



YR THE ONES TO BLAME

a voiceHOUSE Production

THOUGHT-> WORDS -> CREATION

Consider this a warning: what you are about to read is not meant to be enjoyable, or entertaining. If you've been treated to vacations in Florida, if you were carted to the mall to pick out new shoes at the beginning of each school year, if you've played on a travel basketball team, if you've been assessed fairly by the judicial system, if you've grown up with both parents- if you hail from comfortable environs both economic and social, if you've been insulated by security- then you've undoubtedly had plenty of cozy pillows to fluff about yourself. You've been provided for. You've been taken care of, coddled. You've been handed opportunities.

This is an attack on your basic premises, your lifestyle and your livelihood, on your general outlook upon the world and your place in it. This isn't about making you comfortable. This isn't about making you feel alright.

You've been afforded luxuries because you've been inserted into the machine- thanks to your parents, thanks to your education, thanks be to God- and now, as a tax-paying adult, thanks to your acceptance. Your acquiescence. You can't be held responsible for your upbringing, for your environment- but you can be held accountable for not questioning it. You've accepted the program, and by doing so, you've chosen to believe in its narratives. And that's what this piece is about. Your narratives. I'm here to challenge your stories.

Our society does not operate based on ideologies, political systems, social theories, financial rules- each of these elements are byproducts. The construction of our world is rooted in narrative. Stories we tell ourselves, tell each other- stories that explain why the neighbor turns her porch light on at 4AM and why the minimum wage laborer at McDonalds has greasy hair. Narratives handed down through the ages since the Fall- from savannah campfires to Sumerian parlors, from Ramses to Caesar to Columbus to Cortez to Jefferson Davis, the Aztecs to the Greeks to the Romans to the Huns to the Arabs to the Prussians. Narratives about race, about caste, about what is right and wrong, who is right and wrong, why they are right or wrong. Narratives that create gods. Narratives that establish hierarchy. Narratives that maintain power. Narratives that perpetuate an imbalance, an accepted inequality. We grew up listening to our parents spin their versions. It steeped into our bones. Now we tell our own. And here lies your guilt. If you buy into the narratives, you are complicit in their perpetuation, and subsequently in the injustice which those narratives create through mechanisms of 'social order.'

Words. Ideas. Stories. Words birth ideas. Ideas create realities. Stories allow us to participate in that reality, they act as guardians and grant passage so we can insert ourselves into the framework. Language is the separator between man and animal, beast, and angel. Language provides the framework for our existence- it impacts how we perceive the world, and how we interact with it. Our words matter.

You might be reading this, reflecting, "I'm just trying my best to work hard. I only take what I earn. I don't discriminate. I don't engage in any kind of injustice. What the hell is this guy's problem?"

My essential problem is your lack of understanding, in terms of what *you* actually are: you are the embodiment of blind pursuit, you are the physical manifestation of implacable hunger *weitiko*, you are an energy hoarder who self-identifies as a middle-to-upper-class consumer. You lust after products and goods, shimmering but hollow, meaningless- more, more and more. You cannot be satiated. Your hunger grows. You venerate narcissists who accumulate more wealth than what could be spent in ten lifetimes. You yourself represent the most provided for faction in the whole of human history, the most technologically advanced, the most well off- yet you are the most wasteful, prideful, and disconnected from the true nature of the cosmos. More and more and more. You haven't had enough.

I used to be one of you- affectionately described as callow, easily riled, and devoid of critical perspective. I used to believe I fell on the light side of the terminator. My self-image was preserved by believing that I could be a 'good' person while at the same time being a person who obsesses over his savings account, wastes food, hires a lawyer to expunge a potential DUI charge, and complains about my taxes. I was

comfortable, insulated, and uninformed- what else for a banal apparatus to the machine. Instead of understanding my 'true' position in the world, instead of being grateful and taking some responsibility, I criticized the plight of others. I spoke out of turn. I was insolent, petty, self-absorbed, and quite frankly, evil.

I'm not perfect. I'm still not right. But I am uncomfortable.
Consider yourself warned.

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She interrupted, abrupt, "Oh my god tell them about your uncle!"

"Randy?" Her husband asked.

"Who else? Oh my god- you have to listen to this."

"I could tell them about Ron, too."

"Randy first- listen to this- his family is a total disaster." She leaned back on a Pottery Barn catalogue couch, a gin and tonic in her hand, a new silk shawl around her neck.

"So my grandma, she owned her house up through the end of last year, but the nurses and doctors said she needed to go into assisted living. She's getting old or whatever, and the place is too much upkeep for her. So she puts the house up for sale. And Randy, Randy's still living in her basement. He's- he's a total mess."

"He still blacks out and gets kicked out of bars- and the guy is fifty! Fifty!"

Adjusting the white collar of a freshly pressed button-down shirt, "Yeah. He lived in my grandma's basement for the last twenty years- saving up for his big dream to get a mobile home down in Florida so he can retire- even though, so he thinks once he has enough for the mobile home he's all set- my dad one time was like 'Randy, you know you have to pay taxes, pay for food' and the guy- he's got no concept of anything."

"He's such a loser."

"Complete loser. But anyways- so my grandma tells him she is going to be moving, there's a FOR SALE sign on the house, I mean he sees people coming to look at the house- he knows like, he's going to have to leave. Or you would think he knew. Because after she accepts an offer on the house..."

"For like two hundred grand, it's a dump."

"Yeah, I mean- it's in the boonies in Delaware. We could literally pay for it in cash right now, with our savings."

"And then knock it down immediately!"

