfect, past perfect, and future perfect.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tense</th>
<th>Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>He walks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>He walked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>He will walk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfect</td>
<td>He has walked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Perfect</td>
<td>He had walked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Perfect</td>
<td>He will have walked</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Greek mimics this attention to aspect through its seven tenses each of which is conjugated differently. The very regular verb λυô luô is the verb that my professors used to teach me the various forms of Greek aspects and tenses. Regular verbs are verbs that conjugate as expected. To understand how to conjugate Greek verbs correctly I need to know the essential parts of the verbs that allowed me to conjugate in all forms. English verbs have three principal parts: the present, simple past, and perfect. All other tenses and aspects can be derived from these three forms. For instance, skate is a regular verb with its three parts being: skate, skated, skated. However, the verb eat is somewhat irregular because the past and perfect form are different from one another and the past form is not found by adding “ed” at the end of the verb. Were “eat” a regular verb it would have eat, eated, and eated [sic] as the three principle parts. The student of Greek however uses seven tenses to fully conjugate everything: the present, future, aorist (simple past), perfect, perfect middle, and aorist passive (an action that happened to someone or something in the past).

The principal parts of λυô luô are:
Many Greek verbs lack some of the principal parts, i.e. the verb βαίνω or go has no passive in either Greek or English. Someone can leave me but someone cannot gone me.

Because Greek verbs are not always as logical as go so we students would invent new principal parts for verbs on our quizzes. The English equivalent of these errors in judgment are strange to my ears. If I said, “he goed to school this morning.” you would understand what I said but think it's wrong. Our professors were amused by these attempts and told us that we were good at inventing principal parts. This did not raise our hopes on those days we received our quizzes back.

Our Greek class suffered. The first year of Ancient Greek tormented me and enthralled me simultaneously. I could learn the material well enough, but the time commitment was

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17The verb's four principal parts are βαίνω, βησόμαι, βην, and βεβήκα (baino, besomai, eben, and bebeka). An alternative form would be βεβέµαι bebemai or βεθην ebethen neither of which actually exist in Ancient Greek or make sense in Ancient Greek. The closest translation I can offer for the two nonsense principal parts are "I had been goned by someone else" and "I was goned by someone else", neither of these make sense in English either.
enormous. Our Greek classes met every day of the semester. I never had another class meet every possible day of a semester. Even my intensive German class allowed a break as did my Spanish composition class. Furthermore, Greek class necessitated homework every single day. These two things, combined with our weekly quizzes and triumvirate of tests, worked us quite hard. As I think back on it I realize that our demanding schedule was absolutely necessary. There could be no other way to learn the basics of such a complicated language in one year. It's true that we did review grammar after the first two semesters, but those were only reminders of material that we had already covered. By the beginning of our second semester, our class had shrunk down to five students. We were not surprised by this because only the dedicated continued to learn this language.

One can suffer hardship and one can also experience it. In our classes we did both. Our Liddell and Scott Greek dictionary gave two concurrent definitions for the Greek verb παςχο (pasxo): 1. to suffer 2: to experience. Our Greek classes could be translated either way. In truth these dictionaries were one of my coping mechanisms. We began using our definitive Ancient Greek dictionary as early as our third semester of class, the Liddell and Scott. This dictionary, first copyrighted in 1899, was created by two very dead Englishmen. Not only were they very dead, like the Greek authors themselves, but their use of antiquated language amused me greatly. A simple noun like τηνιανια (to neanian) would be defined: “1: a young man 2: a strapping.” The latter is a synonym, I swear it. The dictionary did this constantly and the amusingly archaic definitions, though somewhat unhelpful, improved my English vocabulary more than my Greek. Liddell and Scott’s unabridged dictionary was akin to the enormous copies of the Oxford English Dictionary on display in libraries. The book must have weighed thirty pounds and could only fit on a bottom shelf safely. One semester my Professor lugged it around
every day in the expectation that it would help us understand the way a particular Greek word functioned in a text. We used it every week. The other text we used every semester we called “Smyth” after the author. This particular dead Englishman had devoted untold years to studying the intricacies of Ancient Greek grammar. The first content page alone is intimidating where Smyth details an enormous quantity of material for beyond this essay's scope\(^\text{18}\).

All of these things listed are interesting to me. Page 24 details aphaeresis, the process of losing initial vowel sounds of words\(^\text{19}\) something the Greeks were very into because their culture was an oral culture and they reflected their oral inflections within their writings. For example, if a word ends with a vowel and the next word begins with the same vowel then the second vowel is clipped. For example, were I to “write he learns in the Agora” γιγνοσκε 'ν ἀγορα gignoske 'n hay agora, I would need to clip the initial vowel from the preposition ἀ in order to correctly follow the conventions of Greek. The rest of the page has useful information, especially regarding accents as they always confused the devil out of me. But Smyth’s book intimidates me because it has 631 pages of explanations of grammar in Greek replete with examples from Greek manuscripts. Smyth was so comprehensive that graduate students of Greek had to have a copy of his book and even our Liddell and Scott dictionary cites passages from his book. I cringe when I think about the enormous amount of time Smyth spent on his project and I am staggered by the man’s understanding and intimacy with the language.

The third semester of Greek focused on Plato’s Apology\(^\text{20}\). It may seem strange to spend an entire semester on one text (that is 505 lines by my count) but we could not get through it any

\(^{18}\) See Appendix I
\(^{19}\) Raccoon becomes ’coon, around becomes ’round, etc.
\(^{20}\) Apology πολογα means a defense or a reply and, as my heavily footnoted Greek text of Plato’s Apology (replete with an extensive vocabulary) tells me the Greek word does not indicate an apology for an offense.
faster. As brutal as the first year was, we were hardly prepared for the strange sentence structures of Ancient Greek. English has a set word order though a fluent speaker may change the placement of words in a limited fashion. A quip by Winston Churchill demonstrates this, “This is something up with which I will not put.” instead of using the more common version, “This is something I will not put up with.” Greek is entirely without a set sentence order. Were I writing in Greek I could rephrase the repeated line, “Without a sentence order Greek without is.” However, it sounds oddly like Yoda to my ears. I could also rephrase it this way: Greek order without is a sentence. While vaguely intelligible in English, the equivalent Greek sentence would be understandable because Greek is an inflected language. This allows the speaker to emphasize different portions of each sentence by placing them towards the beginning. Unfortunately, this makes it very hard to understand for a student new to the language. For example I will use a famous quote of Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” or, in the original:

\[
\text{δνεξέτατος \ βίος \ οὐ \ βιωτός \ άνθρωπος,}
\]

\[Ho\ \text{de\ anexetatos\ bios\ ou\ biotos\ anthropo,}\]

committed. I would like to translate the word as defense (in a legal sense) and believe that the Greek word is protean enough to permit it.

---

21 The Apology is the record of Socrates defense at his trial that he ultimately lost. Socrates felt that he was put on trial twice the first time in the play by Aristophanes called The Clouds in 423 BCE and the second time in 399 BCE which supplies the text of the Apology itself. Even 24 years later the people of Athens remembered the play well enough for Socrates to address it in his defense, see Plato's Apology 19c.

22 This number and letter refer to the traditional way that the lines of Plato's works are numbered. This numbering allows translators, scholars, and lay persons to refer to the specific lines they have translated quickly. These numbers are similar to the verses and chapters of certain holy texts.
Were I to translate the phrase preserving the Greek sentence structure it would be “the for without examination life not worth living,” a general bit of nonsense. Socrates emphasizes the examination of a life by beginning with that verb. This sentence begins with two words the first of which is a definite article ἀ that connects with βίος as “the life.” And the δὲ is a separate grammatical construction that here functions as a conjunction


ανεξετατος

anexetatos noun form of the verb to examine that Helm tells me has both an active and a passive voice. He suggests that this be paired with the following noun and translated as “the life without examination” to reflect the ambiguity of the Greek. The next word οὐκοί is a simple negation supplying the “not” in this sentence


βιωτς

biotos is a strange form of the Greek word for life that Helm glosses as “livable” or “worth living”. The final word ἄνθρωποι, which is the dative form of the word men, can be translated as people in some cases. In this case the word does not need to be translated because the words in English already connotates a universal sense of the phrase. This is just one part of a relatively long


This simple word, δὲ, is often paired with µὲν and is difficult to translate well into English. µὲν begins a thought and δὲ connects it. A good way to translate these two words is to say "on the one hand...on the other hand." though this becomes repetitive to English speakers because the expression is archaic. In fact, the Greek so loved this expression in their discourse that many translations drop it consistently so that the text avoids sounding like a Greekified English.

I suggest reading a poem by A. E. Housman, a classicist and poet at the turn of the 20th century, entitled “Fragment of a Greek Tragedy” for it is the best example of Greekified English of which I am aware. It’s also funny even if you haven't studied the language. For example the last lines of the poem are:

ERIPHYLE: He splits my skull, not in a friendly way,
Once more: he purposes to kill me dead.
CHORUS: I would not be reputed rash, but yet
I doubt if all be gay within the house.
ERIPHYLE: O! O! another stroke! that makes the third.
He stabs me to the heart against my wish.
CHORUS: If that be so, thy state of health is poor;
But thine arithmetic is quite correct.

The editor of my Greek text of Plato's Apology. Helm went to the trouble of creating an authoritative text from the many available Greek manuscripts. He also helps the student of Greek with more difficult passages.

οὐ ou changes to οὐκ ouk if the word following it begins with a vowel. It also sounds like the noise a monkey makes.
sentence in Greek and it took me many sentences to show all the steps needed to translate it. Again, Greek is a very difficult language.

Despite the inherent difficulty of the language I was hopelessly enamored by the beginning of my third semester. I have always had a passion for philosophy though this waxes and wanes. This happens regularly enough that a degree in philosophy was distasteful even if the individual classes were marvelous. In any case, ancient philosophies entranced me early on as first year student at college when I read the Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle. Coming back to the same ideas was welcome and I was able to meet these ideas in the original language. This is an unfortunate rarity for a great many persons, learned and not, in this country especially. The chance to meet a text or an idea on its own terms is a delicious chance to understand it more completely. The chance to meet the philosophers on in their own language was too enchanting for me to resist after my first few encounters.

My love for the ideas helped me to limp through the rest of my career in Greek. The fourth semester introduced my class to Koine Greek which expanded into the outer reaches of Alexander the Great’s Empire making Greek became a common language in the first century CE. The term itself is Greek for common. Our class delved into this with gusto because our three seminarians had been waiting to get to this point all along. I had been interested to encounter the New Testament in Greek as well as many sermons I had heard had used a Greek term to elucidate a verse or passage more clearly. Though my fellow congregants may have rolled their eyes when the pastor introduced a Greek term I sat enraptured and took notes. Koine is very simple compared with the Greek that Plato used.
The Gospel of John begins:

νρχνλογος, και λογος πρς τν θεος και θεος ν λογος.

En arxay ain ho logos, kai ho logos ain pros tov theon, kai ho theos ain ho logos.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.

The opening passage of the Gospel contains some of the most beautiful and abstract language within the New Testament itself. Furthermore, the Greek syntax is straightforward and well mimicked by the English without any need to hunt down the scattered parts of a sentence (as I needed to in the earlier example from the Apology). I believe that the simplicity stems from Paul's desire to reach out to a larger audience as a missionary. Our experience was limited by the length of the semester and, consequently, we only went to the omnipresent John 3:16. Our professor explained that he could show us no verse that could more fully encapsulate the New Testament, and that one only had to understand subordinating conjunctions to read through the rest of the gospel. Nevertheless, the simplicity of the language was made manifestly evident to us five Greek students when we read a passage from the Septuagint. However, the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, is a strange document as it is written in Greek but still

27 The Greek text I am using is the Fourth Edition of the Greek New Testament edited by Aland, Barbara, et al. From the Deutsche Bibilgesellschaft (www.scholarly-bibles.com). The scholarship and textual apparatus are very helpful though they are not readily interpreted. I recommend it to any student who wishes to pursue New Testament scholarship. For the English I have used the authorized King James Version which I personally refer to as “King Jimmy”.
reflects the underlying Hebrew. This renders many of the passages Hebrewlike Greek and
certainly confused us five students.

My last year of Greek was the hardest, but it was also the most rewarding. In the Fall my
class, then shrunk down to three students, voted to read tragedy in lieu of histories. We three
students were allowed to choose Sophocles over Herodotus by a democratic vote of two to one\textsuperscript{28}. These Greek plays from the Golden Age of Athens are powerful enough to still be revived to this
day. My university staged a production of Lysistrata though I am rather certain, despite failing to
see it, that this version was much more feminist than the original. We use these myths still
because they are archetypal stories written out in complicated Greek.

Before I continue allow me to give some background information. The family of
Agamemnon is as destructive as any modern family. Here's another table to explain how
unfortunate the family is.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Member</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agamemnon, the father</td>
<td>Sacrifices Iphigenia on the way to Troy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aegisthus, step-father</td>
<td>Moves in with Clytemnestra after Agamemnon leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clytemnestra, the mother</td>
<td>Murders husband to revenge Iphigenia, adulteress with Aegisthus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iphigenia, a daughter</td>
<td>Sacrificed by Agamemnon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electra, a daughter</td>
<td>Mourns her father excessively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orestes, the son</td>
<td>Revenges father by killing mother, is pursued by the furies and is acquitted in a divine court by Apollo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It's quite complicated and terrible. The complexity and beauty of original Greek in Sophocles's
Electra amazed us. In particular the messenger speech\textsuperscript{29} uses elevated language to convey a very

\textsuperscript{28} This voting process was repeated in the spring and, unfortunately for a young man named Andrew, we skipped over Herodotus again.

\textsuperscript{29} There is a messenger speech in most of the Greek tragedies. Basically, someone comes on stage and tells the audience something we hadn't seen on stage. Aristotle considered these scenes immensely important and wanted
simple message. I liken it to the speeches of Shakespeare though the translator necessarily has a lesser command of the English language. This speech is as beautiful as the images in it terrible. And Sophocles's messenger speech is as beautiful in my eyes.

So far Orestes fared as I described. But when a god sends harm, not even the strong man can escape. For on another day, when with the rising sun there was held the race of the swift-footed horses, [700] he entered it along with many charioteers. One was an Achaean, one from Sparta; two masters of yoked cars were Libyans; Orestes, driving Thessalian mares, came fifth among them; the sixth was from Aetolia, [705] with chestnut colts; a Magnesian was the seventh; the eighth, with white horses, was of Aenian stock; the ninth hailed from Athens, built of gods; there was a Boeotian too, making the tenth chariot. They took their stations where the appointed umpires [710] placed them by lot and ranged the cars. Then at the sound of the bronze trumpet, they started. All shouted to their horses, and shook the reins in their hands; the whole course was filled with the clatter of rattling chariots; and the dust flew upward. [715] All of them in a confused throng kept plying their goads unsparingly, so that one of them might pass the wheel-hubs and the snorting steeds of his rivals; for both at their backs and at their rolling wheels the breath of the horses foamed and smattered. [720] Orestes, driving close to the near edge of the turning-post, almost grazed it with his wheel each time and, giving rein to the trace-horse on the right, he checked the horse on the inner side. To this point, all the chariots still stood upright. But then the Aenian's [725] hard-mouthed colts carried them to be true and thus unified in a sense (the unities of drama are explained in Aristotle's Poetics as are the importance of messenger speeches. Sophocles's Electra has a beautiful messenger speech but it's all an elaborate lie and thus Aristotle would have dismissed it.
him out of control as they passed out of the turn from the sixth into the seventh lap and dashed their foreheads against the rig of the Barcaean. Next, as a result of this one mishap, the cars kept smashing and colliding with each other, and the whole [730] race-ground of Crisa swelled with shipwrecked chariots.30

Alas and alack, the few documents we have left to us by the Greeks are such a poor representation of what has been lost. I blame the Christians who burned the library of Alexandria but the Golden Age of Athens passed so very long ago that we cannot help but lose much of what they had. For instance we have only seven extant plays by Sophocles, seven by Aeschylus, and eighteen by Euripides. All of our extant plays by these three most prominent tragedians of Athens is far less than the ninety that each one of them wrote singly. Similarly the ancient law court orators or logographers wrote speeches for their clients to use in court, more on this later. Lysias, my favorite because I can understand him, purportedly wrote more than 200 speeches that survived to the Augustan Age, we have only 34 extant speeches and fragments of 127 more. I studied and did some translating of Lysias and came across a speech of his written as a defense against impinging upon a sacred olive tree. Really.

To understand why cutting down an olive tree could be met with capital punishment I need to explain some things about the Greek law courts circa the Golden Age of Athens. The Greek law system consisted of only jurors and each side of a case needed to recite a speech crafted to persuade the jurors. In Plato's Apology Socrates makes consistent mention of these 500 jurors, ἄνδρες δίκασται (literally) O Men of the Jury, as do other extant speeches of the logographers. Socrates claims that only thirty votes condemned him (36a) and

30 Translated by Sir Richard Jebb.
that if he had swayed those few people he would not be executed. Professor Carey of Cambridge wrote a commentary on speeches of Lysias, a logographer, that claims that the juries in these courts were more powerful and much larger than our contemporary versions. They decided innocence or guilt and they choose what punishment befitted a crime for which no set punishment existed. These juries were not bound to the precedents of previous juries either though sometimes there must have been precedents as evidenced by the logographers' writings themselves. The trials were also very different. Each man had to represent himself\textsuperscript{31} and had a set time to present his case before his opponent could question him. Then the jury would cast votes and then choose a punishment. Because each man had to represent himself a tradition of speech writing for the courts arose. The logographer needed to craft a speech that would convince the jury and also craft said speech to sound like the client.

The speech I referred to earlier is entitled “Defense in the Matter of the Olive Stump” or ΑΡΕΩΠΑΓΙ ΤΟΚΟΣ ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΥ ΣΠΙΚΟΥ ΑΠΟΛΟΓΙΑ Apeopagitokos peri tou sekou apologia\textsuperscript{32}. And yes, this speech is about exactly what you think it is. First some more background, according to their own myth the Athenians decided to have a contest between the gods to name their city, and whichever god offered the citizens the best gift would have the city named in his or her honor. Poseidon gave the city the gift of the sea and therefore, logically, trade, but Athena gave the gift of the olive tree, which was esteemed more. So the citizens named the city in Athena's honor. The legend further extended to specific trees around the city and countryside of Athens that were supposedly planted by the goddess herself. It was illegal to damage one of these sacred olive trees in any way be it cutting it down or impinging upon the

\textsuperscript{31} The sexist language is intentional because there have been few societies more misogynist than Ancient Athens.
\textsuperscript{32} When titling a work or inscribing in Greek it is proper to use only capital letters and to skip any breathing marks or accents.
tree by plowing too closely to its trunk. The punishment was death in these cases as the Greek
system was far harsher than our own legal system. If the accused were found he or she would
have been made to drink hemlock, the way Socrates was executed. On the other hand, proving
the guilt of the accused was difficult in many instances as the land hand passed through many
owners and wars tended to muck up the countryside. Both these points are made in the speech.
Despite the ending of Socrates's career the philosopher inspires and to be able to touch upon the
very words he spoke was amazing to me. Even in the face of certain death Socrates still held out
hope for the future. When I did the leg-work of these brief translations included I sat at a bar on a
Sunday afternoon, watching the football on an enormous hanging television set, I remembered
all the other times I did the same. I'd sit cross legged on a couch in front of a television that didn't
belong to me and look up words in Greek during the game. This always made the games less
painful to watch because I invested myself more in my vocabulary sheets, than any game. But
sitting there with a medium sized Lidell and Scott dictionary I was happy because I was again
using this hard won knowledge. Of course, I needed to gloss about forty words to get through
two pages of the Greek text but that's not too bad. It's about right for my level of Greek
vocabulary, emaciated as it is. I have long ago realized that this is the easy part of translating but
I still love the chance to sit there and look up words in a dictionary, even English dictionaries.
This is only made better because I'm looking up words in Greek.

