Journey to the East: Essays

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Journey to the East: Essays

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a collection of seven personal essays written by the author and headed by a critical introduction. The introduction presents a common theme among the essays—that they represent a “journey to the East”—and points out the function of memory in the essays and the necessity for some distance between the speaker and the protagonist in each, even though those two may in fact be the same person. Such distance, the author claims, allows valuable discoveries to be made and justifies an otherwise purely egotistical venture. The introduction also expresses the author’s desire that his essays promote empathy—between author and reader, between reader and the world, and between the reader and the reader’s self.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Missionary</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Coming</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glory</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing, Dear Gemini</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Blessings</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leftovers</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Devil’s Highway</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to believe that he has come close to the ultimate: he has, after all, no more to offer than explanations . . . of his own ideas. But he ironically adapts himself to this smallness—the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in the face of life—and even emphasizes it with ironic modesty.

—Georges Lukacs

I was 26 when I came to Ohio and began writing these essays. To a boy raised in the Texas South and educated in the Utah West, Ohio was unknown; it was the East. Appalachian foothills and cobblestone streets replaced the coastal plains and suburban concrete of my youth; the desert dryness and the high mountain valleys of my undergraduate years were flushed with a great green humidity. I hadn’t a family member or a friend for a thousand miles.

Not that Ohio was terribly strange or scary. Besides a few idiosyncrasies of local speech and culture, it was pretty much like most of America—a Wal-Mart, an Applebee’s, a cineplex. I could hear the trains pass at night from my bedroom window, just as I could as a boy in Texas. But I hadn’t moved eastward just to add a new address to my list. I was a graduate student, an academic; I came in search of knowledge. Fitting that the city that became my home is called Athens.

I also came to Ohio as a writer, an essayist. As such, I was in search of a different kind of knowledge as well, knowledge about myself. Like the protagonist in Hermann Hesse’s short, cryptic novel that shares this collection’s name, I came in search of truth.
These essays are a product of the time I spent here, a record of the discoveries I made during these two years.

Allow me to clarify something. Although not everything written about in these essays occurred while I lived in Athens, that doesn’t mean that the essays themselves and the discoveries they record aren’t a product of my time here. The events described in “Second Coming,” for example, occurred in Texas, and those of “Sing, Dear Gemini” occurred in Utah. More than half of these essays refer to the two years I spent in Korea as a Mormon missionary—another journey to the East. Though the David Grover who is a character in these essays isn’t always the David Grover who lived in Ohio, it is that David who wrote and narrated these essays, who remembered the experiences and crafted their representation here. It is that David who was dealing with those memories and incorporating them into his present life through the act of writing. So even though the content may not all be from Ohio, the story is still all about that time and place.

Consider it this way: these essays do not treat memory as a construction of the past, but rather as a construction of the present. I often think of my memories as being like peach preserves. At some point those peaches were living things hanging on trees, little bits of a certain summer, but I picked and prepared them and put them up for a later time. When I want to remember what that summer was like, I pull a jar off the shelf and open it up, using sight, smell, taste, and touch to reconstruct what once was, only it doesn’t quite work. For one, the canning process has changed the peaches from what they once were—memory is imperfect at best. For two, it makes a difference what mood I’m in

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1 If Athens is my Athens, then Seoul is my Jerusalem.
when I open the peaches and whether I eat them on English muffins or with pork chops, for breakfast or for dinner—memory is contextual. For three, the taste of the peaches and the memory they are meant to inspire is wrapped up in and confused with all the other summers and all the other peaches I’ve had in the meantime—memory is slippery.

In other words, memories do not really exist outside of the present, and every time a memory is called up it attaches itself to a new context, a present context. Thus, when in “Second Coming” I remember the day I returned home from Korea and smelled bread at the grocery store, I do not remember it only as it occurred; I do not experience the memory as my 21-year-old self did the occasion. I remember it in terms of all that has happened since then, all I have learned and thought and come to believe about that experience. I remember it as a 26-year-old living in Ohio, smelling bread each week at the local grocery store. Present-me is aware of what will happen to past-me in the interim, and present-me chooses his words and phrases with a present-day vocabulary and sentiment. In most essays the visible signs of a difference between the past and present incarnations of memory are slight, but in “Second Coming,” the difference becomes pronounced in the last line as the speaker describes the smell of bread as a “prophecy” and senses in it “a girl whose hair will smell faintly of pizza dough, a birthday gift of oversized muffin tins, the craving for rice.” This prophecy is of things past-David could not know but of which present-David, Ohio-David, is well aware; it is a case of future memories being conflated with past ones.

Phillip Lopate speaks to the importance of this distinction when he writes of the need for a “double perspective” in essays, an “ongoing dialectic between [the writer’s]
prior and present intelligences.”

In the essays that follow, this dialectic isn’t only found in the representation of memory but also in the creation of my persona in each. It is never so simple that there is merely one David in any essay, for, as Lopate puts it, “narrator and . . . protagonist [are] two different creatures.”