He sips from his glass beer bottle. "Exactly. But back to my story. My grandma, after everything is squared away with the house, she tells Randy like, 'We're moving at the end of November' and he is floored! I mean he's shocked! 'What- what do you mean- I have to find a place?' And yeah, so- so my grandma gives him some money from the sale so he can get a condo. So he gets this two bedroom dump, and he gets these roommates. A guy and a girl, and they're total meth heads. And lately he's been having all these problems."

"Obviously- because like, you're living with meth heads!" his wife shouts.

"Exactly- and he comes to my dad and he asks for help getting a lawyer, so he can evict these people."

"Who by the way, don't even pay him rent!"

"Right- well, the woman cooks occasionally, and we all figure Randy's getting free drugs from the guy. So that's the rent. Anyways, my dad finds him a lawyer. Sets up a court date."

She blurts out, "Why your dad helps him is beyond me."

"No kidding. But anyways- Randy shows up to the courthouse- he gets a court date- and he shows up on the bus, with his two roommates! They literally like, they take the friggin' bus to court together. And Randy- he friggin' refuses to say anything bad about them! He just- he doesn't even want to file a motion, and

they all leave together on the bus. My dad called him like, 'Randy, what happened?' and Randy kept saying he had a change of heart."

"He realized he wouldn't have anybody to cook for him or do drugs with!"

"Right- he's like a fifty-year-old child. It's pathetic. Him and his dreams about his mobile home!"

Laughter.

Grins.

Self-assuredness.

Take it in for a moment. Reread the conversation. Give the pair of them a voice. Give them your own voice, the voices of people you love.

Then ask yourself: were you taken aback by their smug, self-satisfied comfort? Their intense belief that they are 'right'? Their verdicts marked with the imprimatur and delivered; their harsh verdicts carried out without any sense of compunction? Does the lack of empathy come through? Does the currency they value lie on the spiritual or physical plane? Are the narratives they create rooted in *truth*? Do you understand who they are, what they value, how they are defined? Positionally- a couple, mid-thirties, three children, a house, careers in advertising, a Lexus and a GMC Yukon, Christians at church on Sunday, vacations in the Hamptons, eating-out three times a week.

I may have allowed myself too much emotional leeway- let's pause before we consider who is to blame, what is to blame- let's be certain to set aside any natural tendency to fidget with anger and fix our bayonets against these two participants in our simulation. What must be foremostly recognized is they are products of a system. Produced. They are guided by narratives. Their minds honed by cultural conditioning, by laws, customs, ideologies, etc. They themselves, intrinsically, are not to blame- at least not entirely. In truth they are pitiful creatures. Playthings to the apparatus.

Though it is difficult to see their abject poverty or ineptitude or shortcomings based on their appearances, their checked boxes. They represent everything you aspire to. Wealth. Health. Good looks. Prestige. Accolades. Accomplishment. What makes them pitiful?

Perhaps we should re-examine our own aspirations?

For now we should us re-examine the unspoken. Here are the underlying assumptions, the roots of a narrative tree, from what I heard in their conversation:

- Material concerns represent the primacy in any hierarchy of concerns
- Their hard work has brought them material wealth; their hard work has been translated into success
- People who have not succeeded economically have not succeeded in life, and are to be judged as losers
- Losers don't deserve compassion, or a closer examination; in fact, it is socially acceptable to criticize the life choices and outcomes of others behind their back
- Drug addiction is a moral wrong, not a mental health issue
- None of Randy's upbringing or circumstance should be considered when reflecting and examining his current situation
- Rule followers are rewarded, and it is easy to follow the rules

A classic mythology invented by those who neither lack nor want... those who own... those in power... hard work brought them to that position, and if other people worked as hard then they could inherit the same benefits. Success is directly equated to effort. The Puritan myth of American disparity. A myth which has bedrocked the foundation of countless racial, social, gender, sexual biases and discriminations. It is a useful myth for the dominant party. Reassuring. Comfortable. Simple. There is no moral scruple when you

make four times the amount of the average working-class family in this country because “you deserve it.” If you’re a CEO with a fourteen-million-dollar bonus, it’s because you work harder than the guy at the fast food drive-in making fourteen dollars an hour. You made better choices. You were smarter. You went to a good college. You got the grades. You interviewed for the job and secured it. Then you did the job. You did it well. You are being rewarded, justly, for your work. It’s all in the rules: people with suppurating 401k accounts and foreign sports cars and blonde wives worked extremely hard to arrive in their position on the corporate ladder. The chairman of the board, the vice president of sales, the tech moguls and the entertainment mavens and the elite- they rightfully earned their spots. Sure, maybe a little bit of luck-timing is everything- but for the most part, their standing is a reflection of their effort.

Take a moment now to examine an alternative case-study. A child, born into poverty, who never had access to books or resources at a young age, who never learned to read because of a failing school system, whose parents couldn’t put food on the table, who grew up with peers who glorified money via illegal activities, who saw women objectified and disrespected- this child, now an adult, now incarcerated for life because of a “three strike” policy enacted by individuals who shared no similarities as the adult- you’re telling me if that child would have worked harder things could have been different? A little sweat and elbow grease?

I don’t have a background in philosophy or rhetoric, and if you don’t either- it’s alright. It shouldn’t require rigorous training in logic formulae to understand the underlying assumptions of the Puritan myth of American disparity simply do not compute.

Oh, you are welcome to disagree, but I think if provided enough time and perspective, you will eventually wind up with a pit in your stomach and a strong sense of being a complete asshole while you construct your counter-arguments.

Let’s focus in on a more ‘human level’ and tackle some other assumptions. Our millennial power-couple, casual and glancing down from the tower of 21st Century American Capitalist Modernity, are unable to parse out and appreciate such nuances. When their eyes catch Randy they see a wasted tract of land, a useless and dead nobody nothing who deserves little more than a final death and good riddance. This couple (pictured for the sake of our exercise in a quaint American living room after at a Thanksgiving dinner, of all places) fails completely in respecting the sanctity of the human person, or human soul, that is Randy. They are incapable of engaging Randy within the parameters of a decent human to human relation. They have no time to ask simple questions.