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33 For instance the word draconian came into English through Greek laws, in particular, the laws regarding
homicide. Dracon's law was very harsh as it made no distinction between premeditated murder and unplanned
murders. If there was the intent to harm or kill then the killer was subject to execution, hence draconian. If I, even in
a moment of great anger, hit someone with the intent to harm or kill I was liable for murder in the highest degree.
On the other hand if unintentionally killed someone, by giving them a love philter then I would not be liable in any
way.
34 There is apparently a hemlock society. I don't know if I'd join that one.
Each semester Greek demanded more of me than any other class of mine, by far. My Greek classes combined history, sociology, anthropology, English, psychology, language skills, writing skills, and about everything else in the humanities. Greek classes were more protean than any other classes I took, even the English ones, and this was fantastic. The informational, historical portion of my Greek classes allowed us an escape that was somewhat on topic. For instance, we digressed on the nature of Greek Tragedy and wrote responses to a modern reproduction of Agamemnon replete with a chorus and masks. We spent time studying the Clouds by Aristophanes in English and laughed at it because it was genuinely funny; at one point Strepsiades sees the students of the “academy” and screams, “What are those white creatures!?” Every discipline could further enhance our understanding of Greek.

We’re sitting in a white classroom on the third floor of the recently remodeled building. The inside is modern and the outside looks the same way it did in 1876. Our small window affords no view and the walls are taken up by chalkboards. Our Professor sits at the end of the table, a huge dictionary to his left and our text to his right. The noon class is relaxed despite the tremendous amount of Greek we’re covered, by now most of the Apology. But today we’re going over “the Clouds” by Aristophanes. Better yet, we’re discussing an English translation of the piece, a concession to our modest Greek skills. Partway through the class our Professor bursts into laughter. Burst is the best word here because he echoes out a deep laugh that stretches down to the belly and cranes his neck so the laughs bounce off the ceiling and only then it reaches our ears. We’ve learned enough about the play to understand the more cryptic humor. For instance, the character Socrates enters the strange by a crane that hung over the strange. The Greek audience would have been reminded of the entrance of Medea in Euripedes’ play of the
same name. The crane, μεχνή mechane\textsuperscript{35} in Greek, represented the chariot of Helios, i.e. the sun, and was used by the gods to enter the stage. Medea enters by it after committing filicide confronting Jason, her husband to be, and prophesying his doom. The audience at the festival of Dionysus would be mindful of this when this Socrates descended from the clouds like the gods and investigated the things above the heavens and the things under the earth\textsuperscript{36}. It would be like a hobo exiting a limousine. The language we’ve acquired by here is so complex that even those jokes take time to unpack for the layman.

And that's really what I learned through my Greek courses. We looked at this play and laughed because we had made it through the whole Apology by then and we were just relieved. My Greek classes deflated my GPA every semester and still I enrolled in them even though I expected to receive a “C.” Greek was the absolute hardest school work I've ever had done and I kept that sense with me in other classes. Every other class was easy compared to Greek and though I'd tell people this they wouldn't quite get it just as a mountain climber cannot say exactly what it was like to reach the top. More often than not I was Icarus, not Daedalus, and still loved the feeling the subject gave me. Furthermore, I know that the specific knowledge that I gained is inapplicable but it's still entertaining to know that the Greeks concocted the Cyclops myths having found mastodon skulls and that Greek wine was watered down because they added pine resin as a preservative and they continued to do so because they liked the taste. Though Greek did not give me immediately useful skills, I came to know hard work and good study habits out of necessity. I further honed critical thinking skills and logic. And though my last test in Greek

\textsuperscript{35} Meaning machine in Greek.
\textsuperscript{36} An anti-religious thing to do for the Athenians. It could be likened to the modern “Intelligent Design” controversy wherein science is seen as a threat to the faith.
frustrated me so greatly that I literally began banging my head against the wall, I consider these three years well spent indeed.

A Measure of Coffee

My personal obsession with coffee began just after I graduated from college and, in the few short years after receiving my diploma, I became a coffee snob. In that time I have spent a hell of a lot on coffee because I refuse to buy the cheap stuff. Still, as a graduate student, I do sometimes have to drink bad coffee, like church coffee. Church Coffee is served after church services in lieu of actual coffee. I believe it usually involves two scoops of Folgers and a pot of water though it varies greatly based on amount of coffee left in the plastic tub. Second, I am miserly, like my ancestors and this has limited my exposure to coffee shops wherever I’ve lived. Knowing that, I decided that I wanted to know the state of coffee in my small town, and to do this I needed to visit every last coffee shop.

By personal count there are ten coffee shops in town and of these, three chains with more than one location. This number reflects the number of shops that primarily sell coffee. I did not include restaurants that happen to serve coffee, for instance. Or gas stations, grocery stores, or fast food. I did, however, include one coffee shop within a bookstore, one in a grocery store, and another that is in a hospital.

37The move from metal tin to plastic tub is mostly over in the bulk coffees. Folgers, Maxwell House, and others now came in oddly shaped plastic tubs that are much less conveniently reused.
In my study, I used the same process for each location so that I might limit variables: I purchased a medium-sized light roast coffee, drank it black\textsuperscript{38}, spent at least half an hour there, and wrote about it. To avoid burning out on coffee or interfering with my experience of a given place, I visited each coffee shop on separate days which spread the process out to a month of reportage and research. Half of the places I visited were new to me and I tried to reflect on the true character of these places instead of my first impressions. I also kept a tally of my expenditures. “Hopefully,” I told myself early on, “I will understand coffee in a better way by immersing myself in it,” (not literally). To this end, I often read about coffee while drinking coffee while writing about coffee.

I began my experiment by spending more than I wanted to at my first coffee shop, but from then on I stuck to my budget for the sake of my budget than anything else. The three instances where I purchased more than one coffee fall under special consideration because each was necessitated by circumstance. For instance, the food purchased at the Hub was needed to endure the rest of the day especially as I had to storm through the majority of a novel from the late Victorian period. The second cup of coffee at Caribou was a gift offered by a friend who had somehow gotten a $10 gift card. I agreed to drive him if he agreed to buy me a coffee, he did. The two cups of coffee at the Coffee Hag arose from a very strange aftertaste which I detail later. And lastly, the two cups of coffee at Jazzman’s Café are a complete underestimate because I habitually spend $1.17 each Tuesday and Thursday during the school year so that I may have coffee when I am in my office.

\begin{itemize}
  \item -1 cup of coffee & 1 monster bar at the Hub \hspace{1cm} $3.34$
  \item -One cheeseburger, fries, & soda at the Hub \hspace{1cm} $5.43$
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{38} Like my soul.
In the course of writing this essay I drank at least seventeen coffees purchased at various coffee shops totally roughly 36 liquid cups of coffee; I also drank about a dozen personal pots of coffee which I brewed at home totaling another 48 cups of coffee. This is not an unusual amount of coffee for me to drink. Were this rate of consumption continued, it would roughly extrapolate to three quarts of coffee, on average, per week for an annual total of 39 gallons. The national average in 2008 was about 26.5 gallons per person. I try to boost the average but one man’s bladder can only take so much.

More importantly, while a great many intoxicants and stimulants have had a great shift in popularity over the years, only coffee and tea have not been campaigned against. There was no proposition in the 19th Amendment to curb the make illegal the brewing and sale of coffee or tea. Temperance movements even offered coffee as a substitute to all of the wickedness of alcohol. These two hot drinks also stimulate the mind and suppress the appetite, both highly valued. Coffee and tea had a place ready for them in societies that had not found coffee. Coffee can be called the wine of Islam. In Tastes of Paradise Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes, “...the logic of coffee drinking for Arabic-Islamic civilization is incontestable. As a nonalcoholic, nonintoxicating, indeed even sobering and mentally stimulating drink, it seemed to be tailor-
made for a culture that forbade alcohol consumption and gave birth to modern mathematics\textsuperscript{39}, \textquotedblleft (italics original). The same logic applies to Protestants who detested the effects of alcohol and valued hard work.

Now then, I present my reports and findings as I came to them. These will be first hand reports from many shops and a spoonful or two of the things I learned about coffee from my research.

* * * * *

There are few things more disappointing than bad coffee. Though I am most familiar with coffee that has been burned, a result of it having been stationed on a hot plate too long, weak coffee is disappointing in a different way. I believe it is this latter way that mars coffee brewed at the Hub\textsuperscript{40}. I have tried the coffee here a half dozen times and each time it seemed slightly off. I gave the café the benefit of the doubt and tried a mug of it today with the same results. There was a generally pleasant flavor to the coffee, an additive I am sure, but the taste still disappointed. I like most everything else about the Hub so the coffee distresses me. The sign outside designates this as a coffee café, or something like it, and the café portion is generally better. While not amazing, the food is affordable and I most seek affordability from a café due to my inherent stinginess. The student menu offered a hamburger and fries for $4.99 though the hamburger consisted of a bun, two pickles, and a slab of meat. The other thing about the Hub is its adherence to what a coffee shop near a college offers: a place to do homework at leisure.

\textsuperscript{39}Tastes of Paradise: a Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants by Wolfgang Schivelbusch.

\textsuperscript{40}Sometime after this piece was first written the Hub ceased to exist. One day it stood, largely empty; the next it was gone and with it the only nearby coffee shop that was not inside the university itself. A source said it disappeared abruptly on the last Wednesday of April. No further information was available.
Coffee makes as much sense for college students as it does for the Arab world. Further, the Hub serves soda in glass bottles which I find with unfortunate infrequency.

Next door to the Hub is a juice bar. While the ability of a juice bar to succeed as a business confused me for a time, a friend has pointed out to me that while coffee bars cater to a specific client that does not overlap. There may be some crossover, but my personal bias is against overpriced limited menu chain stores. This is not because I am a clichéd university instructor\textsuperscript{41} but because I question the appeal behind most gourmet or high end luxuries\textsuperscript{42}. The particular juice bar next to the Hub caters to the person who does yoga then wants a health-conscious place to hang out afterwards. I am not into yoga or much into those people who are into yoga. In this way, I am largely cut off from this juice bar and am fine with it. Another perplexing chain is Cold Stone Creamery. I goddamn love ice cream, but Coldstone is an unlikely success, to my mind, because it is overpriced considerably. A two person Sundae\textsuperscript{43} will cost nearly to $5 without a tip. For this same price I can get at least twice as much high-end ice cream in a supermarket, though there are strangely expensive items in the freezer aisle too. Perhaps the only thing I have shown here is my miserly nature and my complete lack of business sense. Rather than continue to rant about the other restaurants in the strip mall where the Hub sits, I will move on to my next coffee destination.

The worst thing about the Fillin’ Station has to be the parking. Despite the empty storefronts on the block, the street parking is almost full on a Monday afternoon. This block is the quintessential yuppy hangout in town. Across the street from the Fillin’ Station are a yoga

\textsuperscript{41}Full disclosure: I have a ponytail and recycle aggressively.
\textsuperscript{42}Coffee is generally considered an affordable luxury unless you buy Kopi Luwak which has traveled through the digestive tract of a civet—a kind of cat from Indonesia. I have little desire to spend $350 on a pound of coffee.
\textsuperscript{43}We have overly concerned Christians to thank for the variant spelling. This word singlehandedly proves that busybodies have existed in this country for a long time.
studio on the corner, a belly dancing studio, and a bookstore with a sign that reads “coffee welcome.” Were I granted a windfall I may well spend all of it right here—not that I’d take yoga classes.

The Fillin' Station retains the charm that Starbucks have lost through ubiquity. I am quite sure that the owner served me my medium sized light roast coffee. He even gave me a free refill rather than swipe my card. As a relatively moral person, I cannot endorse any advantage taken of the Fillin' Station based upon my experience. Perhaps it is the soft tones of the wooden furniture contrasting the sharp colors on the walls that relaxes the eye; perhaps it is the mix of music—I think most of it involved an acoustic guitar, whatever the case, the diverse crowd at the Fillin' Station feels endemic. One may remain solitary in a crowd here.

On this particular Martin Luther King Jr. holiday the weather is seasonably warm, twenty four degrees or so, but the icy sidewalk is less than inviting. I would much rather continue to read about the recent history of coffee in this well-worn high-backed armchair than go home. Having read some, my understanding of coffee is incomplete, but I can connect dots together. For instance, the current coffee trade group ACPC (the Association of Coffee Producing Countries) grew out of the dissolved ICA (International Coffee Agreement). Out of the many things that collapsed the ICA I will mention two: Brazil's unwillingness to limit coffee exports and the large longstanding discount the United States enjoys, and is unlikely to give up, on coffee. Even these two factors did not topple the ICA; the ICA failed, according to Mark Pendergrast in Uncommon Grounds, because it was a flawed system. Both these systems sought to stabilize prices for coffee by limiting exports. The US used a similar system to keep crop and

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45 Uncommon Grounds 364
commodity prices stable until a spike in food prices lead the Nixon administration to remove artificial limits on production\textsuperscript{46}. The removal of artificial limits led directly to farm consolidation in the 1970s and likely contributed to the perplexing food economy at present in the US. It did however lower food prices for decades which may in turn result in different crisis, though that is beyond my ken. When the ICA fell coffee prices halved in the early 1990s costing Andean nations an estimated $750 million\textsuperscript{47}. Coffee revenues fell $4 billion in the late 1980s. In just one year revenues fell from $10.7 to $6.6 billion. One fair trade organization claims that in the last two years the price of wholesale coffee, when adjusted for inflation, is the lowest in 100 years\textsuperscript{48}.

The way coffee shops decorate tells a lot about who they are and who frequents it. Caribou Coffee has a more northerly feel, not only by name but by decor. Wood panels, accents, and floorboards evoke a homier feel than is usually possible. Even those small Caribous in the hallways of malls have wooden frames—a thing that should be more jarring than it is. My local non-mall Caribou Coffee is in a strip mall—it's a pattern of coffee shops, alas—on the northeastern edge of town. A few blocks to the east lie fallow fields and farms that grow more corn than I can imagine. This Caribou belies the comfort of the exposed wood by simple uniformity: they all have the same color wood stain for instance.

On my two visits, Caribou had a new campaign promoting oatmeal to go with my coffee. I have never seen “Handcrafted Oatmeal” advertised before: as in, “Ring in the New Year Right with Oatmeal,” and coffee. I do not remember the last time I even had oatmeal as a breakfast unto itself though a quick check with colleagues informed me that I was an outlier in this regard. On the day I visited, the store lacked light roast coffee which threatened my experiment's

\textsuperscript{46} See the documentary “King Corn” for more details, hypotheses, and ramifications.
\textsuperscript{47} Uncommon Grounds 364
\textsuperscript{48} Globalexchange.org
consistency; I ensured the consistency of my study by revisiting. The dark roast tasted, as all
dark roasts taste to me, burned and acrid. The impression softened as my drink cooled. Caribous
often have trivia questions which save a customer a dime if answered correctly. On the day I
visited, the question read “What’s the largest Scandinavian country?” I shamed my
geographically inclined brother by answering incorrectly...twice. Educated readers will know
that Sweden is the correct answer, worth a shiny dime. Caribou is, for lack of a better
comparison, a Northwoods version of Starbucks in scope of available coffees and coffee-like
drinks, customer base, and miscellany. Caribous serve the coffee connoisseur that likely has a
briefcase or a backpack with the ratio fluctuating based upon location. Perhaps though, all coffee
shops serve this clientele despite a few that cater toward the fringe. I will visit at least one of
those in my coffee questing.

As odd as the bit about oatmeal remained, I thought the counter strange because it was
covered and cluttered almost completely by snacks and knick-knacks: mostly foodstuffs took up
counter space and these tended toward the snacky—though there were some coffee beans too.
Near the groceries, a small display of reusable coffee sleeves stood. Most coffee shops, Caribou
included, have simple cardboard sleeves but Caribou also showcased cloth sleeves that ranged
from knit to plaid to team colors—only the Minnesota Vikings were available. I have seen these
before and have wondered who would ever buy one. Not only are they easily replaceable by a
free piece of cardboard, but these reusable sleeves cover a disposable cup. The logical
dissonance of a reusable sleeve for a disposable cup impressed the avid recycler in me. Why not
offer coffee mugs or thermoses instead and pre-empt the need for any waste. I, thermos in hand,
could only wonder and move along. My thermos also allows for discounts at some shops such as
Jazzman’s Café. The cup is often the most expensive part of a serving of coffee even if it be a paper cup.

As I drove about town finding different coffee shops I thought about the story of how coffee moved from Ethiopia to Latin America. Very briefly, coffee went from Ethiopia to Arabia and then Asia and Europe. It’s likely that coffee came to Venice along with many other trade goods and spread from there. Supposedly, in 1600 Pope Clement VIII decreed coffee to be a Christian drink despite the association of coffee with Muslims. A more interesting story about the spread of coffee comes from Austria.

Legend claims that Vienna helped popularize the drink in Europe by defeating the Ottoman Empire at the second siege of Vienna in 1683. After the siege, the Ottomans fled leaving a great many things including, apparently, bags of coffee beans. The Emperor of Austria gave Jerzy Franciszek Kulczycki beans for assisting against the Ottoman Turks. Kulczycki then opened the first coffee shop in the city. He also added milk to his coffee, something the Turks did not do. My faint recollection of Viennese coffee was that it was very strong and very small, much like espresso in America. If I believe my Austrian friends then my whole experiment is the indirect result of a particular Polish man.

Near downtown and the library is the largest site of the largest mass hanging in the history of this country. The hanging was the aftermath of the Dakota War of 1862 when local tribes attacked settlements like New Ulm. Later, 303 Sioux prisoners were taken by the army and all were convicted to be hanged in rushed trials. President Abraham Lincoln, on the urging of Minnesota’s Bishop Whipple, commuted the sentences for 264 prisoners. Another man was
given a reprieve. This meant that 38 executions took place on December 26, 1862. On the city’s centennial ninety years later, the hanging was reenacted in front of a large crowd.

Near this terrible history is a coffee shop named The Coffee Hag. The name is emblematic of the atmosphere and clientele—the exact relationship remaining elusive. I have been here before and written poetry. A friend and I wrote poetry while the Mankato Green Party—there is such a thing—offered people free coffees. I’ve also had a chance to sing Christmas Carols with strangers here. It is like a hippie hangout though that movement has long since ceased. In any case, an air of openness and yes, peace—perhaps even love—permeates. I find the juxtaposition of historical massacres and quasi-hippies to be indicative of America writ large.

The Coffee Hag lends itself to concerts and readings in the evening. There hangs a great deal of art on the walls as well. A friend explained a large wall hanging motif to me that moved from a symbol of divinity in Babylon to Platonic ideals of geometry. Next to it hung a painting of September 11th complete with a figure rising back into an office that is being reformed and where fire is extinguishing itself. At least, I want to believe it runs backwards in that way if only to comfort myself. The opposite wall houses jars and jars of fair trade organic coffee beans, priced at $11.29 per pound. This is about the same price as local Food Coops. There are more varieties along the wall than any coffee shop I have yet visited. Perhaps even more than the previous four combined. A potential downside of this wide selection is an issue of freshness. I cannot answer that question given my meager budget.

The barista replaced my coffee after I found a unpleasant, potent fruity aftertaste in my cup. My replacement had a pleasant taste, a medium dark roast to my taste buds, and only a

49 For the purposes of this essay I mean certified organic though I do not use the word “certified” each time.
slight hint of tropical fruit at the end. The reusable mug added to the drink because it resembled a tankard rather than the large, bulbous cup at the Fillin’ Station or the clear mug at the Hub.

The Hag, as the cool kids call it, is a place to hang out. The coffee is good and the espresso machine makes things like Scottish Milk. I asked and the barista explained that it was like a *miel*\(^{50}\) without the espresso, i.e. warmed milk and honey mixed together. Beyond the drinks, which are largely identical between coffee shops, is the comfort of a given shop and its utility. The Hag lends itself to sociability much more than Jazzman’s or Caribou because chains, while having comfortable chairs, lack things to do. I can’t recall seeing a board game or a left-out deck of cards at a chain coffee-shop: Seven Caribou Coffees, five Starbucks, three Dunn brothers, and 1 Gloria Jeans. One Dunn Brothers did have a little child-play area but nothing for adults but drinks and snacks. On the other hand, local coffee shops have uniformly offered games, books, or cards\(^{51}\). It is a distinguishing mark between chains and local coffee spots. It also separates the two distinct business models. The first is a product oriented approach with a focus on quick service; the second is a customer oriented model that focuses on the customer who repeats, stays, and brings people in through word of mouth. The closest exception to this general rule has to be each Starbucks\(^{52}\) in a Barnes and Noble bookstore, but even there the customer most often sits to drink coffee while buying something from the other parts of the store. Chain stores are about uniformity of design, product, and experience. Therefore, it would only tarnish the image of a chain to have games with inevitably lost pieces. There is also an expectation of business for most chains because of marketing, repeat customers, and word of

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\(^{50}\) Also, the Spanish word for honey.
\(^{51}\) I can remember eight offhand: White Rock in St. Paul, three versions of The Meeting Grounds in St. Cloud (a defunct local business), the Coffee Hag in Mankato, The Hub in Mankato, Coffee Bliss a defunct Mankato business, and the Fillin’ Station in Mankato.
\(^{52}\) These tend to be little coffee counters that happen to serve Starbucks coffee rather than a true Starbucks.
mouth. Local places must more actively court business from customers. They must also appeal
with a smaller budget. Today at the Hag, I spent ten minutes sorting out a full deck of cards.
Rather than detract from the experience of a particular store, this episode lent itself to my
conception of the place.