Take “The Missionary” for example. This essay is divided into sections with alternating settings: one in Ohio in 2008, one in Korea in 2001. Thus there are two Davids, divided from each other by seven years’ experience—a source of mild irony in the essay. The older David knows things the younger David has yet to learn, and he must bring this experience to bear on his meeting Patrick, a Hindu missionary. But it’s more complex than that. The speaker of the essay is neither of these Davids but a third, one enough removed from both experiences to comment on each. As a missionary and as a graduate student, I was only passingly aware of the importance of this essay’s experiences as they happened, but as a writer I was able to meditate more deeply on their meaning and use reflection and comparison to clarify my ideas. Lopate calls this process “taking the measure of the distance between [one’s] prior and present selves.”

The space created by allowing these three Davids to coexist within the essay and by allowing the most recent David to commentate the experiences of the other two is one of the things that differentiates essaying from other forms of personal storytelling.

But there’s more to it than that, actually. In the act of writing “The Missionary,” there was a moment when I suddenly became aware that I wasn’t merely sussing out

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3 Lopate, “Reflection and Retrospection,” 146.
4 Lopate, “Reflection and Retrospection,” 147.
pieces of my past. At first I thought I was exploring a bit of empathy between me, a former missionary, and Patrick, a current missionary. But as I came to the end of my first draft, there was an odd moment when I saw myself through my father’s eyes, similar to the way I was seeing Patrick as a younger me. Suddenly I wasn’t only taking the measure between past and present, but between present and future. There’s a fourth David, a possible-future David, hiding in the fringes of the essay, and to me that’s the most interesting and valuable part.

Lopate seems to think, and I agree, that it is this distance between selves in an essay that justifies its innate egotism. When I say that find my work “interesting and valuable,” understand that I mean this in two ways. Firstly, and least justifiably, I am enamored of my work because it is mine. I’m fond of myself. I’m an egotist. I like sentences that begin with “I,” especially when I wrote them. But secondly, and much, much more importantly, I think my writing attains value in that it allows for the kinds of discoveries I journeyed to the East to make.

The reason this second point is more valid than the first is that it doesn’t apply only to me: the distance that allows for discovery in essays allows it for both writer and reader. In the same way that I discovered something in the act of writing each of these essays, the reader can discover something in reading them. Distance allows that—in this case not so much the distance between speaker and protagonist, but between reader and writer. These essays aren’t memories to the reader like they are to me; in their transmission they become mere stories. Either the reader shares my various roles and experiences—male, white, American, Mormon, twenty-something, bachelor, roommate,
child, etc.—or he or she doesn’t. Regardless, in reading these stories the reader comes to understand me, other, self, or world in a new way. It is that which makes these essays valuable, which recommends them for transmission beyond my own hard drive.5

Forgive me for going on so long without specifying exactly what I mean by “discovery.” I titled this collection *Journey to the East* not so much because it is a record of my coming to Ohio but because the collection itself represents a move towards enlightenment. As I said above, the writing offered a chance of discovery, which is a big part of what makes these essays valuable to me. In “The Missionary” I discovered, quite unexpectedly, a connection with my father I was not previously aware of. I came to appreciate in anew his efforts to teach and guide me and came to regret not letting him know more and more often how his efforts had affected me. In writing “The Devil’s Highway” I had similar moments of understanding for my mother; I came to see how her feelings for me and my welfare haven’t changed near as much as I thought and came to remember just how much I care about and depend upon her as well (these may be obvious things to you, dear reader—please pardon a twenty-something male non-parent’s blockheadedness). And in writing all these essays I came to know myself better than I did.

To be perfectly blunt, empathy is what I’m most often after, and its what I most like to find. It’s what I hope my readers discover in these essays. An essay like “Mixed Blessings” is an attempt on my part to understand people with whom I’m lacking a connection—in this case, alcohol—and at the same time it may serve to help those people

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5 Admittedly, there are other things that make essays valuable, such as artfulness. A good story well told is inherently valuable—“art for art’s sake” and all that. I won’t be the one to judge whether these particular essays meet that standard, however.
understand me. I want to express that I’m a little jealous of things I’m missing out on, that I’m eager to understand and even enjoy parts of life that are barred to me by decisions I’ve made, and at the same time I’d like to convey that maybe there’s something for others to be jealous of in my way of life. At the very least I’d like to promote mutual understanding, and if I can through my writing help my reader actually inhabit another’s shoes for a moment, the way I found myself in my father’s or my mother’s or in Patrick the Hindu missionary’s shoes, I’ll consider it a journey well made.