The fact that Randy was sexually abused by a camp counselor when he should have been enjoying a summer of archery and swimming, a nine-year-old boy- should this fact impart no bearing on his current predicament? The fact that Randy never felt safe around anybody but his mother, since his father was prone to overdrinking and handing Randy a thorough beating every weekend from the ages of three to fourteen- this adds no valuable information for us as we attempt to understand his life? Randy’s best friend in high school was killed in a car accident- two weeks later Randy tried prescription opiates for the first time as a way to hide the pain and remorse of being responsible for that friend’s death... pabulum? Addiction runs in Randy’s family, with his aforementioned father as well as several uncles and cousins being killed or dying young directly as a result of substance abuse- who cares. Who cares, right?

Not to mention, Randy is a family member! He is kin to the male speaker in whose dialogue we are eavesdropping! Blood related. And still, not an ounce of compassion, of empathy- thrown out with the plastic wrappers and cardboard boxes, detritus of Amazon lifestyles- worthless, cheap death- there is no acknowledgement of that kinship. Let alone a thought about what that kinship might engender, what

beneficence might be owed a family member. Can you imagine how these two hyenas might prey upon a perfect stranger?

Ultimately these two have no patience for that which is broken. They evaluate Randy- and determine he is of no value. Devoid, bankrupt of intrinsic worth. Worthless. He is a failure, loser, wasted, broken down nothing. Though, paradoxically, it is they themselves... healthy, wealthy, god-fearing and tax-paying model citizens... that represent the most broken faction of our society.

To elaborate: if we define brokenness as a 'loss of essential elements of our humanity which revolve around connection and community,' then our paragon power couple, our royals, have been fractured beyond repair. To see people as objects and outcomes, to pass judgement on the decision maker rather than the factors that led to the decision- our king and queen have lost any sense of connection with their fellows. They have removed themselves from participation in a human story. They have lost the ability to empathize, to display mercy, to cultivate awareness, to understand the whole. They have reduced other people to objects- fetishes- and in the process have been utterly reduced, and broken.

As Jung clarified, the unraveling of the ego trip leads only to loneliness, isolation, despair, and hell. They are doomed, and oblivious.

Their conversation continues:

"It's a wonder he hasn't already saved the money for his trailer park dream house with his lucrative landscaping business."

"Please- do not call that a business. He owns two lawnmowers, a snow blower, and some random junk hitched to his truck."

"Not exactly a viable plan for the long term- like, he has no retirement money, and he's getting pretty old, and beat up- I guess that's why you go to college. I hate to say it, but he's going to end up hurting himself and then what?"

"Oh I know exactly what he'll do- he'll file for unemployment and disability benefits, and then he'll never get off the dole. We'll be working our asses off for the next thirty years so he can sit at home and smoke meth with his hillbilly roommates. Like my coworker Callie, her sister- listen to this- she hasn't worked for ten years because of depression. She literally gets a paycheck every month and says she's depressed and, like, that's it. Ten years."

"I'll tell you what, if I'm feeling pretty friggin' depressed on Monday morning, maybe I'll go file for mental health leave."

"It's just such bullshit. We've never taken advantage of anything like that. People are just lazy. I hate to say it but dad is right when he complains about driving around on the south side during the week, with healthy young people hanging around the corner. That's the same bullshit."

"Need that government check to supplement your drug dealing."

Quiet acknowledgement from the other dinner guests.

Consensus.

Alignment.

Thanks be to God.

More underlying assumptions, 'facts,' dictums- from what I heard:

- People who suffer from mental health issues fabricate their problems
- And if those people who are fabricating their issues happen to need assistance in the form of social welfare, then they are lazy and taking advantage of the system
- Certain ethnic groups are more prone to take advantage of the system, and are also lazy

- Without investing money in the stock market, you have no security, or real worth, nor should you feel any sense of accomplishment
- Manual labor does not constitute a respectable career choice
- Because you represent a certain ethnic or minority groups you necessarily participate in illegal activities, such as drug dealing

Let's start human to human for this section. Callie's sister has attempted suicide six times- twice by slitting her wrists, once by slitting her neck. Twice in a garage, the car running. Once by a noose, a ceiling fan. Relentless. Her brain neurochemistry is unpredictable, and she has a genetic aberration which mechanically prevents her dopaminergic system from functioning 'normally.' In addition, she grew up in a conservative Lutheran house where certain aspects of her sexual identity and personhood were repressed and remain repressed. She believes she is worthless and is destined for eternal damnation. Her sexual encounters with other women create such inner turmoil that whenever she 'acts out' on her impulses she usually is too sick and disgraced to extricate herself from bed for weeks at a time. Randy, though being old and indeed a little beaten up, often works ten-hour days and has been his own boss for the better part of fifteen years. Randy has several elderly clients who are unable to pay their bills on time, yet he continues to shovel their porches and sidewalks first after a heavy blizzard.

And let's not overlook the irony of our hypothetical couple's final conclusion: all those 'healthy young people' on the southside (aka a diverse and complex African American community) take advantage of the social support system. A broad sweep. Lazy. Cheaters. Rule breakers. Drug dealers. All of them. African Americans. A claim made with no actual evidence, a claim supported by anecdote. An anecdote like the one about Callie's sister- a Caucasian female. Caucasian. White. A white girl, who also 'takes advantage of the system.' Hmm? Why doesn't the broad stroke apply in both directions? Why is it delivered at all?