To wit: chains want you to bring something while local shops must have something to
offer. This is an outgrowth of business circumstances. Starbucks managed to become ubiquitous
without pushing itself. Pendergrast explains that “Starbucks became a household name without
mounting a national advertising campaign. Indeed, the company spent less than $10 million on
advertising in its first 25 years (1971-1996)\textsuperscript{53}. It was a veritable ‘word of mouth wonder,’ a
stunned \textit{Advertising Age} reporter put it\textsuperscript{54}.” Moreover, Starbucks’ logo is emblazoned on their
merchandise—this is advertising that the customer pays for directly. This is the behemoth that
local coffee shops compete against and one of the ways they do that is with cards and board
games or other “value added” things. Value added in this case means things that add to the value
of a product without reflecting increased economic activity. The more recent example in the
coffee world is fair trade coffee. People are willing to pay a higher price for fair trade coffee
because it has a perceived higher value than other kinds of coffee. Ethical coffee has stamped
more and more labels on itself to proclaim its goodness, that is, the goodness of the coffee not
relating to taste. I now have a bag of coffee in my cupboard that is fair trade, organic, shade
grown, bird friendly, and in a rainforest alliance all at the same time. Despite the higher price of
fair trade organic beans, vending this kind of coffee is another way to add value and it
distinguishes those shops that do so. There is also the ethical appeal of fair trade and organic

\textsuperscript{53} Parentheses: my note.
\textsuperscript{54} Uncommon Grounds p. 378
coffee but it is difficult to ascertain that notion as it affects the customer because many customers
1) do not have a preference for or against certain industry practices and 2) are willing to buy a
product that is not ethical, or value-added, in this way. I believe that reason two may be changing
because I have seen special coffees at Starbucks with organic on the bags. After rechecking their
website, there is one coffee that is entirely organic and shade grown.

There are, however, blends of value added coffee available that contain at least 10% of a
certain bean. Highly desirable beans are mixed with cheaper beans to make a cheaper product.
Hawaiian Kona coffee is sometimes sold in blends that cost less than 100% Kona coffee. I found
bags of Kona coffee blends that cost about $10 per pound on average while 100% Kona coffee
seems to cost at least twice that much. I also found many blends of Kopi Luwak coffee that cost
much, much less than the usual $180 per pound price tag. It’s a sneaky trick because it is near
impossible for a consumer to know exactly how much Kopi Luwak is in the blend. Pendergrast
writes of a more outrageous coffee scandal. Michael Norton, the owner of Kona Kai farms,
purchased cheap beans from Central and South America, rebagged them, and then sold them as
“pure” Kona coffee for a huge profit. To prevent this kind of fraud from recurring, growers of
Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee ship their beans in inscribed wooden containers.

Dunn Bros Coffee seems to do little to distinguish itself from other coffee shops in town.
The darkly stained wood decor here is a strange choice—though it is about the same shade as
coffee so perhaps that decided it. I suppose the shop is meant to feel cozy—fireplace,
comfortable chairs, wood décor—but it does not feel any more or less so than othershops in

55 Bantai Civet Coffee sells four ounce bags of 100% pure Kopi Luwak coffee that has been certified by the
Philippine government for $44.95. If you buy four to get a full pound the cost would be about $180.
56 Ibid. 391
57 Ibid. 392
town. The only singular thing Dunn Bros Coffee can claim is fresh roasted coffee. The little cardboard sleeve that came with my paper cup tells me that the coffee is “roasted fresh daily.” I have learned that whole roasted coffee beans may be stored for months before beginning to stale; therefore, the benefit of freshly roasted coffee is questionable. Further, coffee roasting is a delicate process especially with high-grown Arabica coffees because “[they] have the highest relative sucrose content and these will achieve the darkest roast under a set of specific conditions.”

Caffeine also points out that the largest coffee roaster in the United States roasts small batches for only five minutes before cooling with air of a fine spray of water. Even basic tips for roasting coffee give an idea of the care needed:

- Beans must be heated to temperatures of 370°F to 540°F. Faster air currents permit lower temperatures.
- The coffee beans must be in constant motion to prevent scorching or uneven roasting.
- The beans must be cooled quickly to prevent over roasting
- Roasting coffee produces smoke which must be vented properly.
- The roasted beans shed the outer skin during the roasting process and the light weight skins (called chaff) can make a mess if not handled properly.

So roasting daily could mean that every day the coffee is slightly different and has a chance of being poorly done. At least, the cynic is me says so. Perhaps I am just worried that I will ruin any coffee I try to roast on my own. On the other hand the freshness guidelines for Dunn Bros.

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58 Caffeine: pgs. 86-87.
59 http://www.breworganic.com/coffee/HowToRoast.htm
require that coffee be roasted only in the store and all roasted beans must be used within three
days.

The menu is somewhat larger than other places in town because of the fruit based drinks
and a lunch menu. As other places offer similar items and pricing, including the coffee shop in
Barnes and Noble, this is par for the course. This may not be a bad thing. Many stores fail to
distinguish themselves and do good business. Let us stay within the restaurant business and
consider another chain that does not distinguish itself, Perkins. The menu at Perkins is filled with
American staples that have largely retreated from kitchens across the country. The prices are
lower, there’s a lot of grease, and few spices beyond pepper. Perkins does not surprise anyone
and does not aim to do so. And because it is a chain, there is uniformity between locations.

My cup of coffee at Dunn Bros. had a medium-dark roast though it was not nearly as dark
as Starbucks. Beyond that, I remember little of note. On my last visit I saw a young woman in
scrubs reading A Peoples’ History of the United States by Howard Zinn, recently deceased. Had
a friend not been waiting for me in her car I may have occasioned a longer conversation. As it
happened, I spoke briefly and purchased my paper cup of coffee. To this point, most of the
coffee shops I visited have defaulted to a disposable paper cup. The three pieces of trash
generated by each customer seems a waste to me because unnecessary. Factor in the number of
franchises that Starbucks, Caribou Coffee, Dunn Bros. Coffee, and Jazzman’s have collectively
and that is an enormous amount of garbage. I present the best numbers of franchises I could find:
Starbucks 16,635 (after 600 stores closed in 2008), Caribou Coffee 511, Dunn Bros 91, and an unknown number of Jazzman’s Cafés because I cannot find specific numbers.

I visited Starbucks last. Of every place I have gone, Starbucks is by far the most controversial and prominent. I suspect that these two things feed off one another but I digress. As already alluded to, Starbucks was founded in 1971 with a focus on quality coffee. Interestingly, the three founders were a history teacher, an English teacher, and a writer. The three focused on roasting coffee beans entirely. In 1982 Howard Schultz joined the company as retail sales director and suggested that the three expand their business to selling coffee and espresso; they declined. In 1985, Schultz opened his own chain of coffee shops called Il Giornale. In 1987 the three founders sold to Schultz who re-branded his own coffee shops as Starbucks and opened outlets in Vancouver and Chicago that same year. Further, Starbucks does not franchise meaning that the company directly owns every store (Unlike Dunn Bros which tells me that I too can open up a coffee chain. From the company website: “The build-out cost of a standard vanilla shell will currently range from $125,000 to $160,000 (add $25,000 for an unimproved shell). On average, the FF&E will cost an additional $135,000.” If you would like to jump into the coffee business and have the cash please contact me.). There was a Starbucks in the former imperial palace in China between 2000 and 2007. And Schultz co-wrote a book about running the company that may or may not be riveting: Howard Schultz and Dori Jones Yang *Pour Your Heart into It: How Starbucks Built a Company One Cup at a Time*. There is also *The Starbucks Experience: 5 Principles for Turning Ordinary Into Extraordinary* by Joseph Micelli a business version of a self-help book, *Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks* by Bryant

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Jazzman’s Café is part of the Retail Brand Group llc. which is part of the food-service giant Sodexo. The Paris based company has 30,000 locations around the world only a small portion of which are Jazzman’s Cafes. Also, there is an apostrophe indicating that one singular “jazzman” owns all of the stores. I imagine him as a jazz kingpin.


Starbucks has become a multi-cultural phenomenon. I'm not sure what that means. But one of the very smallest things it means is Mankato, MN (pop. 50,000) has a Starbucks. There were even two real Starbucks. The building on the corner of Warren Avenue and Stadium Drive housed a Starbucks that was culled along with 599 other underperforming stores in 2008. What is left is something called Starbucks that lives inside a Barnes and Noble bookstore and

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61 “Coffee Crisis? Starbucks Closing 600 Stores” ABC news July 1, 2008  
http://abcnews.go.com/Business/Story?id=5288740&page=1  
62 It is a bookstore only in the sense that it happens to sell books. Barnes and Noble could sell pretty much anything and retain its name, design, and poorly paid employees.
another in a Hy-Vee. The Starbucks stand in will not take Starbucks cards though it does serve Starbucks brand coffees.

The near-Starbucks in Barnes and Noble has regulars. I talked to a former Barista who replied that there were definitely regulars. “You see the same people every day.” When I asked him more specific questions he said, “I'd say the average is 40. In the morning, mostly older people but then the crowd gets younger as the day goes.” I asked him if the place is full of two year olds at midnight and he said yes, it was, with a laugh. My favorite part of this place is the wax facsimiles of a light lunch: wax sandwiches with wax chips on plates. Mostly I get coffee. As I lived with someone who worked at Starbucks, and needed rides home from work (thank you for being terrible, Mankato bus service), I had plenty of opportunities to drink the coffee there. My preference is always a lightly roasted coffee and Starbucks serves the opposite. While I will drink the coffee there, I usually drink it as a last resort, e.g. late nights at the Minneapolis airport when half my family made it out of the Detroit airport before a storm delayed the other half.

Despite my ambivalent feelings, I must recognize that Starbucks does something right as it has become ubiquitous. There is even a small cafe on the MNSU campus that serves Starbucks coffee. Howard Schultz was worth more than a billion dollars in 2006 according to Forbes Magazine, good for 345th richest American. Nevertheless, I'll leave it to most others for reasons of taste.

Parity exists across these nine coffee shops with two exceptions: the dark roast of Starbucks and the odd fruitiness at the Coffee Hag. I should note that I have two friends who complain about the weak coffee that Jazzman’s Café brews, but both of them are smokers which may partially explain things, i.e. smoking dulls taste buds. The parity extends to value-added coffees as well because I am unable to taste the difference between organic and non-organic
coffees; though my conscience and wallet feel lighter after the former. Prices were also largely uniform between locations; a 16 oz. regular coffee will cost about $2 and will likely be served in a paper cup.

The rise of specialty coffee in the 1980s has had the greatest effect on coffee as it exists today. The upward trend in specialty coffee has diversified the way we drink coffee though it has done little to affect overall consumption. USDA data tell me that at peak per capita consumption, in 1946 people drank 46.4 gallons of coffee per person compared to 24.2 gallons in 2005\(^63\). The USDA also notes that sales of coffee at grocery stores have decreased while this has been offset by coffee consumption away from home. Apparently, sales at coffeehouses increased 97% between 1997 and 2003. I find it likely that Starbucks happened to expand at the perfect moment, and not because of any particular business practice. I am largely just glad to be able to drink good coffee at home for a change.

\(^{63}\) US census bureau and USDA respectively
More Than I Should Say: Working the 2010 Census

*And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place...So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.* Luke 2:1-3 NKJV

One house had a bell that chimed like a clock tower. A solid glass storm door covered a dark brown inner door. The orange and brown motif seemed original to the construction; the yard had no sidewalk and the driveway was long and smooth as if it had just been redone. No one was home. I drove by a house I had thought empty when I saw a woman sunbathing on the lawn. I made a half circle of the block before I pulled out my phone to call my supervisor. I asked if I may do an interview for a case I’d written off weeks ago. She agreed, thinking that it’s better to have too much information rather than too little. I then drove back to the sunbather and saw that
she was probably a college student and in a bikini. I grabbed my official census bag and approached her. I stopped six feet from her lawn chair, lifted my name badge, said that I was from the US Census Bureau, and asked if this is 173 Beech Avenue. She set down her book and said yes. I looked squarely at her sunglasses and asked how many people lived there, what were their names? I asked her questions for the census, got in my car, and left. Later, I told my supervisor that I knew people had moved back in when I saw that young woman sun tanning. My supervisor razzed me, “You only wanted to stop because she was in a bikini!”

Once in a while a kind person would invite me in to sit on a couch. After braving a small, yipping dog, I spoke to a large friendly man who ironed shirts while he answered questions. During the interview a young boy darted in, because he was five and curious, and out of the room because the large man would scold him each time he came in the living room. When I left I handed the six year old boy an information sheet about the US Census, though I doubt my supervisor would have done that.

Once, an older woman kindly invited me inside to sit down. She said that she hadn’t filled out a census form because she had just gotten back from wintering in Florida. By the time I began asking questions about the type of mortgage on her house (question H2 in the enumerator questionnaire) she was down to one word answers and her face soured. She’d transformed herself from the kindly grandmother to the wicked spinster fast enough that I felt disoriented the rest of the day. On a different day, a man didn’t want to talk to me so he lied about his place of residence on Census Day—April 1st, 2010. I learned about the lie later from a neighbor and wondered how many others had lied so that they didn’t have to answer my pedestrian questions. I couldn’t answer and I wondered how accurate the census really was.
Occasionally I’d encounter someone hostile to the census. Usually the respondent, that’s census-talk for the person interviewed, withheld a name or a telephone number. I would explain that the phone number was only used for quality assurance but a dozen people still refused. One young woman refused to give me any names for the people in her apartment so I wrote “Person 1, Person 2,” and so on. Person 1 spoke with me through a door opened only as wide as her body and she spoke in clipped sentences to get me out of there. In my memory she is looking down at me, though I was taller than her in real life.

One man didn’t respond to me. I held up my badge that looked like it came out of a box of crackerjacks and began my little spiel. He said, “No, not you census people,” and slammed the door. Of all the places I visited and all the people I spoke to, only this man worried me because, as per regulations, I had to get the information from somebody, usually a neighbor. He seemed large and angry when I’d tried to speak to him so I kept an eye on his house when I walked up and down his little side street trying to find someone who could answer his questions for him. “No” was not an option for the census. A worker like me could only give up a case if no one responded after three attempts to contact him or her. On the last try I was free to ask any and all neighbors about that address. Only after exhausting all possible avenues of data collection could I write off a case. Other options for chucking a case were more complicated. Sometimes an address no longer existed or the building had changed or remodeled so that there were fewer apartments. Once young man answered the door in his shirt sleeves and said that there was no 115 ½ anymore. He turned to the windows where the sounds of a television came out through a pulled shade and invisible friends of his confirmed it. I walked back to the car happy, filled out the rest of the paperwork, and turned it in the next day. I had absolved myself of it.
My team sat in the grey meeting room of an office building full of accountants. Five long thin tables with outlets for laptops stretched out from the room’s center. There were enough seats for about twice as many people as were in my group so we clustered near the front—some of us needed to be prompted before moving forward. Swivel chairs hugged the tables. A bank of windows looked over a manicured lawn but often the shades blocked this view. Gray industrial carpet covered the floor, the walls were off-white, and a kitchenette was installed across from the windows. A lectern stood in front of a whiteboard as white as bleached underpants. Looking back, I believe even a Pentecostal Revival would be muted in that room.

Because I am a full time student most of the year, I need a way to pay rent in the summer and a temporary job from the US Census seemed like a great fit. I love order. My photographs always include right angles and straight lines. My room is arranged so that I can find anything and everything quickly. I systematize. So when I considered that the US Census was an organizer on a massive scale, I sensed a common goal: to make sense of the world.

Fewer than twenty people came here for training for the four days, and of those two or three declined to complete training for whatever reason. The young college guy who sat on my right apparently decided that he didn’t want to do the job. Another man said that he didn’t want to be an enumerator after we covered safety and accident training. “If you see a dog,” our CL said, “Stay clear. Be safe.” A chorus of people echoed, “Don’t go near a dog, you don’t know what will happen.” One woman even claimed that a respondent had pulled a gun on her. The CL hushed her before the story could continue. We chatted about not hopping fences, knocking politely, and other obvious parts of safety. In our heavy red book was a form to fill out in the case of personal injury while on the job and another for car accidents. I, beingsmart, asked if we
had to fill out two forms if a car hit us while crossing a street. My CL laughed and didn’t answer the question.

On the first day, we were told that we were part of an operation called “Non-Response Follow Up” or NRFU, pronounced narfu. In other words, we would go to those addresses that had not mailed back census forms and manually count them. The first thing we did as employees of the decennial census was recite a pledge. Everyone in the room rose and placed a hand over his or her heart and said, “I pledge to protect the privacy of the people I interview. I pledge to protect the United States from any threat, foreign or domestic.” There was more to it but that’s the gist of it. Still, I felt odd to have pledged to protect the US from foreign or domestic threats because that seemed extreme for a group of people in a small town in the Upper Midwest.

Each of us was given a messenger bag with the words “Census 2010” in blue letters on a white background. The official seal of the United States Census Bureau was on the left side of the words so that we might look more official. Our bags contained most of the materials we would need for our NRFU operation. We had three handbooks (pale orange, yellow, and red), loose forms, a handle for our census brand bags, and a little kit of writing supplies. Each kit contained a piece of paper detailing its contents: five number two pencils, two blue ballpoint pens, three pencil erasers, and a box of paper clips. Every part of our bag came with a list of the contents—the enormous amount of paper that must have been wasted amuses and depresses me. Lastly, each bag had a little folding paper nametag to be set in front of each of us. With the difficulty of the material and the pace with which we dragged through it, I felt like a second-grader again.

The questions below are my best recollection of the script printed on the Enumerator Questionnaire Form. Few of the questions are probing; there is not even enough data generated
to get a credit card. I spent four days, more or less, learning to ask these questions and write the answers in tiny little boxes that would be scanned later at the regional census office—I’m not sure if that meant Shakopee, MN or Kansas City, MO.

S1 Hello, I’m ____(name)____ with the US Census Bureau. Is this ____ (address) ____?

S2 I’m here to complete a census questionnaire, it should take about ten minutes. (Hand person an information sheet) the first part of this explains that your answers are confidential and I’ll be referring to the other parts later. Did you or anyone else live or stay in this (house, apartment, or mobile home) on April 1st, 2010? (If “yes” proceed to S3. If “no” skip to S4.)

S3 Does someone usually live here? (If “yes” continue to S5. If “no” continue to S4)

S4 Is this a seasonal or vacation home? (continue to respondent information on back page)

S5 We need to count people where they live and sleep most of the time. How many people were living or staying here on April 1st, 2010?

The opening salvo of questions determines the rest of the interview. If a respondent was not present on April 1st then an enumerator must determine if the residence is vacant or a second home. However, if a respondent was present on April 1st then the interview proceeds through to the next set of questions on the inside of the Enumerator Questionnaire form:

1. Okay, let’s make a list of these people starting with the name of an owner or renter.

   Otherwise please start with any adult living here.

2. How is ______ related to person #1?
3. Is ______ male or female?
4. What is ______’s date of birth?
5. Is _____ of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin? (If so, what group)
6. What is ______’s race? For this census Hispanic origin is not a race.
7. Does ______ sometimes live or stay somewhere else for any reason?