It goes without saying that our couple affords no consideration for the mass incarceration policies of the Regan and Bush administrations, no consideration for the economic injustices suffered by impoverished, minority communities across America's urban landscape. And that only considers the last twenty, thirty years of racial disparity in our country's history. But our history lessons are filled with Abraham Lincolns and Andrew Jacksons, manifest destiny, turkey dinners and planting squash, the celebration of the Civil Rights movement. Nobody wants to be educated on the transgressions of the past- nobody wants their children taught that they are inheritors to an empire of greed and rape. And it's not only in the classroom- we don't want to support additional taxes against corporations to settle the economic gap, or at least begin to address it. We don't want to equal the playing field in education. We don't want to equal the playing field for jobs. We don't want "them" to have access to fresh produce, to libraries. We cramp "them" into dilapidated buildings, destroy their neighborhoods, police them, brutalize them- we of course being white Americans- but then we want to blame "them" for any of their hardships or pitfalls. They all sell drugs. They're all lazy. They're malefactions are proof enough.

Wisdom, courtesy of two white people who went to college prep high schools, who went to AP WORLD AND NEWS REPORT TOP 25 UNIVERSITIES, whose parents paid for tuition and education. Whose parents took them to the library, used excess income to hire tutors for the SAT, who bought books and read to them at night because neither of their parents worked the graveyard shift of a second job to make sure food landed on the table each night. Two white kids who both consume benzodiazepines and SSRI medication, at the recommendation of a physician, to handle the 'stress' of their life.

If only more people went to good colleges.

If only more people worked hard.

If only...

Our simulation continues with:

"How about these punk kids who want their student loans erased? Did you see all those signs at the convention?"

"Another handout."

"Friggin' unbelievable. Nobody wants to be accountable for anything. Pretty convenient for them- I mean, if I don't have a student loan, can I still get a check for ten grand? How does that make sense? What if I put new carpeting in my house?"

"These kids are spoiled. They think they're entitled to everything. Free education. Free promotions. I have this kid on my team whose twenty-four and he was complaining to me about how he didn't get promoted this quarter. I'm like, you've been here for a year. Chill out."

"And it's not even like they do anything- they think if they show up and do their job their entitled to it."

"It's delusional, honestly."

Delusion. A perfect analogy- a perfect assessment: a false belief or idea caused by mental illness. Mentally ill- sick with greed, hypocrisy, and plagued by a lack of perspective. Created by a culture which worships narcissists, venerates the ultra-wealthy, listens to whoever has the most "LIKES."

They (our pair) are no different than the products they buy. Produced. Molded into perfect Destroyers. Molded by a society, by a set of cultural norms, which are blindly followed and unquestioned.

If only we lived in 7th century India- then we could justify this devotion of Kali. It would make sense for Shaivite death cultists to reign as king, queen, court and jester. High priests would drink the blood of the unborn from the wombs of the sacrificed plebeians torn out of their homes to become carnage for the keeper of the wheel, a holy skull to be placed on the necklace of the deity.

Two white kids (themselves) whose collective household income puts them in the 91st percentile of the United States and the 99th percentile globally... who never had to take out a student loan, who received a car on their 16th birthday... handed the best medical treatment through childhood, wholesome meals, care, attention, love... given so much, so freely, but so quick to rebuke anybody or any notion that confronts their internal structures built on the mantra 'I EARNED THIS FOR MYSELF. I DESERVE THIS.' Beware the deserving. Beware those who need no help, who never needed help.

Beware the delusional

To inhabit a state of poverty is to enter concordance with the divine- God adores his little helpless creatures most, his poor folk, his sinners and prostitutes and adulterers and dirty fishermen barely making ends meet. Christ didn't come to play chess with Roman senators. He partied with the destitute, the impoverished- those who had been disenfranchised, who were never invited to sit at *the* table. Outcasts. Untouchables.

And even if God is dead and none of that matters- to be in a state of poverty is to acknowledge that you are provided for. By the earth, by the universe, by your friends and family, whatever- somebody else besides you is behind the wheel. You can't go it alone. You are dependent. And being dependent, you ought to express gratitude for that which is provided for you.

And this isn't to say those who do have a seat, those born into families of privilege, born into birthrights and afforded opportunities- it's doesn't necessarily prescribe them roles as anathemas. However, when they refuse to acknowledge their position is one of extreme luck, one granted to them by the universe as an unwarranted gift, by fate- when gratitude fails- when a sense of responsibility towards those not as privileged is lost- then we enter the territory of culpability. Then they become guilty, they become worthy of criticism- perhaps even tragedy? I'll let you be the judge.

When these two check their Fidelity account every Friday night and twitch with delight over growth projections, over the percentage points- when they sneer at a woman on a highway off-ramp clutching a cardboard sign with rusted knuckles- they fail to realize the truth of their position. Most of the world lives in poverty. Most people are suffering terrible economic and social realities- parents are forced to make tough choices about how to feed their children. Sometimes those children do not eat. It is happening, right now. But our pair, our heroes- they have no concept of the average human experience.

They look at a woman checking into a Motel 8 with her son in tow, the boy's head barely reaching her hips, a backpack on him and a pillow in her opposite hand- they don't see a woman fleeing domestic abuse. They don't see the trauma, they can't feel the pain. They can't understand- so they criticize. It is a basic human reaction. Whatever you don't understand- criticize. That which is different is to be made fun of, gawked at, joked about, poked and prodded and denigrated. The first commandment of white privilege. The first play run from the playbook of oppressive thinking: that which does not fit the mold ought to be ridiculed.

Ridicule.

Chastise.

Imprison.

Kill.

Everything starts with a joke. We're a funny species.

Keep listening (if you can stomach it):

"Must be nice to be able to afford that."

"Seriously, who are all these people who are buying Audi's for Christmas? I know it's a friggin' commercial, but honestly."

"Same people who are taking white wine and caviar lunch breaks. How do you even get that rich?"

Secretly wanting a cherry red Audi in their driveway.

Wouldn't that be nice?

One minute pressing charges and passing judgment against a trashy and classless caste, the poor who have brought this mess on themselves... the next minute lamenting the rich and their tax breaks, their jet skis and gaudy commodity caches. Our couple's profession, philosophically, is one of an architect. Architects of an invisible distance that separates them from any culpability, that allows them to feel "well, we're not that rich"... "we don't live that garishly"... crafted, designed to insulate them from a sense of duty or guilt. They create distance, they create valence. The rich are out there somewhere. Above them. They are the ones looking up. They are the ones battling, struggling. Sticking to their hero journey. Sticking to their bootstraps, their personal Horatio Alger story. Absorb the ironic undertones behind their need to cultivate an image as victim, as 'fighters' who beat the odds. Completely oblivious to their true position on the economic spectrum. They pursue their kitschy charity causes and bleed liberal Democrat blue ennobled by their politics but they themselves never become proximal to any issue- one minute they criticize another man's work ethic, the next they coyly brag about an unmerited bonus granted to them from a generous executive at work- on their Peloton bikes looking up a friend's home value then criticizing their friend's career choice as a construction worker with a business on the side paying immigrants "under the table" because that isn't playing by the rules.

"Are you guys travelling at all this year?"

The worldly type- seeing the world, spending nights asleep on king mattresses in the best hotels, paying extra for the eco-tourism resort cruises and six-night all-inclusive get-a-ways- but never learning anything about the world or its inhabitants. Unable to touch the plight of the world's people. Never speaking to a local who wasn't dressed in a service uniform bearing a nametag. Oblivious to the streets, the scene- the reality of a place. Walking up to a stack of ruins and there they are, clicking pictures with the belief in their

hearts that they are absorbing a foreign culture, breathing deep, *sui generis*. A fine dining experience, to indulge in the cuisine. Expanding horizons. "Isn't that pretty?" kind of nonsense. The attitude of conquerors, an attitude inherited from generations upon generations of hypocrites and thieves and liars. Consuming, taking, coveting, experiencing- experience- at what cost? To what end? When do they acknowledge the emptiness which they ceaselessly strive to fill cannot be satisfied? An emptiness with a bottom deeper than any material possession, any sensory matrix, could ever hope to find or hit- let alone fill.

"Parker and Mia bought a house in Fernanda Heights. Which- I don't know- the schools there are what, like a friggin' C+ rating on Redfin? Personally, I think it was a dumb move. The market is tough right now, but they should have just held out."

"Where they were living wasn't exactly an A+ either- for them, I think it was an upgrade."

Their deepest fears...their simple pettiness and jealousies, their instinctual reaction to engage in schadenfreude... to delight at the trials, the failures of others... their family, their friends. Who is safe, who might be spared their wrath?

The scariest part- what if they cannot be changed? What if brain tissue isn't quite plastic enough? What if the programming is impenetrable? Calcified by ego, affixed into predictable egoic structures operating on predictable thought lines resulting in predictable behavioral outcomes- those whose view of themselves and the world will never change. Even when death and old age and sickness and the 'denuding' mechanisms of life come knocking to collect the toll- even then, they might claim it all to be unfair and hold firm. They might be right forever, until they aren't anything.

And only then will we be safe.

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To end, we ought to balance the ledger.

We ought to look for a deeper, more elegant conclusion than simply villainizing two suburban parents who probably want the best for their children, who probably don't intend to lay waste to the entirety of the natural world and her inhabitants therein.

Products. Produced. Manufactured. Programmed.

Upper-class folks who have become exactly what they were designed to become.

Let's not be guilty of the same sins. Let's uncover the nuance.

A culture exists which creates these people. The system itself is a vestige, an infected inheritance going back to the dawn of human history- the first oppressors, the first notions of capital, the first notions of profit, of money, of caste- our fall, our exile from the garden. We've carried the scaffolding with us along the way. The system stands almost as an entity unto itself. An invisible hand. A disease. Witchcraft. However you want to frame it- you understand the essence of its mechanisms to be diametrically opposed to those essential human elements we defined earlier.

What surrounds us, what infiltrates us, our parents, our teachers, books and music and movies- they cannot accept the full blame.

It is so large, so pervasive, so powerful and ingrained it is almost beyond opposition.

But what our parents and our teachers and our artists and our leaders and we ourselves must be held accountable for is this: we have allowed a system to propagate and aggrandize which dehumanizes our inalienable humanity, and have failed to question any part of their environment. We don't ask the right questions. We don't challenge the norms. This is what we can be blamed for. We see the results of the system all around us, the bodies in the street, the homeless shelters, the pain- but we continue to play along. We are afraid if we stop, all the comforts will end. We don't want to lose our precious comforts.

To which I say:

Stop playing dumb.

Stop pretending like this can work.

It can't.

It won't.

Start feeling uncomfortable.

Start asking better questions.

You can.

You should.

If you don't- watch out. People can only take a beating for so long. And when it comes to a dog fight, I always bet on the hungrier dog.

threat

Stranded without
directions, or course
-unable to end this dark vision-
alone in a wood, alone in modernity
convenient
confronted
by an inescapable thought:
nothing can get better
so long as we remain.
The we of me and you reading this,
of those not originally from here
the inhabitants
the conquerors
the landlords
in this our coveted home, a
money-making scheme-ridden mini-mall
America, and beyond.
As long as we're here.
Nothing can get better.

As long as we breathe,
everything else dies.