These questions are the meat of the decennial census because these data determine important things like federal funding of local government. These seven questions also took up most of the interview and most confused respondents. Question three, concerning gender, was the most awkward question to ask. In training, our supervisors told us to preface it to make it seem less strange to a respondent. I usually said, “Now this may seem like a silly question but…” and most people went along with it fine, some laughed. Occasionally a female college student would furrow her brow a bit when I asked that or, once or twice, I heard a sigh of dissatisfaction—the quick, audible kind. However, I sometimes needed to ask that question because sometimes names were gender neutral, i.e. Sam, Chris, Pat, while other times I encountered a name I’d never seen in written form before or it had an alternate spelling that was irrelevant to pronunciation. I also struggled to spell many of those names because my knowledge of African languages is based almost entirely on The Lion King (“Hakuna Mutata”).

One family in particular challenged my language skills. I knocked on the door and felt a wave of heat wash out over me. A woman in a beautiful red and orange patterned headscarf looked at me while I held up my badge and began reciting my script. She motioned me to stop and then left the door to go knock somewhere in the residence. A few seconds later an older man
in a button shirt and a towel invited me in and offered me a chair. I carefully walked over thick rugs and saw a pair of children playing loudly in a language I did not know. He was very pleasant when we interviewed and helped me to correctly write the names of his children. He even went so far as to explain some of the phonetic differences between his native language and English. I tried out the names a few times and I thought that he appreciated my attempts, as poor as they were. Only when I left did I realize that the man I had spoken to may have been the only fluent English speaker in that household.

*Turn the page and ask:*

**H1** Were there any additional people staying here on April 1st that you did not mention?

a. Persons without a permanent residence, babies, relatives, roommates, non-relatives, or anyone else?

**H2** Does __person 1___ own this house with a mortgage (including home equity loans), own it free and clear, rent it, or occupy it without having to pay rent?

Question H1 covered just about every possible person that could be missed by the census. I was required to continue through the list, pausing at each comma, even if the respondent said no one visited on April 1st. Most people laughed by the time I asked if any non-relatives had stayed on Census Day.

Question H2 was the most prying of all the questions. Most people do not freely share what type of mortgage is on a house. One of my supervisors even said, with gusto, that she wouldn’t answer that question. “It’s none of their business!” she said. “Hell no! I wouldn’t tell
you what kind of mortgage I had. Like they need to know that anyway.” Perhaps, the notion of
government compelled most respondents to give answers that they would not otherwise share.

I was required to ask question H2 even when I knew or could accurately guess the
answer, like in large college apartment buildings. Most students gave me a strange look when I
asked if they rented because, 99% of the time, they did. The few exceptions were relegated to a
single apartment building that I’m relatively sure qualified as Section 8 housing because a non-
profit organization ran it.

On the back page fill out:

R1 respondent’s name and address (fill in address if respondent does not live
here)

R2 phone number

Thank the respondent for his or her time.

Each enumerator had a language card that had a basic set of instructions in more than
forty languages that ranged from Spanish to Mandarin to Dinka (a language family in Sudan). I
used the card once. At one apartment I knocked on a door and a dark-skinned, elderly woman
answered the door. She wore a head-wrap and a dark blue dress with a floral pattern. I began to
talk and she interrupted saying, “English, no,” again and again. When she said “no” her voice
rose in pitch like it was a question. Maybe she meant, “Can’t you see I don’t speak English?”
When she said it a few times I thought, Finally, I have the chance to use my language flashcard.
I dug through my messenger bag, opened the language card, and pointed to a language I thought
likely. She said, “English, no?” and began closing the door. I tried another language or two but
gave up when she repeated her chorus like a songbird. Per protocol, I handed her an information sheet that had English and Spanish instructions on it.

My boss assigned me an older residential area at first. I walked by houses that had stood near one another for at least forty, if not fifty, years. The yards, small; the trees, big. Most trees seemed full grown and a few were so tall that one could take out an entire house with one swift fall. I liked the mixture of people in the neighborhood: elderly people who had lived in one place for decades, young couples looking for an affordable house, and a mess of college students. Most of the students were not terribly helpful because they didn’t know the answers to my questions. Few roommates knew full dates of birth for people though they usually knew approximate ages. College guys would turn to one another and talk through the answers, “I think he’s twenty-three,” “Yeah, he’s a year younger than us,” “Are you sure? He’s in the same grade,” and so on. The collaborative answers were always half complete. Generally, if someone needed to ask about a roommate then he or she couldn’t give me a complete answer. I got used to holding me pencil waiting for the answer to come out like a reporter on her beat.

There were other ways college age people frustrated my efforts to document them. I worked an enormous apartment building with hallways long enough to host indoor track meets. These apartments alternated between people who were not available or people who were friendly; I found very little middle-ground. I knocked and left notes as usual when I heard a few girls go into a corner apartment. I knew it was on my checklist so I rushed over with questionnaire form and pencil readied. When the respondent opened the door I saw four girls in a large living room. I remember a blond wood motif and a large kitchen island. “Oh, you didn’t do your census form,” smirked a girl in sweatpants—clearly a visitor. I spoke my little introduction
and began with the next question when the girl holding the door open said, “Our parents already put us on their census forms.”

“Well, we need to count people where they live and sleep most of the time. If you live in Mankato most of the year then you count for Mankato.” I had answered this often enough to have a set reply.

Her eyebrows shifted down a little, “But we’re not going to be here next year.”

“That’s OK. The Census is interested in where everyone lived and stayed on April 1st, 2010. Did you or anyone else live or stay here on April 1st, 2010?”

She nodded still framing a grimace. She told me the number of people; I turned the page of the questionnaire and asked for a name. “I don’t want to give out names,” she said.

“The census is confidential and I have sworn…”

“I don’t want out names to be out there,” (Out there is vague and therefore difficult to contradict because the phrase could mean almost anything and usually means about six different things to the person who says it.)

“So you’re not comfortable giving me any names?”

“No.”

The interview went on this way. Not only did she refuse to give any names but she also refused to tell me complete dates of birth (she refused to give years) and a phone number. I did technically complete the interview but it was a poor set of data. I didn’t even have anything for respondent data besides “person number 1” which makes follow-up questions nigh impossible.

This was not an isolated incident. In the same building other college students refused to release certain information. Often they refused names or dates of birth and more than a few
refused to offer phone numbers questioning why the Census needed them. I invariably said “for quality assurance purposes” but that did little to sway people.

In a different brick apartment complex I spent three rainy afternoons knocking on doors. The building looked like a college dorm on the inside: long beige hallways with doors close together. This building frustrated me the most of all the particular places I enumerated because all the apartments were studios and therefore had only one person who could answer my questions. Usually residents weren’t present so I left dozens of notes on each floor. One apartment asked me to come back later. I did and the person again asked that I come back later. I tried to explain that it would take about ten minutes but he shook his head. I remember dark circles around his eyes and he held his head up with effort. I came back one more time and said that I would interview him now or he would get harassed by a colleague of mine for another week. He gave in and took the ten minutes to answer my questions.

One apartment refused to open the door. I knocked on the door and kept knocking because I plainly heard Wheel of Fortune on the TV. Whoever lived there refused to answer the door which makes me now wonder what he was doing. Factor in vacant apartments and you have an idea of the problems I’d bumped in to. There are two ways to check if an apartment is vacant: the easiest is asking the landlord, who may or may not speak to a census employee, the second option is the usual way: leave a notice of visit. It’s a little like getting a package notice from the USPS saying “Sorry we missed you.” Enumerators, like me, left official Census forms that said that a Census Enumerator had visited and would come back again. I offered my name, phone number, and hours of availability on the little note to prompt people to call me. For two months I answered every phone call the same way: “Hello, this is Seth Calvert with the US Census. How may I help you?” Despite leaving some three hundred notes (a conservative estimate) about a
two dozen people actually called me. And of those two dozen, only five people let me interview them over the phone.

The Census Bureau, in its questionable wisdom, had me drive to neighboring small towns to track down data. I only needed to check five households in the first town. I got paid by the mile and by the hour so I didn’t mind the waste—long drives meant more money for me. It took me three trips because one of the houses, as it turned out, was vacant but I didn’t learn that until a neighbor told me.

The second small town I visited was even smaller than the first. A large unpaved parking lot occupied part of the downtown. At a three way intersection, two bars and a bank stood across from the elementary school. The town bordered farm fields and a river with the entirety of the town on the west bank. Coming from the north, I noticed that the first half mile of the town consisted of a house on one side of a road and a house on the other side. Toward the small downtown the city spread out a few blocks wide but remained bunched around county roads. I visited houses and what may have been the only two apartment buildings in town. One of the apartment buildings had been neglected. Just one of the five apartments had a number on it, helpfully labeled “5.” Two apartments, decidedly uninhabited, were accessible only via a shaky staircase. (I hoped that it didn’t collapse under me because I rarely carried the proper forms in case of personal injury on the job.) After knocking on all neighboring doors, including the town bank, I largely despaired of meeting the occupants of the rickety building.

At another point I ran into a woman who could actually tell me about her neighbors. When I introduced myself on her three step cement porch she said “Oh yes, I saw you here yesterday.” I asked if we could speak about a house across the street she told me about the
people who used to live there. After a great deal of unnecessary information—occupations, family size, neighborliness—she finally told me that the house had been for sale for six months. I thanked her kindly; the humidity smothered my words I and drove away.

The last house I visited in that little town bordered the slow river that formed the eastern town limits. I knocked on the front door of a small dark blue house under the shade of some enormous leafy trees fed by the river. A neighbor mowing his lawn gestured with his head toward the backyard where a large garage sat. The garage door was open and six people sat in plaid, polypropylene lawn chairs drinking beer kept cold in a nearby red cooler. The week proved to be the hottest of the year to that point so I saw the wisdom in drinking in a cool garage. The woman I spoke to was quite nice and we had polite Minnesotan small talk about the weather, esp. the heat. Still, I always thought of garages as a party venue for white trash. I drove back to my hot house and considered myself a prick for thinking that.

I had stumbled upon the place at the end of a dirt road between towns. I’m reasonably sure I located the correct address despite the missing mailbox numbers or any kind identification on the trailer. It had no steps to the front door, which had been sealed with a combination of tape, cardboard, and a plastic sheet. I never actually spoke to anyone from that trailer because whoever lived there did not answer the door or respond to my official census notes, though the notes did disappear. I’d seen some tacky small town stuff sitting on people’s lawns: cement deer, garden gnomes, and flamingoes occasionally. I grew up in a small town myself (pop. 50,000 when I

64 Most people told me much more about their neighbors than I needed to know. I sometimes found out endearing facts this way. I met a woman who had lived in her house for forty-seven years and she’d seen the neighborhood change quite a bit with the influx of cheap apartments for college students. She even told me that a man I’d spoken to had actually lied to me to get me to leave him alone.
graduated from high school) but some stuff takes the cake. At the end of one dirt road I saw a
pair of ceramic statues that were black fishing boys. The two boys were painted coal black
except for bleached white eyes and enormous red lips. I recognized them as a ceramic cousin to
the black lawn jockey and I had to wonder why someone thought to leave them outside; I had
long thought them banished to back rooms in antique shops. I found the statues at the bottom of a
hill on a dirt road in rural Minnesota. Perhaps the farmers who lived nearby didn’t care or notice
such things. Were I a neighbor I would wonder about the statues might mean about the people
who lived there. When I spoke with an older guy, who ostensibly tolerated the statues’ presence,
he seemed nice enough. We talked baseball because baseball is a subject most any male in the
state can discuss comfortably with a complete stranger. I asked about the nearby trailer and he
said a name that sounded Latino to me. That he knew the person with a Latino name and had a
horrible, racist statue outside his home perplexed me because I want things to be ordered, to
make sense. Life does not seem to share in my predilection.

By the time I’d found that strange statue, my CL had run out of work to give us. I worked
for the census in a state that had the second highest mail participation rates, 81%. My fellow
workers and I would come to meetings and ask if there was more work. Sometimes our CL
would hand out a set of three or five enumerator questionnaires but that soon dried up too.
Because the Census did not have a local office, we made do with public places for meetings like
cafes or sitting areas in grocery stores. In the last weeks of my employment, I would drive three
miles to a grocery store, I’d step out of the car into the heat of parking lot with my Census bag
strapped over my shoulder, pass through the automatic doors into the florescent lighting, and say
hello to the person offering samples of California Chicken Salad before sitting down near my CL or one of the assistants. The little tables provided almost enough space to work on if I rotated my binders and forms carefully. If my CL were there I would be greeted bouncily and she'd ask if I had anything for her, like pay sheets or completed questionnaires. I'd listen for at least a half hour because I could claim the meetings as hours worked on my pay sheets (form D-308). It seemed like my CL clandestinely sanctioned my habit of spending an hour at each meeting. In any case, it would not have been hard for her to divine why I habitually lingered.

My time with the census officially ended in July—they sent an official termination letter so that former employees could prove their lack of employment. But I didn't actually do any work the last three weeks I was employed. At one of the cafe meetings, my CL explained that some enumerators would work on the next operation while the rest of us would be phased out. My CL recommended me for the next operation though her superiors did not ultimately choose me. So for three weeks I “worked” for one hour because that was the minimum amount of time that would be processed for payment. We theorized that the census kept us on the payroll to avoid paperwork. That likely translated to $35 extra for me and the others on my team. Multiply that figure by ten for my team, and then multiply the result by at least another ten to include all the census employees in the state of Minnesota before one can begin to understand the enormous amount of money paid out to save on paperwork.

I have a better understanding of critics of government waste now. I had done other jobs where waste was rampant but I had hoped that the federal government was somehow immune. That is not to say that I demanded the dissolution of the government, but I do think this experience tempered my expectations. Perhaps waste is what bureaucracy must render unto Caesar.
A co-worker of mine knew someone who had worked in the government at the time the Paper Reduction Act came through. Her friend had been enthusiastic and thought that this new law would change how the government worked. My co-worker shook her head and said flatly, “It didn’t.”

Chess

The black and white plastic sheet covered eight square feet. Pawns shorter than my knee stood next to a King that towered to my thigh. Eleven people sat around watching two large men play an even larger game of chess. The chessboard looked like a blanket with cheap lawn ornaments. The plastic pieces were hollow, the bottoms filled with sand to keep them from toppling over.

Nearby, jets of fountain water slammed against an abstract steel sculpture so that whispers disappeared under its streams. Hardly any spectator spoke while a game was on, I was unable to discover whether or not the noise of the fountain or chess culture-of-politeness. The silence stood out because people streamed out of the double doors nearby: walkers talked under the fountain’s roar, bikers wheeled by without sound, and skateboards rolled.
I watched two games: the first game should have ended before it did but the white player refused to yield. I saw the doom in his few remaining pieces: five pawns, a bishop, and a king. Still, the game went on as cigarette smoke rode a smooth breeze and leaves rained onto the concrete. And while the game plodded on, I noticed only men gathered round the giant chess set. As many as thirteen spectators clustered loosely around the edges, often smoking. And still, though more women walked by than men, few female gazes ever rested on the chessboard. A few hungry people came outside to watch: pop and taco bell, banana bread and coffee, Doritos and pop.

I watched all of the second game between two goateed men. When the man who played white came he said, “The champ is back. I won four games today.” His opponent smiled; they’d played before. A quiet camaraderie came out in the little bits they said. The Caucasian guy in a t-shirt offered to handicap himself by taking black and said, “I got more sleep last night.” His African-American opponent smiled. And thus, the colors of the men were reversed on the chessboard. No one mentioned it because it had happened before and will again.

The game took an hour to finish. After a solid move, like the one that set up a sentence on the queen, both players would sit down and think about what would happen. The ninth turn of the game lasted five minutes because of that tendency to think things out and a lack of time limit. I knew it was the ninth turn because I took notes on the game. In about five minutes I learned to record proper chess notations from a book in the library called, embarrassingly, *Chess for Juniors*. The title alone meant that whatever chances I had for glory through chess had long ago passed. It also embarrassed me to have the book out in public because *junior* is not a good word to describe a 26 year old.
At the end of a game the black player asked for a smoke first through gesture then with words. Smokey treat in hand, he said, “This is why I play for stalemates,” and he smiled the victorious smile only possible to a chubby Caucasian man playing outdoor chess.

Dental Hygiene

I let my girlfriend know that I would be tardy for our date this evening because I had a dental appointment. “They said it might take three hours.” I said.

“Why would it take three hours? Every dental appointment I’ve ever had lasted thirty to forty minutes at most.” Though she said it in good faith, I believed that she was under-exaggerating the time it took.

“I’m going to student dental clinic.” I said, flatly.

“Oh,” she paused, worried, “good luck.”

Her unspoken question was clear would it be worth it, after all, to allow a student to work on me?
The dental clinic at my nearby campus was located in the basement of a brown brick building. I followed directions to sign shaped like a grinning tooth that gestured in the direction of the dental clinic itself. I believe that the tooth held a toothbrush. The sign bothered me in the same way that the sign at Famous Dave's bothers me. Part of me wondered if the dental clinic was on the bottom floor to conceal the screams coming from patients, but as I checked in I tried putting away such thoughts.

Two young female students in light blue scrubs sat reading textbooks, “Hello,” I said and looked at the wall-mounted clock, “This is Seth Calvert checking-in extremely early for a six o’clock appointment.” Eventually a young woman called me and led me into the dental chair I would spend most of the evening in. The young woman introduced herself as Keisha (not her real name) and that she would be working with me. She wore a light blue set of scrubs that had a rougher texture than the pink scrubs most of the other student dentists wore. She also had a name tag identifying her as a “dental hygienist.”

The clinic itself differed from my previous dental experiences because there were roughly fifteen dental chairs arranged grid-like in one enormous room. All of the chairs had the usual dental accouterments and a built-to-spec computer desk with compartments for tools; an iMac sat at her eye level when on her stool. The first official thing she did was to ask for cling wrap. I wondered why she needed it until an aid came up with a box of Great Value brand cling wrap and laid a sheet across the computer keyboard. The assistant tucked the plastic over the edges of the keyboard to keep the wrap in place as a shield against whatever horrible bacteria routinely plagues keyboards.
She wore clear sunglasses that doubled as eye protectors and when I commented on them approvingly she said that she’d gotten some out for me and she held them up off the tray so that I could look. Then she withdrew a tool from a kit and began examining my teeth. I’d come in complaining that a pair of lower molars had lost fillings and that they caused occasional, mild pain. She used the mirror on the stick and something else, “What’s that called?” I asked. “An explorer,” she said as she turned to type a few notes on specific teeth. “Is that really it? Explorer?” She nodded, “Yep.” “Do they all have names?” I asked. “Oh yeah, they all have names.” I looked in the kit and saw ten tools that looked practically identical to me—two hooks of different shape on the end of each wand. The kit looked as complicated as a build your own blender kit. I didn’t ask for the other names to avoid burdening my dental hygienist further with peculiar questions.

My first notions of the x-ray room were not entirely positive. The room was accessed by a narrow hallway and was itself the size of a small bathroom. A table with a computer and pair of monitors took up one corner, a chair stood in the middle, and in the last thing like a hairdryer at the end of a flexible arm. Keisha sat me down and I began my thorough investigation of a poster on the wall. I remember a simple exhortation to give of yourself to those around you and leaves of varied colors swirling around a sepia background. I spent the next hour looking at it and reading its two dozen words.

Keisha draped me with a lead apron to prevent some exposure to radiation, presumably. It was slightly heavy but not much worse than a heavy winter coat. She then grabbed a plastic tool that attached to a long black wire that my mouth would become well acquainted with. The yellow tool had a bridge for teeth to bite down upon and a ring to guide the metallic end of the x-ray arm. “Your mouth is small,” she said. I must have given her a strange look because she
continued, “It’s not small exactly, but narrow. So I was wondering if you’d like some padding to it.” She held up the plastic bits now adhered to one another. I asked if I could try it a couple times before deciding. I opened and she maneuvered the end of the device into my mouth; from afar it must have looked like a mother and a fussy baby at mealtime. “Now bite down, slowly.” I bit and made a face. She pulled it out.

I said, “It feels like biting down onto a hot piece of pizza. The roof of my mouth doesn’t like it.” She went to get what turned out to be a thin piece of blue plastic “padding” that covered one side of the insulated x-ray plate in my mouth. She reinserted it and asked if it was better. “It is, a little,” I said.