This final conclusion finds me,
and so with the gravity absorbed,
before me are two logical options
to move forward:
time to set fire, cast light upon the dark
OR
time to relax?
Take it easy, man. It's okay.
You're trying your best.
Recycle.
Try not to use as much plastic.
Keep trying.
Relax...
lifetimes spent relaxing in bourgeois leisure anaesthetized
in front of televisions
in front of computers
in front of cellphones
on borrowed time not borrowed but stolen by our forefathers
taken without warning from rightful inheritors, the true ancestors of this earth.

I can't relax.
I can't waste any more precious energy, life.
I have to end it.
Our demise is the only path to justice.
Accept it
Coals glow
Die, smolder into midnight suffocating with courage
Own up to the crimes
Pay, dearly

You son of a new moon rapist
you thief, grandson to a slave master,
great-grandson of a robber baron
father to an appendage whose (his) purpose
will be dictated by an insatiable apparatus, an apparatus of greed
wanton excess and profligacy and evil.

Examine the painful truth
acknowledge the undercurrents of this your legacy.

Dawn the robes, play the judge you were born to play.
Make a guilty ruling.
End the line.

How else could it be right?
How else could you do good?
How else could the universal laws be interpreted?

Every meal you ate
each pair of new shoes
family vacations
school textbooks
bicycles
a warm bedroom
opportunity, opportunities stolen
like everything else- you and yours, you took them
from the children of others
asphyxiating their helpless fathers and mothers
in the name of righteousness,
having never performed a righteous act.

Stolen in my name- by my father before me-
I am his justification as I have
justified my own undertakings -for my son come after-

Hypocrite
Murderer

Thief

A crooked thing,
crooked things,
I am a son of them, us, we, the
prophecies of darkness
who arrived on ships like cottonmouths
drawing fangs and passing disease
brought death,
saw the world as a display case full of objects and
killed myth, symbol, meaning
-separated-
-hypnotized-
viewed people as objects,
viewed animals as objects,
viewed the earth from a plexiglass window
-monetize-
-commodify-
brought more death,
bringing more death.

Fear.
Lacking creativity.
Fearful.

Now, as I stand at the end of my name, my line,
a cursed line that can only be cured
once it is cast into the stone circle-
I strike the flint.
Into the flames,
the heat,
cleansing smoke
burns and subsumes the sin of generations.

Accept the dancers, welcome
a transformation-
the ashen figure I become
will be more beautiful
than my living skin ever was.
Red, charred into blisters
cracked like clay,
returned to the land.
Author a new creation story,
this is my last hope to participate
to contribute
to a sacred whole.

Hope.

Say a prayer for us, your enemy.

white gore

white gore-
like stern
warnings from daddy
at the top of the stairs
ready to dismember us
for our infidelities

please, i won't do it again...

please, i promise...

white gore-
like homework and drama club,
van rides to practice,
home-cooked meals, spaghetti,
secretly i hate
you mother, you don't understand

please, another minute...

please, leave me alone...

white gore-
like errands to the mall,
trash bins full of plastic,
newspaper headlines read
on a breath of single-malt
scotch, cigars

please, i want it...

please, just one more...

white gore-
white privilege
white power
white christmas

in a photo album forgotten
shelved in grandma's
antique bureau

a legacy of doom

das capital aka EMPTINESS

Lifetimes spent in automobile cabins, cellphones tatoo'd onto our palms, televisions destroying our vision, eating indiscriminate fried food, wired by our loins, buying shit.

Buying more and more shit.

There can never be enough shit.

Instantly delivered shit.

Shit on credit.

Shit to keep all of our shit organized.

Expensive shit.

Cheap shit.

Dumb shit.

Smart shit.

More shit, right now.

Imperialists, the inheritors of a rapacious greed runaway- take at all cost- no matter the cost.

Blind. Selfish. Ruthless wolves in sheep costumes with lamprey brains. Reptilian. Savage.

Those who no longer dream. Spoiled. Stupid, rich evil. Self-perpetuating, circuitous, engendering laziness and waste. This land is your land- nonsense.

Plastic fingers touch everything like Midas, cursed.

Goodbye. So long to the pristine, the sacred.

We are worse than any Aztec sacrifice holiday.

Ironic in our obsessions with life with our lives with keeping alive, with our important egocentric existence clinging and hung up so concerned to live, to avoid death and chemicals and carcinogens- for what? So we can keep complaining so we can worry so we can keep buying shit, accumulated?

Then what? Who cares.

Charge it.

Burn it.

Poison it.

Poisoned by culture. Redolent with insecurity. Blind, fearful, wardrobes full of clothes but naked in the face of it all.

Unable to think critically. Unable to find sentimentality. Unable to produce genuine emotion.

Dictated by internet search results. Advertisements. Buying. More. Shit.

Unconcerned- who cares.

The future? Who cares.

The earth? Who cares.

Google will deliver us this day our daily answers.

And we criticize the believers, the religious? We criticize the ancients? We, disciples of science. Disciples of nothing.

Scared. Empty. Stupid. Haughty. Without wisdom, stuffed to our gills with useless facts, with stuff. More shit.

Buying more.

Shit.

an observation

separation from land
leads
to separation from heart;
land bridges men
to their hearts,
to their women,
and hearts bridge man
from the earth
to the universe,
cosmic.

the best stories are
ones you hear
before you had ears
to listen

we belong to the earth,
we are hers

despite our worst efforts

ERROR message

compatibility issues
the earth's truth
ours
signal disruption
eyes out a
window
tormented inside
phony barriers, separation
solidify
dream sublime
make believe lifetimes
full
of incessant drama
worried that it might
end
prematurely
harvested for food
plucked
necklaces, bones
everything is destroyed
nothing is gone
at least
Her life will
outlast
our own
scented by
petrichor
christened with spindrift

routines

Check the email
Open up the browser
Close a window
Respond to a post
Like a picture
Log out of the account
Change the password
Transfer the money
Complete an order
Open a window
Click on a link
Enter a selection
Log in to the account
Add a comment
Read a message
React to a message
Zoom in
Update an address
Select a preference
Pause the video
Play the song
Check a receipt status
Record a memo
Check the weather
Create an alarm
Cancel a reminder
Save a favorite
Check the email
Close a window

Closing windows
Mindless
Shut ins
Shut out
No time to breathe, appreciate
-birdsong
-echoes
-breeze
-eye color
Do you even know if you have your mother's eyes?