Keisha needed twenty full x-rays of teeth—crown and root and all. She’d placed the tool behind a canine and asked me to bite before she raced out of the room to take a picture. Then she’d return to move the plastic piece ever so slightly and repeat the process. The front teeth were not much trouble because the probe needed to only travel slightly past my lips. She grabbed excellent shots of my lower front teeth in all their crooked glory.

However, I had 28 teeth to photograph—my wisdom teeth had been removed years earlier—and the probe needed to travel ever further back against my molars and gums. “Open,” she said and slide the probe toward the upper leftmost part of my jaw. I made a “cut” motion and spit the plastic bit out. “Sorry,” I said. “I have a strong gag reflex.” She shook her head, “No you don’t actually. Some people start to gag when the probe touches the top of their mouth.” She paused, “Can we try again? We need to get the roots.” I nodded and steeled against the feel of her fingers pushing, the plastic clipping against my molars. “Bite down,” she said, “You’re doing good.” I did and she did her little run-out-of-the-room-click-a-button dance. When she came back I spit the tool out. She did the same thing to the other back molars, hoping that the x-rays
were enough. She looked at the digital images, “We didn’t get the roots on that one but I can’t get it further back. They’ll have to be good enough for her. Wait here.”

She went out of the room and I had a chance to recite poetry mentally to pass the time. It also helped put my mind off of what was happening. So I did a sonnet by Drayton that starts:

As in some countries far remote from hence
The wretched creature destined to die,
Having the judgment due to his offense,
By surgeons begged, their art on him to try,
Which on the living work without remorse,

It goes on and turns out to be an elaborate metaphor for the torture a lover feels for his lady. No poem in my head was more fitting for the dentist.

“Hmm, we need to get the roots back here,” said the professor—a short woman with short brown hair and a white lab coat. “Let’s try that again.”

“I can’t get back there,” said Keisha, “Do you have some technique or something?”

The professor began explaining that sometimes you can move the camera partially away from the guiding circle on the plastic prop. She modeled it a few times and took another eight x-rays of my mouth. Meaning that I’d gotten something like thirty x-rays, instead of the twenty I’d agreed to pay for.

After the probe had been moved around my mouth for an hour and I had gagged hard enough to bring tears more than once, Keisha said, “Seth, you’re like my best patient ever.”
When the x-rays were finally completed to the professor's satisfaction, Keisha escorted me back to the dental chair where again I lay awkwardly balanced on my head. She re-probed my mouth and I was able to see the dental software being used on the nearby screen. My back molars had what looked like two rivers running through their centers which noted, I supposed, the filled cavities on those teeth. More important though were the two molars that had brought me in to the dentist in the first place. The two teeth had previously been drilled out by a dentist but the fillings had, somehow, dislodged so that certain foods—especially peanuts—wound up trapped in the cavity of the tooth. There was little pain but it was much more aggravating to feel the holes in my teeth. Keisha made notes and took a very good look at the molar on the right side of my mouth that had lost its filling. “I'm not sure if that one is chipped or not,” she said a few times and noted it on the chart.

“Okay, now we're going to check your plaque,” she said. She poured a reddish liquid in a paper cup and told me to swish it around my teeth. “It stains the teeth where the plaque is,” she explained.

“Didn't they used to have a candy that did that?” I asked. “That would probably be better than this nasty tasting stuff.”

“Um, yeah. I think so. I think they might still use it for kids. I know it tastes bad but you're doing great.” Keisha was nothing if not positive as a dental hygienist. She often encouraged me by saying something like “you're doing great” or “one last time.” I realized what she was doing and the fiercely cynical part of my brain resented it, but most of me was glad for the praise, however mild. I wondered if perhaps dentists should employ cheerleaders who might gladden the office up. Perhaps some consistent positive feedback would make trips to the dentist more palatable, if more surreal.
In any case, I finished rinsing and had the pleasure of sucking on the straw that works the opposite of usual straws when Keisha had me open up to check my plaque build-up. “Hmm, I think we have a bit here,” she said. “88? Yeah, I think 88.” I didn't know what that meant and I must have shown concern because she elaborated, “88 out of 300 is pretty good for not being to the dentist in a couple years. See, look,” she handed me a mirror so that I could examine the plaque myself. My front two teeth were almost completely coated in a reddish tint but the rest of my mouth looked okay. My back teeth seemed devoid of plaque but for the recesses between teeth. “See? You have a lot of plaque built up on the front teeth. I mean, plaque starts forming as soon as you're done brushing but you still have a lot on your teeth.”

She handed me what would later be my complimentary toothbrush. “So, show me how you brush.”

“Umm, I use an electric,” I said, “a sonic-care.”

“Oh, right!” she laughed and bent as though to hide to embarrassing error. “Well, show me how you'd brush if you had to with a normal brush.”

“OK. Well, uh. I think it's 'up like a rocket, down like the rain, back and forth like a choo-choo train.’” I moved the brush to mimic the actions but I hadn't actually put it into my mouth. “I'll also have to hum a bit,” I then mimicked the pitch my electric toothbrush makes which happens to be the starting note of the theme from 2001: A Space Odyssey\(^6^5\). Other people have

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\(^6^5\)While I don't have perfect pitch, I have a habit of noticing the musical qualities of machines around my house. My toothbrush indeed vibrates at the exact frequency of the first note of 2001: A Space Odyssey's theme. I often hum the song to myself while brushing me teeth. It makes the process generally more interesting. I also found out that my roommate's toaster oven clicks its timer to the beat of “Low Rider” by War and, less famously, “C'mon Ride It (The Train)” by Quad City DJ's. I prefer to imagine the sounds of the cowbell and trumpets from “Low Rider” as I wait for cheese to congeal on a tuna melt.
commented on it and noted, in particular, how odd it is for my toothbrush to mimic that pitch so accurately.

Keisha looked at me and then she had a realization; I was humming because I used an electric toothbrush and she'd asked me to brush how I normally did.

“Okay, do you know the circle movement? Can you try that?” I did and saw that I had at least moved the red color around my mouth a bit. I also noticed that I'd colored my free toothbrush already which displeased me the way a partially opened Christmas gift displeases, or perhaps it was more like being given a vacuum cleaner for a birthday. Who wants a new vacuum cleaner for their birthday? It's like an admission by all present that the recipient is rather dull. My toothbrush was now red and remained faintly red after the first few brushings to my great disappointment.

While I brushed a tiny bit more a professor came round to Keisha to check her digital chart. The professor took note of the plaque buildup and asked me about my brushing habits. Keisha pointed out that I had a fancy toothbrush.

“So you have a sonic-care?” the professor asked. I nodded. “How do you use it?” she asked. I held up the toothbrush in my mouth and made slow circles with it around my clenched teeth “So you just kind of hold it there and let it do the work? Okay, you should hold it at a 45 degree angle on the edge of your gum and then sweep down with pressing in to get the spots between the teeth better—like flossing almost.” She turned to Keisha. “It's so weird that they sell these nice toothbrushes but don't tell anybody how to use them.” The two women sighed like they were in on the same, sad joke. The professor left promising to get the licensed dentist to come over and check out her charts so that I could actually go home after being there for more than two hours.
At this point Keisha asked me if I knew anybody who needed dental care. She said, “I've got three hours Wednesday afternoon and I don't have any appointments. Do you think you could ask around to see if anyone wanted to come in and get a quick screening?” I said sure because I'd done that to help out a friend of a friend two years ago. I mostly remember being asked if I could brush and floss more often. It didn't take very long nor did it cost anything. “Cool, so here are my times and people could come in every half hour or so. Oh, and it would be better if the people who came in hadn't been to the dentist in a while, like two years or three years.” I made mention of my graduate student friends living in poverty, like me, and she seemed pleased. Later that evening, she'd send me an email reminding me of the favor I could do for her. To wit, the e-mail read as follows:

Seth!

Any luck with finding screening patients that would be willing to help me out?! I'd realllllllly appreciate it! :) As of now, my day is still wide open and I need to fill it with at least 4 people!!

Hellllppp! haha!

Thanks!

There are eight l's present in the word reallllllly for anyone keeping count. I'm also unsure how I would pronounce the extra letters in hellllppp. Her e-mail read the same way that she had said most everything to me that evening. Keisha was enthusiastic in the exact way I rarely am so that
her exuberance became more striking when paired with habitual dentist office reticence and stoicism.

Keisha did also say before I left that it would be fine if I didn't find anybody. Unfortunately, I came down with a bad flu the day after my appointment and couldn't actually ask anybody.

Back in the chair where I had been inverted for a further half hour, the dentist finally came over to do a final check before I could head home for the evening. The first thing he did was to get a general sense of the layout of my mouth, especially those teeth which had lost fillings. He probed and checked and asked Keisha questions. “Did you mark a fracture on tooth 23 (the lower right bicuspid)?”

“I checked it and it looks fractured to me.”

The dentist wrinkled his forehead, “I’m not sure.” the examiner dug around my mouth tapping here and there on the tooth in question. “I think it was just drilled that way.” He paused, “Alright, now what about the state of the teeth.”

“I think I see some fluorosis in there,” she said.

“Well, it's either (mystery dental word) or fluorosis.”

“Yeah, I've always been confused by the difference between the two,” she said.

And then the dentist began pointing out different possibilities before concluding that I probably had fluorosis; whichstains the teeth because of too much fluoride in the system. However, they didn't tell me that then because I was transformed from a patient into a teaching tool. I suppose that I had been a tool for dental education from the moment I walked into the clinic but the feeling had never been as acute as when the dentist used my teeth to demonstrate for Keisha. For a time I became reduced to my teeth perhaps in the same way that a hand model
becomes only hands. It disoriented me to hear them talk as though I were not a present or even a person, so that I had to continue lying slightly inverted while present for a conversation in which I could take absolutely no part. When the dentist finally left, lab coat trailing behind him, I felt relieved.

Keisha raised me up and we talked about the next possible appointment. I had already paid for everything but I had not yet received all the services in the three hours I had spent in the dental clinic. We settled on a distant date three Mondays from the day I went in.

“I think my next appointment is on February 14th, does that work?”

I nodded.

“Well good, I'll see you on Valentine's Day for your cleaning,” she said.

The unreality of seeing the young female dental hygienist in training on Valentine's Day made us both chuckle as though we had just agreed to a bizarre date. Seeing a female dental hygienist for Valentine's Day was peculiar. I'm sure there are a few possible jokes in that but most of the ones I can come up with are rather crude.

Valentine's Day

In the early afternoon of Valentine's Day I arrived at the clinic again to finish my pre-paid dental work. I was scheduled merely for cleaning and polishing which Keisha had sworn would not take too long. Perhaps she felt bad that the initial examinations and x-rays had taken as long as they did. More specifically she texted the following to me:
Hey Seth! This is Keisha from the [university] dental clinic just reminding you about finishing you’re cleaning at 2! Won’t take long! I promise!

I had come back to lay inverted in a chair while she stuck things inside my mouth. I arrived at least 15 minutes early because the walk was quite short from my office and I have a tendency to be early whenever I can help it. I believe that this grows naturally from a childhood of inadvertent tardiness. Keisha called me in so early that I could hardly read more than a page in the part of the hallway that passed as a waiting room. Keisha sat me down in the chair nearest to the waiting room and asked me if there were any changes since my past appointment. There had been. My left second bicuspid had eroded further so that the previously drilled cavity become more cavernous—this meant unpleasant sensations including but not limited to mild pain. Oddly, the most painful thing to eat turned out be peanut butter and jelly tortillas—I had run out of bread and remembered my bevy of tortillas in the fridge. Some people might be tempted to call such concoctions “wraps” but that's ridiculous. It's clearly a tortilla as opposed to any other cultural wrap like spring or egg rolls, etc. If she noticed this she didn't say much about it. I repeated a desire to have fillings done at the student clinic and she said we would talk about scheduling at the end of the appointment.

From there she did a cursory examination of my mouth with, I believe, the examiner. Afterward, she asked, “Have you had the water system before?” I nodded.

“It's really slick,” she said. In my left hand she placed the suction device for me to use when I needed and then she began spraying/blasting/scraping. I was not entirely sure which of the words is most appropriate because I had only suffered through it once before. Quick research
showed me that I can purchase a home version of the dental product for something like $30 so that I can enjoy the unpleasant taste of hot water mixed with plaque and bacteria today.

In all seriousness, the water jet system worked well but tasted god-awful. Even the suction device did little to alleviate the abhorrent flavor that the hot water left on my tongue. Further, my poor tongue was not only subjected to awful tastes but it also kept getting in the way. Keisha moved the little mirror-on-a-stick to block my tongue from interfering with her cleaning but I kept wanting to shift it around in my mouth.

While she was doing this, I did my best to focus on things other than my mouth as I had in my previous visit. I recited poems in my head. I did “Loveliest of Trees the Cherry Now” from my favorite collection of metered, rhyming poems. I did “Binsley Poplars” by Hopkins despite forgetting the actual title of the poem. I recited “To His Coy Mistress,” which I had stuck in my head mostly to use as a pick-up line on co-eds. Do not emulate this because it never worked. Usually the woman in question became uninterested before I could finish the first stanza of 20 lines let alone the full 46 line poem composed of 23 rhyming couplets. I did “Shine, Perishing Republic” by Jeffers, which is a difficult poem to stick in one's head because it so strongly avoids mnemonic devices.

“Can you turn your head towards me?” she asked.

I did and then started in on the parts of the longest poem I ever tried to stick in my head: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The 131 lines, not including the Italian epigraph, of the poem are three times as long as any poem that I've successfully memorized and the task is so large that I would not have even tried it had not a high school teacher put me up to it. As a sophomore in high school I didn't know how I well I was doing. During one English class I calmly jumped out the window and then come back into the school at my teacher's urgings. No
detention resulted but I felt that my teacher changed his affections for me. Therefore, when he promised a crazy thing—to raise a semester’s grade a full letter if one could recite the full poem to him from memory—I chose to memorize the poem. I had piddled around with a fair number of lines—I had made it to about line 85—when classmates asked someone to distract the teacher. I took the chance and stepped into the dark brick hallway outside the classroom and told him that I was ready to recite the poem from “Let us go then, you and I,” to “And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, / And in short, I was afraid.” He looked hurried but agreed and so I made the first few lines come dancing out cleanly and progressed on to the third and fourth stanzas without needing any prompting from him. By the time I recited the 68th and 69th lines (“And should I then presume? / And how should I begin?”) he seemed convinced or wondered what was happening in his classroom and left me in the hall. He never asked me to recite the whole thing nor was I certain of whether I needed to have memorized the poem to get that A on my report card. Perhaps “I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” for all the good the poem did my grade.

Back in the dental chair, I had finished reciting poems some time before and now had little to do but wait for the water jet system to finish pulsing the plaque from my mouth. I kept spitting as best I could into the suction device but it seemed that there was always more moisture in my mouth than could be removed.

And then “I Think We're Alone Now” by Tiffany came on the speaker. My boots bobbed a bit to the beat and I started dancing slightly in my chair. Mostly I wiggled my feet and bobbed my head.

“Of course you'd dance to this,” she said and shook her head while smiling knowingly.
We made uncertain plans about meeting one last time so that I could have my fillings replaced, but she never got back to me about it. In total I paid $140 for cleaning, examinations, x-rays, and fluoride, which is a pretty competitive rate. I ended up paying about $32.50 an hour for the work done on me. Here it becomes harder to balance time and money because four hours in a dentist chair is not much fun, but because I was willing to spend four hours in the chair I did two things 1) saved money and 2) contributed to dental education. The money part would be a wash for a great many people because a more practiced dentist could have done all of the work in about an hour. The second part though is the presumed point of the student dental clinic.

The clinic itself stands beside the academic building I spend almost all of my time in. I find it impossible to walk past without recalling my time in the dentist chair nearest the entrance to the clinic. Sometimes, when I hear the right song, I have the urge to brush my teeth. Were I back in Keisha’s chair today, I would open my mouth as widely as I could and acquiesce to her peculiar probing. I would turn my head toward her when asked, rearrange my demonic tongue, and relax my jaw. I would settle into the deepest part of the chair and let my feet dangle. Then, beneath the music on the clinic’s speakers, beneath the quiet questions asked of patients, beneath the humming of lights and pulsing of tools, I would half-close my eyes and think to myself, “When I have fears that I might cease to be.

On Censorship and Fallout from *The Satanic Verses*

I headed down to my local library which happens to be the library at Minnesota State University Mankato to ask a librarian about the policies regarding book challenges. I hoped that Justine would be working this particular Saturday because she had taught my first college class
about the resources in the library and we’d become work friends in the years since. I saw her sitting at the reference desk with another librarian and walked up to ask her about policies.

“It’s for something I’m writing for my thesis,” I said.

“Well, if you have a question we only have ten minutes to answer because then we can go home. It’s funny, all day was slow and then at the end we get a good question.” I recognized that she had mentally checked out on a Saturday afternoon.

“I think the library has it on the website. Let me check. Do you know where it is, Cathy?”

The two librarians conferred briefly before searching the website for it. “Okay, here it is. From the library home page go to Library collections, then click collections development, from there click policies and on the policy page at the bottom is a link to challenge forms.”

I asked her to repeat that so I could write it down.

“Well, it’s hard to win a challenge here because it’s a university library,” said Justine.

“I found that out through my research on the ALA website,” I said.

Justine switched into lecture mode to say, “Good, that’s a great resource. But it’s hard to win a challenge here because people might use it for their research. So if a book’s challenged we’ll bring it to a collections meeting and discuss it there and from there it goes to the Dean of the Library.”

Cathy wondered, “I don’t know if a book has been challenged while I’ve been here. I’ve never heard of one.”

Justine hadn’t either, “Hmm, you could check out the “Z” section of the library; it has books on censorship.”

I wrote “Z” on my left hand and then I thanked them for their time.

Cathy said, “Justine is a, what did they call you? A reference queen?”
“No,” said Justine, “it was something else.” She thought for a moment, “Oh! It was library goddess. Someone called me a library goddess so I think Cathy here should bow down to me.” She laughed, they both laughed.

“Oh good, you jumped over the whole ‘demi-goddess’ phase.” I said.

“Right,” she said laughing.

I re-thanked them both for their time and Cathy turned to me and said, “Good luck with your writing. Your topic is librarian approved.”

“Yes it’s approved. Good luck!” said Justine.

The website I’d been directed to said little I hadn’t suspected. The website proclaimed:

“The library strongly supports the concept of intellectual freedom.” The website then laid out the same progression that Justine had: a challenge must be submitted in writing, the written challenge will be discussed by library faculty, and then the Dean of the library will issue a verdict, and “The decision of the Dean is final.” Further, the University library adheres to the Library Bill of Rights\textsuperscript{66} which is, roughly, an all-inclusive version of the first amendment that goes beyond most other first amendment rights. This document was first created as early as 1939 and has been lightly amended five times since then.

The challenge form itself is rather like a short essay exam or at least that’s how it looks to me. There are three main questions on the form:

1. What do you find objectionable about this item? Please be specific.

2. Does this title have any redeeming value as an academic resource?

\textsuperscript{66} See ALA website for full details. http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/index.cfm
3. Please cite relevant scholarly or literary criticism that might affect the Library’s discussion.

My university library has greater hurdles than a given local school board such as the one in North Dakota that briefly banned a book. Again, it seems very difficult to censor a book after 1971 and the cases Charles Rembar argued in front of the Supreme Court, but that doesn’t stop people. Nor, I fear, will it. Censorship will continue as it always has. Sometimes censorship means that every Apple application will be family-friendly. Some other times it means that a certain kind of book won’t be published or that Blockbuster will edit the movies it rents out or that certain words disappear from the lexicon rightly or not.

Part I: Book Censorship in America

In 1959, the United States Post Office confiscated copies of D.H. Lawrences’s *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* sent through the mail. Charles Rembar, working for the publisher, sued and won at the city and state level. He did much the same thing later in front of the United States Supreme Court which overturned an earlier ruling which had deemed *Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller obscene. In 1973 the United States Supreme Court instituted the Miller Test to determine whether a given book was obscene. The test consists of three parts:

1) Whether an average person, according to the standards of his or her community would find that a work, on the whole, appeals to prurient interest

2) Whether the work in question describes sexual conduct in a patently offensive way
3) Whether the work lacks serious literary, artistic, scientific, or political value

A work is considered obscene only if it meets all three parts of the test. Thus, the obscenity laws which had censored a great and good many works were successfully neutered. The test makes it impractical to outlaw a given form of expression that is not intending to be pornographic. This does not stop people from trying.

Laura Mallory of Gwinnet County, Georgia tried three times to ban the Harry Potter books from the counties’ schools and libraries. She argued that the series “promote[s] the Wicca Religion” and that it was therefore a state-sponsored advocacy of religion. The Georgia Board of Education ruled against her in December 2006. Even though she lost the case she told the Associated Press, “If even one parent or one child has looked into this more closely, it’s worth it.”

The school board in Sioux Falls, South Dakota decided that *Stuck in the Middle: Seventeen Comics from an Unpleasant Age* should be removed from school shelves. Keoland Television interviewed Sioux Falls School Board President Kent Albery who said “[There was] very graphic language, slang terms for sexual acts they felt weren't appropriate to be in the library for student access.” The school board looked into the matter after a teacher complained in September 2009.

In 2009 there were 460 book challenges according to the American Library Association. On average, for the past fifteen years 520 books were challenged every year.

In Alamosa, Colorado *The Golden Compass* was removed from a middle school library shelf by a librarian. Mindy Wandling said that she felt compelled to remove the book because “she felt the book was in conflict with community held beliefs—and her own beliefs—about
God,” according to the Valley Courier. Soon thereafter Mark Skinner, a certified librarian from
the town’s high school, had heard of the removal and complained to the district superintendent.
The book was placed back on shelves within two days.

A week later the Fahrenheit 451 Project at Adams State College held an open forum on
censorship. Ms. Wandling did not attend because of a nearby tragedy. Instead, her husband,
Pastor Ed Wandling said that his wife felt that she “was [not] in a place to participate” due to
recent tragedy at a sister church. Mr. Wandling said that he and his wife believed it was not
appropriate to have books in a library that sat contrary to community beliefs. He further
disagreed with the American Library Association’s position saying “The [ALA] thinks I, as a
parent, am the only one who can restrict what my children read,” said Wandling. “I don’t agree
with that.” Mark Skinner, the librarian who had placed the book back on the shelf, noted that he
was the only person at the forum who had read the book. He later said, “I have a hard time with
anyone who wants to pull a book when they haven’t read it.” Another librarian noted removing a
book from a library because of personal belief may violate the U.S. Constitution. She continued
“Pulling a book because of personal belief is censorship.” 67

The most often reason books were challenged was sexual content which was the reason
more than twice as often as the next most cited reason, violence. According to the ALA, sexual
content was nearly ten times more likely to be challenged than anti-family content (316), twenty-
six times more likely than suicidal content (117), and thirty-three times more likely than
inaccuracy (91).

In Raceland, Louisiana the principal of Central Lafourche high school banned classroom
use of Black Hawk Down by Mark Bowden after a parent complained about the author’s use of

curse words. Jared Foreman, the teacher who assigned the book during banned book week, claimed the move was censorship but education officials claimed that the book violated policy on cursing. Before students had to return the books to the school library, which surprised them, Foreman marched his class to the school flagpole singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” en masse. He later said that he wanted his students to understand that they were returning a book due to censorship.

Brooklyn’s chief librarian removed *Tintin au Congo* from general circulation. The book, as of August 2009, is the only book in the Brooklyn library system that is hidden from public view; it is viewable by appointment only and locked behind a series of hidden doors on the third floor of the Brooklyn’s central library. The 80 year-year-old book was removed because, according to the NY Post, “depicted Africans as Monkeys.” The book also “pushed a pro-colonial message.” The ACLU complained that the library had taken the easy way out of the situation.

The school board of Beulah High School voted 4-3 to ban *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* by John Berendt after two parents found it disturbing and explicitly pornographic. Per school policy, a board of five members first reviewed the book and unanimously voted to keep it in the library. The two parents then appealed to the school board, none of whom had read the book, who voted to remove it. It stayed removed four for days before the board reversed its opinion because, as one member said, the decision was made too quickly and left the board open to a lawsuit it likely could not win. The board chose to pursue other options such as requiring parental approval before a student could read it. This was the first time

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the book had been banned since its publication in 1994. The book had been checked out only once before the child of the complaining parents did.⁶⁹

In Grants Pass, Oregon a book was removed from first graders when complaints were made about the way loggers were portrayed in the book. Bernie Conrad felt alarmed when he saw a booklet his grandson brought home. He read the eight pages booklet Help the Forest by Rita Crosby and decided that he had to do something about it. He wrote a letter to the editor and spoke to his grandson's first grade teacher. The teacher then went to District Seven Curriculum Director who took one look at the offending material and knew it was not appropriate for the area. The local paper, the Mail Tribune, quoted her as saying “As soon as we saw the page, we said, 'Oh no, this isn't appropriate for this area.'” She continued, "This is part of our adopted reading curriculum, on the state-approved list. It's one page out of many, many, many books and materials our teachers have to work with." In particular, the book accused loggers of littering the forest and that birds lost their homes when the trees were logged. The book was later replaced with a revised version. The teacher who offered her students the material offered advice to parents, "Like I told the little boy's father, you listen to what your children hear and see, and you filter it. You tell them your beliefs. Just because it's written somewhere doesn't mean it's the truth." She added that the book had been part of the reading curriculum last year and that no one had complained.⁷⁰

The most likely institutions to be part of a challenge were schools, school libraries, and public libraries in that order. The next most likely institution was colleges and universities though there were only 146 of those in 15 years. To give an idea of ratio, schools, the most

⁶⁹LAUREN DONOVAN Bismarck Tribune | Posted: Saturday, January 17, 2009
https://secure.forumcomm.com/?publisher_ID=40&article_id=102766
challenged institution, were involved in 3866 challenges meaning that a school was roughly 26 times more likely to receive a challenge than a college or university.\footnote{http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/challengesbytype/index.cfm}

Kelab Tierce, a teacher in the small town of Tuscola, Texas was put on paid leave by the school board after a student of his read *Child of God* by Cormack McCarthy. The book in question was on a list of books compiled by English teachers for a pre-Advanced Placement class. 120 parents and students from a town of 700 crowded into a meeting of the school board which voted to keep Mr. Tierce on paid leave. The Associated Press reports that parents of a student filed a police report and had previously contacted school officials about the book in question. Mr. Tierce was then investigated for allegedly distributing harmful material to a minor after the student selected the McCarthy book. He was never charged with providing harmful material to a minor—a misdemeanor charge.

However, the Abilene Reporter News relates that Mr. Tierce was later charged and arrested for inappropriate sexual conduct with three female students. He posted bail at $30,000 and was free to go pending trial. His contract with the school was not renewed.\footnote{http://www.nysun.com/national/texas-teacher-suspended-after-book-list-complaint/65072/ http://www.reporternews.com/news/2008/oct/13/no-headline---tierce_details/}

*The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier was banned by Jacqueline Haas, the Harford County Public School Superintendent. After banning the book, the superintendent received a joint letter disapproving of the ban signed by the National Coalition Against Censorship, American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, National Council of Teachers of English, Association of American Publishers, the American Library Association, and the PEN American Center. Ms. Haas also unintentionally made headlines in Massachusetts, Georgia, California, et
al after the Baltimore Sun broadcaster the story. After a seven month period the book was reinstated in classrooms but required parent permission.

Part II: *The Satanic Verses*


Salman Rushdie was disinvited from a book festival in South Africa on November 1st because of threats made upon his life.

Within two months, the book was banned in South Africa and Pakistan. In the following weeks Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Somalia, Bangladesh, Sudan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Qatar banned the book.

On January 14th, 1989 the book was ritually burned by a crowd of several thousand protesting Muslims in Bradford, UK. The act could not help but recall other book burnings such as those organized by the Third Reich in 1933 or those urged by Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1953.

On January 25th Salman Rushdie denied that the book is blasphemous saying that the Prophet Mohammed would have no objection to the book.

On February 12, 1989, at a protest in Islamabad, Pakistan six people died and 100 were injured when a crowd of 10,000 attacked the American Cultural Center. The next day, riots followed in Srinagar, Jammu, and Kashmir.
On February 14, 1989 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against Rushdie and his publishers the text of which follows.

In the name of God the Almighty. We belong to God and to Him we shall return. I would like to inform all intrepid Muslims in the world that the author of the book *The Satanic Verses*, which has been compiled, printed, and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Qur’an, and those publishers who were aware of its contents, are sentenced to death. I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, where they find them, so that no one will dare to insult Islamic sanctity. Whoever is killed on this path will be regarded as a martyr, God-willing.

In addition, if anyone has access to the author of the book but does not possess the power to execute him, he should point him out to the people so that he may be punished for his actions. May God's blessing be on you all.

The British government placed Salman Rushdie and his family under protection. On February 15th, 1989 the British embassy in Tehran was stoned and the Fifth of June Foundation offered 20 million tumans to any successful Iranian assassin, non-Iranians would receive roughly 3 million dollars. Rushdie issued a carefully worded apology on February 18th saying that he regretted the distress the book occasioned in others and that “Living as we do in this world of many faiths, this
experience has served to remind us that we must be conscious of the sensibilities of others.”

However, the Ayatollah refused to accept the apology saying:

This is denied 100%. Even if Salman Rushdie repents and become the most pious man of all time, it is incumbent on every Muslim to employ everything he has got, his life and wealth, to send him to Hell.... If a non-Muslim becomes aware of Rushdie's whereabouts and has the ability to execute him quicker than Muslims, it is incumbent on Muslims to pay a reward or a fee in return for this action.

February 22\textsuperscript{nd}--EEC countries (a precursor to the European Union) recalled their ambassadors and suspended his level contacts with Iran. The \textit{charge d’Affaires} from Iran was ordered out of Britain.

On February 24 a crowd rioted in Mumbai, India. Police opened fire and 12 people died and 40 were injured. February 26\textsuperscript{th}, a bomb attack on the British Council library in Karachi killed a Pakistani guard.

On March 7\textsuperscript{th} Iran broke off diplomatic relations with Britain.

On March 29\textsuperscript{th} Imam Abdullah Ahdel and his assistant were murdered in Brussels’ central mosque. The killing was understood to be a reaction against the imam’s moderate stance against the novel. The next day a number of moderate Muslim leaders in Britain asked for police protection after having received death threats.
On April 2nd, two bomb attacks against the building of the British Council and a car of the British Embassy took place in Ankara. One week later incendiary devices were thrown against two London bookstores for stocking the books 74.

In Berkley, California two book stores were firebombed for selling the novel. A caller to 911 said that the bombings were in retaliation for selling the book and for defending the right to sell the book. On May 27, a crowd upwards of 20,000 gathered in Parliament Square in London, England to burn an effigy of Rushdie and call for a ban on the book. A newspaper in New York City was firebombed after defending Salman Rushdie in an editorial.

The next year, five bookstores in the UK were firebombed. In July, 1991 the Japanese translator of the novel was stabbed to death. The Italian translator was seriously wounded in a separate attack. Thirty-seven people died in Turkey during a literary festival when a mob burnt down a hotel. The mob had demanded that the Turkish translator be turned over to them, and when the festival participants refused they burnt the hotel to the ground. The translator escaped. In 1993, the Norwegian translator of the novel was shot and seriously injured.

I know of no secular book that caused as much fury as The Satanic Verses. According to Malise Ruthen, at least 60 people have died in the events chronicled above 75.

It was only in 1998, 10 years after the book’s publication, that Rushdie announced that he would no longer live in hiding years after the events. The United Kingdom and Iran only reestablished diplomatic relations that same year. The British government attempted to have the fatwa removed but Iranian officials declared that only the issuer of a fatwa can revoke it.

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74 The previous dates come from an article published in Index on Censorship in 1989, “The Satanic Verses: A Chronology.”
75 Ruthven
Unfortunately or conveniently, depending on how one looks at it, Ayatollad Ruhollah Khomeini had died in 1989 and thus the fatwa could not be removed.

Knowing only the smallest part about the controversy that plagued the book I purchased it by the inch in a small town in Missouri. It then spent two years sitting on a book shelf collecting dust before I read it over a Christmas break. Like his other works that I’ve read, Rushdie’s book is outlandish, surreal, hysterical, and critical. In the same book are chapters about the Angel Gibreel (Gabriel) speaking with the Prophet Mahound (Mohammed), a man transforming into a goat in an attic apartment in London, and wax effigies of politicians melted in a microwave at a dance club in front of a cheering crowd. The first chapter is about two men plummeting to earth after the plane they had been flying in exploded. The novel is no simple thing to retell which is most likely a positive attribute.

For me then, fully understanding the book, especially the subtle cultural notes, as I read it would be like making me read the Oxford English Dictionary from back to front while standing in a convertible which sped down the interstate. Therefore, it didn’t much surprise me when I did not detect exactly what was offensive about the book. I put down the 550 page book at the end without knowing why the book resulted in a fatwa.

The first issue is the depiction of the Prophet Mohammed within the text. Rushdie not only portrays the Prophet but actively lampoons him. Toward the end of the novel a brothel operating in Jahilia (a pseudonomic Mecca) changes the name of the twelve prostitutes to the names of Mohammed’s wives. The re-named prostitutes then ask that Baal, who is in hiding as a brothel guard, become their husband. The widow who operates the brothel agrees with the result that the brothel becomes a perverse mirror of the Prophet’s family. That the brothel is called “The Curtain” (the primary meaning of hajib according to Ruthven) further mocks the attitudes
to women legitimized by Mohammed’s many marriages. After the prostitutes are renamed the brothel does a booming business and the women so embrace their roles that they forget their original names. When the armies of Mohammed finally overtake the city the brothel is closed, Baal is found, and he and the women are put on trial. In a final round of mockery, Baal recounts his time in the brothel which causes those present to begin chuckling then laughing to the point of crying in front of Mohammed himself.

Further, Rushdie narrates Mohammed's Satanic Verses: verses that Mohammad supposedly recited but are absent from the Qua'ran.

Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other?

They are exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed.

The verses in question seem rather bland to me because I know only the littlest about Islam. Through a character in the novel Rushdie suggests that these verses suggest that Islam contains not one God but four or perhaps the three birds here are angels. These two verses are heretical and could well be apocryphal. Mahound, as Rushdie refers to the Prophet, returns to the mountain of revelation and asks the Angel Gibreel for guidance and after a time the Prophet realizes that the two verses were not divine revelation but were from Satan. The Prophet repudiates the verses thus infuriating the city that worships the three deities. The followers of the Prophet are soon obliged to leave the city and only return later when they have become the dominant faction in the region.

And, in fact, the Prophet's return to the city of his birth is the second round of criticism of the new religion. The most damning is offered by Salman the Persian who was Mahound's chief
scribe. Salman explains to poet Baal that being close to the Prophet let Salman see the trick that Mahound had done. Salman, being the best educated among the early followers, was made scribe to Mahound but after a time he wondered if Mahound's utterances were truly divinely related and so Salman decided to test the Prophet by changing something small as he wrote the Prophet's words. In Rushdie’s words:

'[I changed] little things at first. If Mahound recited a verse in which God was described as all-\-hearing, all knowing, I would write, all-knowing, all-wise. Here's the point: Mahound did not notice the alterations... The truth is that what I expected when I made that tiny change, all-wise instead of all-hearing—what I wanted—was to read it back to the prophet, and he's say, What's the matter with you, Salman, are you going deaf? And I'd say, Oops, O God, bit of a slip, how could I, and correct myself. But it didn't happen...'

Salman felt compelled to continue and try changing bigger and bigger things until Mahound noticed. Salman realized that he had committed heresy and escaped before Mahound could bring his God's divine wrath down.

Why then death threats and murders?

I tend to best understand things by comparing like things and bringing out details. The closest cultural equivalent to the murders and death threats that the Satanic Verses engendered I can conceive of is violence done to abortion clinics and doctors. In neither case are the perpetrators of the crime physically or even directly injured by the victims but yet the perpetrators feel justified in what they did. I think specifically of the murder of Dr. George Tiller in May, 2009 by a radical anti-abortionist.
Anthony McRoy has pointed out that "In Islamic society a blasphemer is held in the same hostile contempt as a pedophile in the West. Just as few if any people in the West mourn the murder of a child molester, few Muslims mourn the killing of a blasphemer."

Part III: Aftermath

The public library of Chandler, Arizona convened its board to discuss whether four items should be pulled from library shelves. Patrons complained about a variety of offending materials including the Phoenix New Times—a newspaper free around the area and available to students elsewhere. A man questioned the appropriateness of the alternative newspaper's advertisements and articles. Library manager Brenda Brown noted that the newspaper is free and widely available and that its widespread availability is a good reason to keep it on library shelves. Other books garnered more furors. One Kathleen Subia became distressed when her seven-year-old daughter asked questions about Where Willy Went a book that educates young readers about sex by following the journey of spermatozoa. In particular, Ms. Subia was alarmed when her daughter asked about a picture on the book which showed a large arrow pointing to a man's genitals. Ms. Subia said that she did not want to have a discussion about sex with her child who was just learning to read and requested that the book be removed to the restricted parenting collection. Another patron asked that George Carlin's book When Will Jesus Bring Home the Pork Chops be removed from shelves because of its language. Patricia Wira checked out the audio-book and was shocked and appalled by the language Carlin uses within. When asked by the Arizona Republic why the book should be removed Ms. Wira said “this kind of sewer
language shouldn't be available in a public library. I'm not naive\textsuperscript{76}, but his language was horrible and the content was very anti-Catholic, anti-Christian.” Ms. Wira reported that she was a long-time patron of the library and that she liked to listen to the audio-books on walks.

The library board voted unanimously to leave the offending materials of the shelves. The manager of the Chandler Public Library said that the number of concurrent complaints was unusual but that there had been no books removed from shelves in her three year tenure.\textsuperscript{77}

*The Jewel of Medina* by Sherry Jones, had been purchased by Random House for a sum of $100,000, but before the book was to be released the large publisher pulled the plug. The author’s agent had tried other large publishing houses but to no avail.

After having slowly gained publication rights in Spain, Italy, and Hungary and a planning an eight city book tour, the novel seemed to be destined for a bestselling list. Instead, the book deal was mutually terminated.

Earlier, Random House had sent out proofs of the novel to scholars in the hopes that some would endorse it. Denise Spellberg was one of those scholars whose work as an associate professor of history and Middle East studies had been used as a source for the novel. In Spellberg’s words, “The author and the press brought me into a process, and I used my scholarly expertise to assess the novel. It was in that same professional capacity that I felt it my duty to warn the press of the novel's potential to provoke anger among some Muslims.”\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{76} The fact that she said that must mean something. Some tiny little part of her brain said that maybe, just maybe, she was actually being naive for not knowing that the comedian who became famous for a routine called “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television” might use dirty language in his audio-book.


\textsuperscript{78}[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121824366910026293.html](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121824366910026293.html)
lawyer then complicated the book’s publication further by threatening to sue the publisher if her name was used with the book in any way.

Jones was stunned by this turn of events. In an article in Newsweek Jones says that the book was canceled “[n]ot because of terrorist threats, mind you—but because of threats of terrorist threats. Because, in other words, of fear.” Jones later writes that she did expect some controversy over the book but that she never expected to be killed. The article was published online on August 11th, 2008.

Kenan Malik writes in “Shadow of the Fatwa,” that Spellberg informed a guest lecturer for one of her classes about the Jewel of Medina saying mocked Muslims and their history. The lecturer happened to be an editor of a popular Muslim website which spread the message quickly. As Malik puts it, “It was almost as if Spellberg was trying to incite a controversy.”

On September 27th, 2008 the offices of the British publisher of The Jewel of Medina was firebombed. Almost twenty years after The Satanic Verses was published. It was unclear whether the perpetrators knew the significance of the date. It is further unclear the exact role Spellberg played in the controversy.
The Garbage Man

The last thing we did in every room was the garbage. For four years of college I cleaned the athletic complex on campus and in those years I mostly visited the building as a janitor: to work and not work out. I learned the exact location of each garbage bin in the building: the one hidden by the desk in the weight room, the one behind a pillar in the gymnastics room, the one by the payphone under the stairs, all of them. If we missed a garbage bin we heard about it the next day an, opinion which I simultaneously understand and hate. There are a hundred garbages in a large building and one person to empty them. One missed garbage matters little to the custodian who takes out 99/100 bags of garbage but that one might be in a supervisor’s office.
Taking out the garbage is peaceful because it’s mostly walking and pulling. I would walk to a garbage can, put the bad bag in the cart, and replace it then repeat until finished. Garbage meant that I could walk around and think or, more often, sing to myself. Singing while a vacuum sucks the dirt out of a rug is easy because no one can hear; in a sense it’s like church. Singing while taking out the garbage is more embarrassing.