Who has the time...

Cy(cles)

Cycles
We are recycled
We lose touch
New ones find it
We are cut off
We are connected
New ones form
Cycles
We are born
We retreat from time
New ones enter
We forget truth
We remember truth
New homes are built
Cycles
Circles mysterious without centers
Metaphors beyond fact or fiction
Forces behind life
Forces like life
Cycles
Don't lose the message in the symbol
Don't worry about it
You're here for a little while
You're here forever
Cycles
We kill the divine
We erect new temples
Nothing changes
Spins
Circles
Cycles

progress(ion)

bought a lie
 (proud owners)
we ate it up bucketful
 (ravenous)
hated our daddies for reasons we never explained
hated our mommies for withholding their love
 (children)
then became him, her
 (adults)
we saved up, played it safe
found a partner, then a bank
 (eureka)
peddled in bland khaki dross
 (believers)
taught our kids make believe lessons when they misbehaved
lost a god
 (injuries)
gained a buck
borrowed more
 (successful)
television sets and beer cans, prescriptions and newspaper columns
 (frightened inside)
screaming blind
standing naked
 (tormented)
never knowing who we are
never thinking about where we could have gone
never considered where we'd come from
or how to get home
forgot we were lost
 (hopeless)
blinded by artificial lights headed to quick mosquito death
checking credit scores, emails, updates, digital feeds, fed like animals
 (distracted)
soulless meat
ashes to ashes
 (dead)

lynch mob

we killed their brothers, hung
them up on trees
tore them open
as a warning:

we're scared enough to do just about anything to protect the status quo
keep our daughters clean
keep money in our boy's pockets
keep you down and disenfranchised,
keep things the way they are and have been because the good Christian white God of forever
and ever made it so thank you Jesus amen

We are culpable.

You are culpable- you.

Guilty, motherfucker.

It makes me sick the karma that waits.

STATE OF THE UNION

clever shit,
nothing but
word choice
symbolism
dimension
post-modern
relevant
edgy
marketable
sexy
unique characters
topical subjects

clever shit,
written by graduates
of clever programs,
winners of clever prizes,
distributed by houses
of clever publishers,
members
of cleverness clubs

clever shit,
ready for the big screen
picked up by the studio
anime enhanced
fantasy romance
hyperspace flying
slight of hand
make their jaws drop
serial installments
one after another

clever shit
that was unearned
that isn't art
that caters to the public
that sells well
that confuses like noises from a large city,
that offers no guidance or help or suggestion
but merely stands alone,
aloof in a corner
looking smart

drinking a neat cocktail.

all i see is clever shit,
everywhere.

what a nightmare, stuck with
know-it-alls.

a funny story

i prayed for him-
he was only
a few years old,
leukemia,
sick in the hospital.
i said my prayers
i lit candles
i wrote church
secretaries
to put his name
on lists of intention
i knelt and
supplicated our
blessed virgin.
he was sick, a
little boy.

not on my account,
probably,
he improved.
the cancer
went into remission,
his eyes brightened
as treatments worked.
he was better.
he grew up.
i met him a couple
years later, he had
started kindergarten
he was living
he was alive
and when i reached down
to shake hands
with a living
miracle, he kicked
me in the shin, hard.

if that ain't perfect
satori,
i dont know what
is.

nursery rhyme

be sure to play in yards with fences, simple right and nice
so the kiddies grow up tall and proud, smiling full of life
eating up their vitamins
taking plenty rest

keep them locked in houses, draw within the lines
helmets while they bicycle, always home on time
wash behind their ears
buckle up their belts

march them into church to kneel and say 'amen'
do it once a week, again again and again
teach them all the rules
make them learn the songs

send them off to school to learn to read and write
teach them perfect manners, so they will be polite
raise their hand in class
don't speak out of turn

keep the kiddies safe and well
so they grow up like you
keep the kiddies safe and well
so they have kiddies too

the apparatus needs its wheels
its gears and grease and lead,
the kiddies are no good to it
if the kiddies are all dead

haiku-esque

winter is a poem
of simple breathing,
quiet survival

creator(s)

some things
speak for themselves
sometimes
something needs to be said
some things
need other things to speak for them
sometimes
nothing can be heard
some things
sometimes mean nothing
sometimes
something means everything
you can give
you can say
you can love...
so do what you can
with whatever you have.
because sometimes
you have something,
even when you don't
think you have anything.
you are everything,
because nothing
can happen without
you doing it,
born from you,
everything.