The athletic building had a hardwood basketball court which had to be swept each day to remove the dust that clung to it like wet snow on pine. When the stands were folded out the gym transformed into an orchestral hall, beautiful acoustics from all the hard surfaces. I would push my broom over the hardwood and belt it out at fortissimo or fortississimo to hear the lovely echo. Singing in an empty gym is better than singing into a microphone, though the volume might be similar the quality of tone rarely is. Sometimes I would hold long wavering notes hoping to hear that shining, circling quality of a perfectly tuned note. And though it might be physically impossible to hear it, I believed I did. Or perhaps I heard the separate tones that a single voice can produce. When a cappella singers hold a chord it is possible to hear a note that no one is actually singing. A barbershop quartet often pulls this trick out and I feel like I can float along on that note that echoes into other notes and almost becomes a chord in and of itself. I most often sang a song about working—usually a folksy song that echoed the complaints of country music. Because I have a preference for depressing music I often borrowed the words to sing the sad songs of Fred Eaglesmith, a Canadian whose part of Canada was south of my hometown.

I used the skills I learned in college to become a custodian elsewhere. I had been a part-time custodian for eight years before this job so I felt familiar with it. I spent half of my shift cleaning three atria in a gigantic health clinic all of which has gorgeous acoustics. Since my shift began as the workday ended, I spent most of my shift alone rarely seeing anyone who wasn’t a
co-worker. One time I was singing an Eaglesmith song that was a little up tempo; I had the drums and guitar riffing in my head while I supplied the vocal tracks. Then a woman in her late forties strolled past me. She wore a business suit with knee length skirt, small earrings, and cropped hair all of which yelled “Sensible!” and “Professional!” I wore khaki pants four inches too wide in the waist, a blank t-shirt, and sweaty plastic gloves. And I was singing. She shuffled past without offering a word or making eye contact.

On Computers

In late March 2011, I ran my first Dungeons and Dragons session for my friends. I had climbed a rung on the nerd ladder. As Dungeon Master I had the task of introducing the player characters to the world and giving them something to do. I compare it to playing cops and robbers as a kid, or pirates or what-have-you, except we had dice to show who hit who and when.

In my decades as a nerd, I’ve studied Super Heroes, Star Wars, and board games that make risk combined with monopoly seem easy. But few pursuits are as undeniably nerdy as
building a computer from parts. Few people open their computers up let alone know what the various components are and how they work together.

If you had walked into my room on Monday night you would have found me sitting on the floor with half a computer strewn about me. My steel burnt orange case lay on its side while I peered into the open cavity like a doctor performing angioplasty. One hand held a screwdriver while the other held open the thin booklet that spelled out precisely how to install my new motherboard. The operation took four hours to complete and bumped me up another rung on the ladder of nerddom.

The first computer I remember using had a turbo-button on the front and used MS-DOS exclusively. It was office gray and had an enormous 12” CRT monitor. I hardly ever used the mouse. I believe windows 3.0 was installed on that machine, which seemed amazing to me that the time because I could actually find little pictures that corresponded to the files on the computer. That computer had perhaps 100 or 200 megabytes of memory, which was more than we ever needed for the few text files we had or the six or some games my dad had installed on it. In 1992 the computer was a bulky machine designed to do work. There were some games available on it, of course, but these were relatively primitive, akin to the Super Nintendo. This was back in the era of truly floppy disks. The computer I remember had a mere eight megahertz processing power which could be pumped to twelve with the helpful turbo-button. It also had two kinds of floppy disks, the five and a quarter inch version and the three and a half inch, of which only the former is actually floppy like a rabbit’s ear.

The reason that computers from my childhood seem so out of date is explained by Moore’s law. Named after a co-founder of Intel, Moore’s law states that the number of
transistors that can be inexpensively placed on an integrated circuit doubles every two years. In other words, processing power has roughly been doubling every two years since 1965 (and probably earlier) when Gordon E. Moore published a paper titled “Cramming More Components onto Integrated Circuits.” Moore later, apparently, altered the wording of his original statement to be clearer about the two year duration which made him seem more accurate in retrospect.

In 2005 Moore himself claimed that his law cannot be infinitely sustained. Various firms and persons have suggested that this law will cease to be accurate in the present decade—anywhere from 2013 to 2018, while Lawrence Krauss and Glenn D. Starkman have predicted that Moore’s law could prove true for a maximum of 600 years (Krauss and Starkman “Universal Limits on Computation”).

Computers thus achieve obsolescence rather quickly because the industry has adopted Moore’s law as a goal, thereby helping it to ring true for the past 45 years. If Moore’s law holds true then I have computed for ten generations of integrated circuits. In dog years my first remembered computer would be seventy, i.e. a grandparent (a grand-dog?). In human generations it would be 300 years, i.e. a great-great-great-great-great-great-great great-grandparent. If I extend the analogy slightly, comparing my first remembered computer to my current one would be like comparing modern intercontinental shipping to shipping goods to Europe using Manila galleons that navigated by astrolabe.

Part II: A Computer Case Interlude

Even though computers have become more aesthetically pleasing, I rarely pay attention to the particular computer I’m using. Part of this can be explained by the dark colors that most
computers come in nowadays—a welcome change from the horrifying gray that was the standard for decades. But mostly I do a very good job of ignoring the computer itself. Even my amazing burnt orange case—twenty pounds of steel with two blue glowing LED lights—is almost always ignored. I have often thought this propensity to ignore computers could be made a useful item. Say, for instance, that a kid wants to hide something the size of a full leather wallet. It would be very easy to hide it in a computer, especially since a great many now come with hand screws on the back. I would bet that the computer case would be one of the last places someone would check.

I’d considered this while I attended a Catholic High School which included some dormitories. Most of the students commuted from the town but maybe one third lived in dorms. At least one dorm student per semester would be expelled from school for a violation of the school’s substance policy. It wasn’t very hard to figure out why certain people no longer came to school, especially if they habitually wore skater shoes and spiked their hair. One guy in particular was expelled after campus security found marijuana hidden at the bottom of a box of tissues. That seemed like a really dumb place to me because of the amount of effort it took security to find it. Better, I though, to have hidden it somewhere more secure—like inside an ugly gray computer.

However, I’ve revised my thoughts on hiding a stash—not that I have ever had a stash nor tried to acquire one. My first considerations are environmental; what if the computer case gets so hot that the “herbage” begins to smoke? Unlikely, but theoretically possible. Further, what about the great amount of dust that accumulates in computers? My second set of consideration is less based in reality. I’ve noticed, by watching a great many cop shows (that clearly resemble reality), that computers are often seized by police. Seizing a computer that had
hidden narcotics inside and privileged details on the hard drive seems like shooting myself in the foot.

Part III: On the Intelligence of Computers

Lately, I’ve been arguing that computers are stupid. I don’t mean that I dislike them or am contemptuous of them. No, I mean they’re literally stupid as in an inability to think and reason independently. Computers are able only to do the things they’re told and they have to be told exactly the right way. Sometimes this is as easy as double-clicking an icon and typing in a website address. But sometimes I want to do something that is not easily or clearly available. I became gradually frustrated by Windows Vista’s constant checks of approval prompted by the User Account Controls. Vista would freak out if I wanted to do something as strange as play Diablo II because it could, theoretically, be malicious malware. However, this did not need to be the case. There is a way to modify if not ignore these controls and bypass a great many approve/deny screens. Unfortunately, there are seven steps before one can actually turn off that feature and one need know exactly what he is doing to even find it.

I bring this up because Vista decided that installing new hardware was tantamount to violating its soul. This assumes a machine can have a soul but I’ll let science fiction writers and philosophers answer that one for me. In an ideal world the disc that accompanies a piece of hardware would flawlessly interact with the computer and install every last needed piece of software that lets the new components work flawlessly. In practice, there will always be at least one device that windows refuses to properly recognize. This time around, I needed to manually discover the device drivers and install them. This meant digging through the disc that came with
my motherboard to find the right file based roughly on the function of the device that refused to work, e.g. to find the device driver for the network card I had to hunt around looking for a file folder called “network,” “internet,” or “Ethernet.” Installing new device drivers also involves consistent restarts with the result that I just got a book and read while the computer spun merrily away.

But I’ve perhaps been begging the question. Computers are stupid in the sense that cars, airplanes, table saws, and DVD players are: they all require manual input to be useful. Even the cleaning machines that iRobot Inc. sells need careful maintenance to function properly in their very specific tasks. The new, tiny Scooba® should have its bottom plate replaced every six months. However it may appear those machines are not independent in the real sense of the word.

It’s this dependence upon very specific instructions that hinders computers. IBM challenged World Chess Champion Gary Kasparov to chess matches against a computer in 1996 and 1997. The company designed Deep Blue as a dedicated piece of chess hardware meaning that it was built specifically to play chess. They also reserved the right to make modifications to its programming between games in a match. Kasparov won in 1996 but lost in 1997 after the computer had been heavily upgraded. Kasparov claimed the machine cheated and demanded a rematch. IBM declined and dismantled the computer. Later chess masters would face chess software rather than a machine built to specifically play chess.

A specific machine built by IBM might be able to win a chess match or a brief tournament on Jeopardy! But neither Deep Blue nor Watson (the Jeopardy playing computer) were likely able to give directions back to the hotel its opponents stayed at.
Part of me thinks that the comparison is unfair but another part considers that to be the essential point. A computer can be programmed to do amazing things but it almost certainly lacks the breadth of abilities that a human being has. We might say that a computer is limited to those things it can do stupendously well. Mathematical calculations and is a subject wherein even the most adept humans would struggle to compete, let alone you and me. Memory is another. I take some pride in having an excellent memory but I cannot compare to a computer that remembers a great deal more and can recall it nigh instantly.

Perhaps the best way to understand computers is to compare them to idiot savants. I don’t mean to disparage the amazing things that computer can do and have done so for more than 70 years depending on what one considers to be the first computer. Someday we may create robots capable of independence from humans as Science Fiction has imagined for years. However, I fear that it will not happen within my lifetime, unless science perfects technology that allows a brain to be kept alive in a jar.

On the other hand, we might well note that computers are indicative of a culture of planned obsolescence. I generally keep a computer for four years but with some minor reworking I could probably keep it for a decade if I wanted only basic functionality like work processing. Even my beloved desktop computer seems more and more an oddity because of the incredible prevalence of laptops. I will keep my twenty pounds of steel and silicon around if only because my hands do not comfortably fit on a laptop keyboard.

Sadly, computers are the clearest measure of rich and poor. In the developing world there are more computers than people. In the USA the ratio is the exact opposite. In 1996 there were

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79 The first mechanical calculator was invented by Blaise Pascal in 1642 but it wasn’t until 1941 that Konrad Zuse invents the first programmable, fully automatic computing machine.
two and a half people per computer according to PC World Magazine. The economist magazine reported in 2008 that there are 76.2 computers per 100 people in the United States. I suspect that the number of CPUs to humans is considerably higher than that. For instance, an iPhone may not be considered a computer per se but it effectively is one. Combined, my girlfriend and I own at least fourteen computer processing units (i.e. things that have tiny computers in them). As a couple we have a one to seven human to CPU ratio, not unusual for our age group.

Nielson has reported that there have been more televisions per household than people since 2005 (a 2007 AP report suggests there are now 2.73 TV sets and 2.55 people per household). I believe that there are more CPUs per household than people right now.

In spite of this, of all apocalypses I worry about the rise of the machines less than most. I’d rank it squarely ahead of zombies but well behind environmental catastrophe, meteor impact, and aliens. The Terminator may have predicted that machines will attempt to destroy mankind but it’s not unique in that prediction as The Matrix, 2001: A Space Odyssey, and 9 all riff on that same theme. If the best public display of computing prowess is a trivia match between two humans and a computer then I think that computers have a great long way to go before they begin to threaten us as a species.

More realistically, it’s clear that computers have changed us and will continue to do so. We’re now figuring out what to do with the amazing computational powers we take for granted. I still don’t quite understand why my phone needs a camera other than to take pictures of my cat. I further don’t understand why I need to constantly be connected. Is it a cultural defect that we can access television from almost any conceivable space? Do I need to watch a re-run while riding a city bus?
This is simply a question of utility and need. I can use a smart-phone to find directions to a restaurant but I could also use a phone book. That’s what most confuses me about the way technology is heading: the redundant electronic ways of doing simple tasks. Perhaps it is what my math teachers feared on a yet grander level.

Washington Revisited

The first thing I read by Fitzgerald called up the pain of returning to find everything changed. It’s perhaps his most famous short story called “Babylon Revisited.” The word Fitzgerald used in the story is “dissipate” as in “…he suddenly realized the meaning of the word ‘dissipate’—to dissipate into the air; to make nothing out of something.” It’s the same feeling I had on returning home after a year at college—my first long absence from home. My room looked the exact same as I had left it but it no longer really belonged to me as surely as if it had
been leased to a new tenant. I’ve found that the trip back to a warmly remembered place almost always ends in disillusionment because the place as it was remembered could never be the actual place. The same cabin on the same lake will become a different cabin on a different lake each time one returns to it.

There are few places where I have been a child and then an adult without any intermediate stage. Of all the places I have been, I have almost always repeatedly visited so that I have a great host of memories at a given place at different ages. In other words, the time between my first visit and second visit are uniformly short. My grade-school does not suffice because I have returned there on occasion to vote or bike or play basketball. Nor does my childhood home because 1) it has been altered from the peculiar state my parents left it and 2) I have had occasion to inspect it by driving by so that I could observe the gradual transformation from the house I remembered into something else, something new. Perhaps if I were permitted to re-enter the house for the first time in fifteen years I would be able to recapture some of that long past childhood each of us seeks to recollect, but the likelihood of perfect strangers inviting me into their house, solely because I claimed to have grown up within, is doubtful.

To complicate things further, I have actual childhood memories of even fewer of these scattered places. I do not remember any aspect of California though my parents photographed the golden gate bridge with me in the foreground. The same can be said for Florida though I have faint first memories, more like dreams than anything else, of Disneyland and a single Floridian beach. However, I do remember taking a trip at age eight to Washington, D.C. and for 17 years I considered that I would never return, having neither the inclination nor the necessary funds. Fate though intervened.
Fate turned out to be a board of executives, which honestly is about as near to capital \( F \) fate as most of us ever get. My university would pay for admission to a national conference and a hotel room. Furthermore, my university allowed that one could attend the conference and see parts of the city on the same trip provided, of course, that I touristed in moderation in order to actually attend the conference. All I had to do was arrange transportation.

I realized that Washington D.C. would be the best chance to refind some long lost part of who I was as a young boy in turtle-shell glasses. I even made sure to avoid the limited evidence of my previous trip to D.C. so that I might avoid false memories generously offered to me by my parents’ stories of my childhood. Whenever they share a story I do not vividly recall, I find that my mind creates memories for that event. To use Fitzgerald’s words, I un-dissipate these memories: they become something from nothing.

The conference was scheduled for early February. Some 18 years previous, I had come to D.C. at the same time of year. Besides being considerably taller—I’m at the very least a foot taller—things were not as they were in 1992. The differences however only became apparent a little later. I was still a tourist, still had little money, and had to share a hotel bed with someone.

Further parallels soon offered themselves up like penitents. The first of these was the difficulty of the trip itself. Air travel has changed dramatically for the worse since 1992 for a variety of reasons; security concerns come immediately to mind but I believe that deregulation of the American Airline Industry, starting in 1978, has gradually led to no-frill service. (I’ve only anecdotally confirmed this but I believe more research would bear out my hypothesis.) I allowed a transfer to avoid paying the cost of a direct flight—though I may have saved as little as $20 by doing so—which proved to be a mistake. Originally I had been scheduled to transfer planes in
Milwaukee on February 2\textsuperscript{nd} but a storm cell blew through the area and dumped just over twenty inches in a day. Chicago suffered its third worst storm in the city’s snowy history. The storm hit about 1/3 of the country and 1000s of flights were canceled including both of mine. When I had first traveled to D.C., I encountered a blizzard, though that storm had been polite enough to wait until I had actually arrived at my destination. I was able, after two phone calls that robbed at least 90 minutes of wait time, to reschedule my flight intolerably early on Thursday morning, the first day of the conference.

Roughly half of our colleagues had little interest in touring the Nation’s Capital but Clint had expressed interesting in “doing some touristy stuff.” On an overcast Saturday, Clint and I debated whether we wanted to go to the National Mall in rainy, 30 degree weather. Though it would make sense for a man who had just beaten off the flu to avoid staying out in the rain for an afternoon, me in this case, we went anyway.

Fitzgerald may have described our tour as he does Charlie’s, “He left soon after dinner, but not to go home. He was curious to see Paris by night with clearer and more judicious eyes than those of other days. He bought a \textit{strapontin} for the Casino and watched Josephine Baker go through her chocolate arabesques.” We descended beneath the street at the Woodley Zoo/ Adams Morgan station on the longest escalator I have ever had the privilege to ride. It was long enough that the people at the bottom of the escalator became doll sized to people at the top and vice versa. The slow glide down the escalator chute became dreamlike because it took two minutes to reach the bottom where turnstiles and another small escalator waited. It felt like gliding to a soft landing. The long escalator—three lanes wide—likely doubled the linear feet of all escalators in my hometown. A round trip on the subway involved sometimes eighteen escalator rides—more than I usually take in a single year back home.
The metro proved easy to navigate, though a ban on eating and drinking must have taken effect since I had last ridden here. (My mother later told that the ban had existed then too). I vaguely remembered riding the metro with my family where my mother must have been nervous for our safety because we were obviously tourists. Now, Clint was nervous that he would become lost, which confused me because he had been a boy scout and had boasted of his ability to navigate the woods and mountains of his home state, Utah.

“Well, I at least did well in orienteering,” I told him. “We need to switch lines at Metro Central.” This had to be the third time I’d said this to him on this trip.

“That’s just great, Seth,” he said. We stood and waited for our subway. “You know,” he said, “I think my problem is that I’m willing to say ‘let’s see how this works out’ and get on the wrong train.”

A train arrived, going the wrong way, “This is the wrong train.” I said.

“See? I would’ve taken that one.”

The rest of the trip went well enough. We climbed above the surface again across the street from a red brick building called “the Castle.” Like Charlie’s “Sudden ghosts out of the past,” the Washington Monument rose from the fog around us. Behind stood the Capital Building topped by a Statue of Freedom that we could not see in the drizzle. We looked at the monuments with a sense of unreality almost the way one feels when seeing the full, rural breadth of the night sky for the first time. The site of the Washington Monument, half obscured by raincloud, filled me with a reverence I only rarely feel for any part of the United States Government, past or present. I do not believe that I am alone in this sentiment because the scope and scale of it dwarfed my pale memories of it. But the scale was not what impressed me most because the Sears Tower, now the Willis Tower, did not induce the sense of awe that came over me while I
was at the Mall. It was, perhaps, a sense of disbelief that most changed the site from monument to shrine for me. My younger self was most likely excited to actually see the famous sites little caring that reverence was the appropriate response. Yet there was still something of the boyhood awe that men had built such things to honor the past. It is a further delight to see the worship of these ancestors transformed into something without a depiction as though the shadow of the man had stretched to such an immensity that there would be no way to depict him.

Clint asked, “Have you seen the Simpsons episode where they visit the capital and Lisa goes to the Jefferson Memorial?”

“Yeah, where she goes to talk to Lincoln and the place is too busy so she has to go to Jefferson?” I said.

Clint laughed, “I just love how angry Jefferson is. Jefferson says “No one ever comes to see me. Frankly, I don’t blame them. I didn’t do anything important. JUST the Declaration of Independence, the Louisiana Purchase, the dumbwaiter!” Clint and I rehashed the same conversation millions of Simpsons fans have had: the clear decline in quality over the years.