A Blue Moon Halloween Haunted by a Future Love Poem

moonbeams tap on my finger
my daughter's first kiss
for me
she's in her mother
she's always been there
she always will be
alive inside my heart
a chamber undiscovered, until today
excavated from ruin

i think about her hair color,
her eyes, her pudgy fingers,
her first steps-
then i stop, reminded to be present
to forget the world of time,
a world that makes me hate
it so much sometimes i don't know what i'd do-
if i didn't have the hope of her

haiku #7

clouds like mesas, distant
thirty-six
thousand feet

simple exercise

count up the people
alive in your head
then imagine all the places you reside, take residence
those minds you occupy
a denizen in astral worlds
of friends, of relatives, of coworkers,
of enemies, of drive through cashiers,
of phone center assistants,
of passengers in nearby cars,
of faces passed by-
for a moment, only a moment-
lifetimes alive these figures go on
impossible to displace
or change
birthed from a seed so tiny

failure

We never learn from the memories of our ghosts.
They sigh hunched over, crapulous, cobwebs in our barstool hearts,
pockets full of magic rings, alone
until our final birthday when the mystery disappears
and we are unborn, untethered from fate.
Left to dry up.
Left to watch screens.
Left to repeat.
Left to die cold.
Look back at what you wasted, before the temptress' call.
Shamed inside,
you know what you chose to leave.
We'll walk out into black nights of a city that killed all her stars.
We'll walk out in tears, alone, our demons gowned by fresh names
to haunt us on
to hold their grip
to keep us down
to smile so wide
as we go searching for truth
that's stuffed in our pockets.
We're searching all over
even though it's right here.
Searching and searching
forgetting we already touch it.
Looking all over
lost in unending despair.

TUESDAY lunch

spread thin
rotten with boredom
ROTTING

putrid
guts
strychnine

how much more can you half-heart
can you fake

CHEWING

cud
gastric acid
gulp

useless gadgets,
mechanized, dead battery

SWALLOWING

breathless
hungry
more

machine police gutted you in the river
laughed at your bones

you read all about it,
an expert

battered across a charred
rye face in a sterile kitchen
that sound
knife blade, crust, dried up

you laughed, then turned up the volume
delicious

hugs and a kiss

“What an asshole!
What is his problem?”
Same as everybody.
He is hurt.
A scared, hurt child.
Hopeless, helpless,
infatuated
by the idea of himself being a self
being a separate individual
keeping up the character
playing the part
important, leading man hubris
like charades
like Halloween
like a big Kabuki theater
like a bunch of scared, hurt children.

Nobody knows anything.

It's ok.

NEW YORK

Goodbye you savage monster
Taken for a ride, sure
You left flower petals on tetanus stairwells
You fed me sunlight in the cold
Stung me, hurt me
Kissed me, loved me
You betrayed me, lonely
You convinced me I'm worthless
Friends made
Money spent
I wanted to be like everyone
I wanted them to love me
I wanted you to love me

Did you?

restless

it is a cold night
alone in bed
next to one you've known for years
but tonight a stranger
a fetid, sleepless night
listening to a breath
unfamiliar,
startling

moonshadows fall
most perfectly
on the snow

Hope(ful)

that's where the buildings went up
that's where things changed
that's where the past became a sparrow
that's where mothers die
and leave fathers to raise their daughters
brewing coffee and telling bad jokes

Color of Blood

We don't tell stories anymore-
we don't talk about great-great-grandpa John
who crossed the Irish Sea to Liverpool with his father
great-great-great-grandpa Tom.

We're too busy clicking,
prattling interminable,
concerned about sports teams or coupons,
we forget what's important.

They left Mayo, Ireland to find work-
run out of food
run out of money
mouths to feed
things to buy-
a family of seven in rocky fields
mama singing songs while she washes clothes in a creek
feet covered in dirt.
Nineteenth century poverty,
but probably some happiness too.

So the men of the house departed
with thousands of others as
labor for hire, back breaking work
shovels and rocks
-John was a ditch digger most his life-
but wasn't yet a teenager when he boarded a crowded steamer.

Who knows what John felt-
if his father told him to be strong
if his mother kissed his cheek at the roadside
if he was scared
the details weren't preserved
I have only a general notion.

In Liverpool, at some point not long after their arrival
John's father, Tom, fell dead from a heart attack.
Maybe it was the drink, maybe a brawl with an Englishman,
maybe the version I heard was changed from the original
either way a young man in a foreign country
was stranded, on his own, no family or money,
with a corpse and a responsibility.

Who knows what John felt-
if he panicked
if he cried
if he prayed-
but I know what he did.

He found a way to bring his father's body home
back to the rocky fields
to tell his mother
to clear a hole with a rusted spade
to bury the past
to board another steamer, this time for America.

Stories remind you of what's in your veins
what your blood is made of.
Blood is funny because you only see it when you're in trouble,
when you're cut or when something has gone wrong inside-
it's good to see it besides in a time of crisis.
And that's what stories do
stories give you a portal into the blood
stories tell you about where you fit in the world
where you came from
where you ought to point-
but since nobody tells anymore stories
nobody understands what's pumping through their heart
no direction
no sense of purpose
no obligation to continue the journey of those who have gone before.
When story telling is lost, there's
nothing an internet search engine can illuminate
to fill the void.

We're losing our stories.
We're losing ourselves.

more on stories

We're lost in the present
We've lost the past

My grandmother
is nothing more than a memory
a headstone, manicured grass clippings
some flowers on her birthday-
in heaven? Do I really believe it?
If I go to church and...
then I'll see her again?

Whatever paradigm
which might have kept her connected to me
I lost, I lost the faith.
So I lost her.
She's not in the trees, in the land-
though once I spoke to a new age
healer who advised me to think of a bird
and I thought of a cardinal,
then I thought of my grandmother
(I was speaking to this healer
not long after we buried her,
though I was being healed for other reasons)
only to find a cardinal
in the backyard
on my return home.

My last encounter with my Grandma's spirit,
I wish I remembered more.

I wish I could feel her again.
Heaven is a long way off.

She was the last old person I loved
who died
so now my mother will be the next,
if the circle cycles naturally.
It terrifies me.
Losing my mother.

At least I'm the oldest,
older than my brothers
and sister, older than my wife

and most of my friends-
so I'll get the jump on them.
I'll disappear completely
before they can. An Irish
goodbye.

At least they won't go looking for me
in heaven.

Maybe I'll dip back in as a highway-side
redtail hawk, riding heat convection.

Very, very fucking high.