We headed to the Washington Monument where a young female ranger wearing dark green told us that we needed to get tickets to go into the monument. There were no signs prompting us to turn around at all. In retrospect, it seems strange to rely solely on Rangers to direct the untold thousands of tourists that annually flock to the Capital. The female ranger told us that the tickets were free and available at a small building we had earlier passed. The ranger also told us that the building functioned as a bookshop. “I love this about America,” Clint said. “The Washington Monument is free!” the subtext of his statement being clear enough to me: most things in this country are not free, especially if tourists are involved. The bookstore was small and I took the opportunity to check the price of postcards because I had no camera with me.
and post cards are usually nicer than whatever pictures I take. The price did not please me. Tickets now in hand, we came back to the Monument and quickly passed through the metal detector that barred our way to the elevator going up. A uniformed man stood near us as we sat down to wait for the elevator. Beside me sat some parents and young children. In front of benches near the Monument’s elevator were words set into the stone: First in War, First in Peace. I considered what seemed like an inherent contradiction in the phrase. Near me a family sat together waiting to ride up. The little girl asked her mother what the words on the floor meant and the mother pointed out that the letters were upside down and then spelled them out for her daughter. The little girl asked what that meant and her mother said, “It means that we’re the first to protect people and we’re first to help them.” I smiled despite myself.

When the elevator arrived four teenagers stepped out of the way so that a pair of families could get on. Though considerate it turned out unnecessary because the elevator was large enough to accommodate twenty-five persons only three of whom were children. On the way up a guide explained that the monument was 555 feet tall. I later learned that it had been the tallest building in the world when it was finished in 1885 and it remained so until the Eiffel Tower was completed in 1889. The Washington Monument is still the world’s tallest stone structure and the tallest obelisk. It remained the world’s second tallest structure until the Singer building was completed in 1908. The observation floors of the monument are at 500 feet up in the air as is clear from the embossed “500” that is set in the floor right in front of the elevator. Clint and I looked out windows on different sides and barely made out the Jefferson Memorial.

“Maybe we shouldn’t go to the Jefferson,” I said.
“Yeah, it looks like we’d have to go way around out of our way to get to it and I don’t wanna do that,” said Clint. He walked around and looked out the windows, “I wish it was clear today so that we could actually see stuff.” At the time neither of us thought of the earlier Simpsons reference where Jefferson lamented being ignored. We helped make his lament reality in our small way.

The guides had told us that we could stay in the monument as long as we liked before heading down the elevator. This seemed more magnanimous than it was because there were not a great many things to see on the upper levels open to the public. I looked toward the capital building and saw the lower wings below the clouds and little else. Clint pulled me over to a window and we saw the White House two blocks away. “I never realized it was so close,” I said and Clint echoed the same.

I had come here as a child but my memories of the Monument are so distant that I cannot remember looking out the great many windows which afford perhaps the best views in the capital city. I had remembered that the top floor was drab on the inside and looked like concrete. I had remembered the staircases with metal railings and I had remembered the long elevator rides up and down. Strangely, I had also remembered there being a person selling little gifts near the down elevator on the 490’ level and that my father bought me a beginner’s stamp collection in the monument itself. I’ve since lost that little book. But I saw no such thing on this second trip. Mostly there were stone blocks and large explanatory posters with photographs. The distance between memory and reality expanded for me because I saw, for a moment, how the brain actively retains events years later even if the images of the place itself are almost perfectly accurate. It was as strange to me as Charlie’s return to the Ritz bar which he discovered was no longer “an American bar any more—he felt polite in it, and not as if he owned it. It had gone
back into France.” The monument too shifted away from my childhood toward a more accurate, and sadder, reality.

We wandered, I stopped to read some of the historical footnotes, and before going down we asked a guide about some structures visible in a photograph of the Mall in the 1970s. “Oh, those were temporary barracks built by the army for World War I. I think the Navy used them later in World War II. They stayed there until the ‘60s or ‘70s because, well it’s the army and once you build it—it stays.” He shrugged a little and smiled and I did too.

When the elevator arrived the Ranger in the far corner told us to keep squishing in until we all touched one another’s shoulders. On the way down, a guide said that the elevator would slow down two times and then panels would open up so that we could see the inside of the building. I moved a little out of the way so that a pair of children could actually see out one of the windows. A dad near me picked up his five year old daughter and told her to stay on his shoulders. The guide pointed out the kinds of stone used in the construction and detailed the history of the construction of the building. The original builders of the monument ran out of money for construction and had to abandon the project in 1854 after only building for six years. After the Civil War congress appropriated money to finish building the monument after it had sat like an open chimney for nearly twenty years. During construction, different states and organizations donated memorial stones. While we viewed the second set of stones the Ranger said, “You can see photographs of all the stones online. I guess the fastest way would be to Google it but you can also go to the National Parks Website.” I checked later and hunted for those stones most relevant to me. Some, like Minnesota’s stone, were simple but others depicted friezes or state seals, organizations, and even sometimes cities. I was impressed by the stone donated by Philadelphia firefighters.
After we passed out of the building Clint asked me a question, “Did it smell like farts in there to you?”

I shook my head.

He continued, “It did to me. A friend of mine came here in 1993 and he wanted to ask me if it still stunk.”

I didn’t remember using my nose in the monument because I’d been dealing with a flu and had become unused to smelling in the past week. “Hey, maybe you just have a tumor and it could be in your nose.”

“What?” asked Clint whose voice rose in pitch as he elongated the word.

“Yeah, either it makes you smell farts, or it makes you fart,” I said.

The Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials are traditional and, in a way, expected. Great people will have statues built to remember them, down to the detail of coat and shoe. Lincoln sits in his majestic temple almost exactly like a statue of Zeus did in Ancient Greece, though the entrance to Lincoln’s memorial is on the broad side instead of the narrow. The two statues in their respective memorials are reverential toward the subjects and will remind untold future generations of their exploits. The text on the walls of the Lincoln Memorial and the murals testify so well that there is no need for another to memorialize his specific deeds. That the entirety of the Gettysburg Address is on one wall and on another is his second inaugural address speaks of his eloquence and vision.

However, there is a different kind of monument that speaks little of history. Two monuments in particular eschew the statues, speeches, and murals. Neither the Vietnam War Memorial nor the Washington Monument depict any photograph or image. Instead, it is the walls of stone that become the symbols. In essence, these stark monuments do not attempt to condense
the greatness of the events to a single speech or moment. Rather, they require the viewer to interpret.

Lincoln’s Memorial brings history to the viewer while Washington’s Monument requires that the viewer bring history to it. The difference lies between the concrete and the abstract. Lincoln’s Memorial depicts that which made him great; Washington’s Monument presents us with the greatness of the man beyond his deeds. In essence, Lincoln’s Memorial explains while Washington’s requires explanation. This may come as a direct result of their different legacies but it must also be part of a pact American society made at the completion of these different artifacts. America said “We can show you why Lincoln was great but we can only suggest why Washington was.” Washington’s Monument requires us to tell his story again and again so that all generations may understand the white stone obelisk. Lincoln’s monument little needs us to tell his own stories.

We headed to a crosswalk built solely for the tourists who would inevitably cross from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. Clint said that Washington looked a lot like London, U.K. where he’d stayed for six months early on in his marriage. “I applied [for a grant] thinking that I wouldn’t get it but then they gave it to me anyway. London was the best time in my life,” he said. I must’ve looked confused so he continued, “I know you’re supposed to say your wedding or having kids or losing your virginity. But no. It was London.” He laughed. “So, what about you and your girlfriend? Are you gonna propose?”

I paused to think. I’d never really considered doing it in the next year. “Well, my brother and his girlfriend finally got engaged after being together for six years and living in their co-owned house for two years.”
“Yeah, I noticed that there’s a lot of easing-into-marriage around here. Mel and I dated for about a year before we got married,” said Clint.

“The thing is, you’re working with a different conception of marriage,” I said. Clint is Mormon and grew up in Provo, Utah—home of Brigham Young University. Occasionally a cultural divide will creep into a conversation with him. These moments tend to fascinate me the same way ethnographers are by newly learned slang. I said, “I don’t want to rush it, especially because we’re both graduating in May.

“I knew some friends in high school who got married because he impregnated her. They didn’t believe in sex before marriage or in birth control, which didn’t work out well.”

Clint laughed, “So when they did the one they didn’t do the other. They half-assed it.”

“Basically,” I said. “I also knew a guy who got married and divorced already.”

“I know some friends who are already on their second marriages,” said Clint. “I’m surprised that my marriage lasted the first few years. When I got the scholarship for London I asked my wife if I should go and she said that I probably should. The trip to London probably helped a lot. We already had a kid and money was tight and we were stressed out. The trip was good for us though she’s still a little mad that she didn’t get to go with me.”

Clint and I walked towards the reflecting but I caught a glint of metal in the crosswalk: a penny. I asked Clint to wait for me because I wanted to pick it up. “It’s just a penny,” he said and kept walking. “It’s luckier if you find it near the monument it depicts!” I replied. So, I waited for traffic and the crosswalk signal to align so that I could pick up the luckiest of lucky pennies on the National Mall. I thought a few times about dodging traffic but I realized that the pennies were on the border between two lanes and that a car in the left lane would likely crash into my head as I leaned over. When the walk signal flashed I hurried to the pennies to find that they were
imbedded in the pavement of the street. Oddly, one was face up and one was face down as though someone meant to forever preserve a penny by placing it within the stone of the capital streets like an impromptu monument to currency.

I found Clint over by the WWII memorial and after I told him the pennies were stuck fast he said, “You are one of many fools.”

Clint and I pressed on toward the Lincoln Memorial under the bare trees and past yellow grass on a path that encouraged us to not interrupt the replanting efforts—there were signs. To our right a long fence barred us from the reflecting pool, which was empty and rather shallow. I couldn’t help but think of the scene in Forrest Gump when Jenny wades through the pool in her dress and how in that scene she didn’t have to worry about the large drains that poked above the bottom of the brown cement. Jenny always surprises me by not sinking in a deep part of a pool because I’ve been conditioned to expect varying depth in bodies of water as big as the reflecting pool which is 2209 feet long and only 167 feet wide. I always expected it to be radically deeper than it turned out to be. Mostly though, it felt like we were walking beside a dried up river bed.

Clint then asked me if I’d ever read Sherlock Holmes and I said no, though I had meant to read a non-dinosaurian book by Sir Arthur Conon Doyle for some time. Clint said, “I ended up getting a complete book of his novels from Barnes and Noble or something. So I started reading the first Sherlock Holmes novel and it turns out that it’s about Mormons. I thought ‘what is Sherlock Holmes doing in the Salt Lake Valley?’ but there he was.

“Arthur Conan Doyle did his homework though. A lot of the big names of the prophets are there and Brigham Young is characterized and it’s all absurd and distorted. Doyle even came to Salt Lake near the end of his life to personally apologize for writing that first novel.”

“Well,” I said. We walked in silence for a bit.
“You know,” said Clint. “I should call my mom. She’d get a kick out of me being here.” Clint then pulled out his cell phone and I did too and soon the two of us were talking to relatives. We both began with the same question: “guess where I am?” My mom guessed “home” which was exactly wrong. “Uh, no. Try again.” I said and she continued to guess everywhere but where I happened to be calling her from. Eventually I just gave up and told her, “I’m on the National Mall.” This surprised her and we talked a bit about the weather here and at home in Minnesota—we always compare relative weather systems for some reason—and then I asked her when we last came here. “Well, it was the year your brother Hank graduated from High School. So, ’92? Or ‘93?” she said. “Probably ’93 because I was eight at the time,” I said. Then she passed the phone to my dad who asked about the WWII Memorial which I couldn’t describe very well. I got the part about the states, the wreaths, and the freezes but it was hard to describe the joined columns and the like to someone who hadn’t actually seen it. By this time Clint had finished his call so I felt compelled to wrap mine up before we got too close to the Memorial. I did and, in retrospect, it was rather appropriate that cell phone reception at the National Mall was rather good. It seemed appropriately American to talk on the phone while walking near secular America’s counterpart to the Ark of the Covenant.

Before us stood the Lincoln Memorial which, in the words of a Ranger stationed there, was a familiar sight to most Americans. What I had forgotten since I was eight was the sheer scale of the building. Right away, I noticed the Doric columns holding up the marbled roof that ringed the outside of the building. It looked like the temple of Zeus or the Parthenon to my eyes having earned a minor in Classics as a college student. The Potomac transformed into the Tiber and the Memorial into the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus—literally translated as Jupiter
the Best and Greatest. Lincoln’s Memorial, like the Capital Building’s Dome, reminded me of ancient grandeur—exactly as they were designed to do.

Clint and I climbed the stairs and entered what felt like the sanctuary of American heroes. In truth, George Washington was not the personification of excellence that his presence on currency would seem to argue. He became the Commander in Chief of the Colonial Armies despite an episode in 1754 when Washington was forced to surrender a fort to a group of French and Native Americans and, as part of his surrender, apologize for “assassinating” Joseph Coulon de Jumonville. I will note that Washington may not have known the precise content of the document he signed because he did not speak French. Nevertheless, this document did not please his superiors and lead to the French and Indian War or the Seven Years War depending on which country you live in and where you learned your history.

Washington has been deified so that his name itself an incantation of purity and dignity outside of the historical man, however great he was. I do not wish to be dismissive or overly critical of the man, but the ability of history to whitewash events is incredible. Perhaps my history was deficient and I am merely more cynical, having read such biased books as A People’s History of the United States by Howard Zinn. And too, the fact the those Presidents who served during my lifetime have been marred thoroughly by scandal makes me question how the first few Presidents could have possibly been as sanctimonious as my public school education would let me believe. Since my birth, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush have all been involved in scandal. Reagan perhaps should have been impeached for his role in the Iran-Contra scandal, George H. W. Bush later pardoned six persons involved in the scandal including five who had been convicted and/ or indicted by independent counsel. Bill Clinton infamously suffered a political circus because of the Monica Lewinsky scandal after he
perjured himself. George W. Bush presided over military operations that included Abu Ghraib and severe human rights violations that, sadly, have not entirely ceased under President Obama.

It is this more complex history that I brought to the same monuments. A friend asked me what it was like to visit these same places to which I said, “Complicated.” I do not believe that criticism of my own country is unpatriotic even though we still live in the shadow of the fallen Twin Towers. Still, this is nothing terribly new. Robinson Jeffers wrote about the same things prior to the America’s involvement in the Second World War. I think of “Shine, Perishing Republic” which I committed to memory as an undergraduate and still retain. I think of a poem that fits the politics of the present day,

That public men publish falsehoods

Is nothing new. That America must accept

Like the historic republics corruption and empire

Has been known for years.

Be angry at the sun for setting

If these things anger you.

I recall even reading a letter from the publisher at the front of Jeffer’s book *Hungerfield and Other Poems* wherein the publisher publicly disagreed with his pacifism, amongst other things. I’m not sure if a poet could be so offend her publisher and the public as to necessitate such a letter nowadays.
I carried these considerations into the Lincoln Memorial where I trod on those steps wherefrom was delivered perhaps the greatest American speech of the 20th century. The exact place Dr. King stood had been demarcated so that whoever might follow could stand where he did and imagine the amazing thrum of people present on August 28th, 1963.

Lincoln has not reached the apotheosis of Washington quite yet perhaps because we have some photographs of him and because he was near enough to our own era to leave behind relics and a considerable string of financial failures. It also helped that Lincoln did not have such an opulent manor as Washington to be later converted into a shrine.

Even so, as we walked into the Monument we saw Lincoln resting on his throne like Zeus did in his great temple that was one of the Ancient Wonders of the World. I glimpsed a sign that said a ranger would be giving a talk at 4:00 pm and I saw that we’d come at the right time to hear it. He and I waited near the sign until I overcame my initial shock and asked if we were in time for the ranger talk. “Oh, that’s me!” she said with a laugh. “I didn’t think that anybody wanted to hear it but if you two want to I can give a little talk.”

The friendly ranger later said that most Americans are familiar with the design of the Memorial because it’s on currency. “The penny and, if you’re more lucky, the five dollar bill,” she said. I resisted the urge to remove a five dollar bill from my wallet and look at it. She explained the number of pillars on the outside referred to the number of states in the Union at the time of Lincoln’s Presidency (36). Stones in the exterior of the building were donated by each state that existed at the time the building was completed. Later stones were added for Hawaii and Alaska for good measure.

The ranger pointed out the many, many different kinds of stone that ranged from marble to granite to limestone including some marble that was imbedded in the ceiling itself. I resisted
the urge to duck because the thought of a stone ceiling made me somewhat nervous. She explained the different symbols of the Lincoln statue itself: his open hand meant peace while his closed fist represented his determination to preserve the Union. “Some people think that he’s signing his initials but he isn’t, that’s just a rumor.” I looked and could see that the open hand looked vaguely like an L in sign language and the closed hand looked a bit like an A. The ranger though assured us that this was just happenstance. The front of the chair were fasces—a Roman symbol denoting the strength of a united country—though Lincoln’s chair lacks the axe heads that generally appeared with ancient fasces. And Lincoln himself was wrapped in the flag as though it were a garish cloak.

The light faded faster now so that we could hardly see the murals when the Ranger discussed them. My feet, even in my work-boots, were cold and Clint’s shoes were both wet and cold. We both began shifting back and forth when the guide mentioned something I hadn’t really thought much off. “You know, when people come here, even school children, they all say the same thing when asked why Lincoln was great: he freed the slaves. No one ever mentions that he preserved the Union. I just think that’s interesting.”

Clint then mentioned that he was getting cold so we said goodbye but she stopped us and pointed out the place that Martin Luther King stood when he said, I have a dream. “You’re lucky it’s wet outside because it’s easier to see that way. Sometimes it’s really hard to see.”

She and I looked out at the Washington Monument, which was half hidden in the mist that had followed the rain. I said, “I bet that’s how it must have looked to President Harrison before they finished it.” She nodded, “I think so but I can’t see where the stone changes because that line marks where they stopped.”
At this point I had almost completely erased my childhood memories of the National Mall with those from adulthood. I didn’t think about it then but whatever minor parts of my childhood lingered in D.C. had dissipated. They had become nothing and it left me estranged from these familiar sights. I had, like everyone else, lost most of my childhood but there, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, I lost that much more of it. What connections I had expected to make to a younger version of myself never materialized. Whatever happened to me as a child at these majestic American symbols remained behind a door locked long ago, like almost every last thing that comprised my childhood. Whatever vestiges of my early years remain have melted away as steadily and thoroughly as April snow. It is the moments when we acutely feel how horribly distant and immutable the past is that cause the most pain. I liken it to the moment I know that a game is lost, or the mental hand-wringing that comes after saying something embarrassing to a boss. These are moments when I become aware of the gulf that separates now from then. I become aware that the simple existence I led as a child has been taken from me and all I remember of it are poor reflections as through a glass darkly.

And as Charlie lost his chance to recover guardianship of his daughter, meaning that he might miss her childhood altogether, so did I further lose what I had hoped to recover here.

Clint wandered around the side of the building and because I was the only one still with the guide, I figured I had a chance to ask something that usually wasn’t on the tour.

“So,” I began, “were you stationed here when the rallies were being held before the election last year?”

“Mhm, I’ve been stationed around a bunch of the monuments during some, yes.”

“Well, what was it like to be here during some of those?”
“Like which ones?” she asked.

I thought immediately of the two intensely opposed rallies last fall—Glenn Beck’s and the one featuring John Stewart and Stephen Colbert. “Um, you know. The Glenn Beck one,” I managed.

“Hmm. I was stationed down at the Washington Monument that day but I saw that people were packed in.” She paused and I wondered if I’d perhaps asked too political a question to get an answer. “You know, I couldn’t really hear anything they said but I could hear the noise of the crowd,” she said this calmly.

But then her voice perked up, “But I was here for the inauguration and that was amazing. Two days before Obama gave his speech there were a bunch of entertainers on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and people were backed all the way up to Washington Monument. I looked and couldn’t see a single spot without people. And then during the inaugural address people were backed up to the Monument again even though it was at the Capitol Building. It was amazing to see all those people here.”

I looked across the National Mall and saw a few dozen people walking around in the poor weather. I tried to imagine the crowds pushing against each other and the fence around the drained reflecting pool and honestly, I couldn’t do it. My brain couldn’t understand how that many people could fit in one place at one time.

“All those people,” I said and left having missed everything.
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