One more word on what I want for the readers of these essays. For me, this collection—its very existence—is an exercise in self-love. But it also contains a good deal of disappointment in myself, even self-loathing. That I am contradictory in this respect, that I both love and hate myself, sometimes in the same moment, is not rare, but it seems to be the essayist’s place alone to show it to the world so often and so clearly. And though I often want my essays to act as windows, allowing the reader a view towards empathy with another, in this respect I want my essays to act as mirrors. As Lopate says: “The trick is to realize that one [the writer] is not important, except insofar as one’s example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish.”

The purpose of re-immersing myself in the confusion or failure of earlier times, of recreating the persona of a younger me and pounding it against my present measure of wisdom, is to enable empathy in the reader. Not with myself, but with the reader’s self. The point isn’t for me to be able to say, “Oh, I’m so misunderstood!” or “Know me!” but

to say, “I felt confused too, and sometimes I hated myself for it. So it’s okay if you do too, because we all do.” It’s an odd echo to the Socratic “Know thyself,” and I find it fitting that it comes out of my time in Athens. I think the great myth of our lives is that we each think we are the only ones who feel like failures—everyone else looks so put together. I’d like to offer an alternate view in my work, a view showing that at least one other—me—feels “lonely and freakish” at times.

Ultimately, what I’ve discovered in these essays is compassion. If life and love and everything have been this hard for me; if, despite my best efforts, I can only despise myself for my failings; if I, who am my favorite of all, am also my least favorite—given all this, how can I do anything but pity us all? It’s hard here on Earth. Our hearts are black and our deeds are sinister. No one is spared from the consequences of others’ actions nor the effects of our own human nature. Though William Hazlitt, my essayist forbear, would have us believe that he saw the dark world and took from it his reason for self-loathing

\[\text{Have I not reason to hate and to despise myself? Indeed I do; and chiefly for not having hated and despised the world enough}\]

I choose to see my self-loathing and take from it my reason for loving the world, and I hope that my reader might as well.

Maybe that’s expecting too much from these essays—from a spinout on the ice, a lonely Friday, a failed relationship, an open-mic night. It all sounds pretty dinky by the light of day. But though these experiences may be pedestrian when compared to the wider world of staggering tragedies, I recall that Montaigne, the father of the form, once said that

\[\text{Every man has within himself the entire human condition}\]
and Phillip Lopate reminds us that “the personal essayist claims unique access to the small, humble things in life. And this taste for the miniature becomes a strong suit of the form: the ability to turn anything close at hand . . . into a grand meditational adventure.”

Perhaps I overstep myself in my hopes, but I’m happy to offer these few essays meant to inspire a little empathy and compassion in the world. That’s what I think this journey is all about, at least. I may, like H. H. in Hesse’s book, discover that I was dead wrong in the end. After all, what do I know?

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7 Lopate, *Art of the Personal Essay*, xxviii.
I met a missionary recently. This was back in the fall, when the days were just cooling off and the weather was crystal clear. I was walking downtown in the sun, thinking the ambitious thoughts of a graduate student, and I only half registered the man standing against a building up ahead, seemingly doing nothing but watching passers-by. This being a college town and an election year, being stopped by strangers peddling causes, candidates, or charities wasn’t uncommon, but nothing about the man suggested he was interested in conversation, so I prepared to pass him without design. I merely glanced down at my feet, readjusted my bag, and continued walking. Just as I crossed his position, however, he suddenly said, “Excuse me.”

I was caught off guard. Normally when approached on the street I’ve seen it coming and have a strategy: I’ve either fished out the coins for a quick deposit or loaded a shrug and a “sorry,” or maybe I’ve maneuvered several fellow pedestrians between me and whoever’s asking the awkward questions. But I’m not generally an avoider, and I never ignore. Most of the time I just take the flyer with a smile and answer the question
truthfully—“Have you registered to vote?” or “Do you have a minute for the environment?” or “Ice cream, today? Every purchase helps Kappa Delta Mu Chi Beta Alpha!” I almost always keep moving forward regardless. Although such questions don’t directly state it, they are often an invitation to stop and chat. So when the unassuming man on the street quite suddenly said, in a calm, quiet voice, just after I’d determined his irrelevance to me, “Excuse me,” I stopped short, surprised.

Torn from whatever reveries occupied me, my eyes glanced over him while my mind started running through the possibilities: He needed directions? No, he hadn’t been looking for anything. Money? He was clean and neatly dressed, so unlikely that. Had I dropped something? I don’t think so—

He was speaking, and his hand turned out to show me the cover of a book he was holding; I looked at it, focused my attention enough to read the title, and replayed the sentence I had just not been listening to. The book was the Bhagavad Gita. “We’re missionaries,” he had been saying: “We’re sharing this book.”

At once the situation dawned on me—where I was, who I was talking to, what came next. My first instinct was to smile and shake my head, then nod and say “no,” then blink and laugh and look slightly off to the right, then nod and look at him and laugh again while saying, “I mean, I know,” and “Thanks, but,” while shrugging and walking away.

I looked up from the book, smiled and shook my head, frowned and stuttered: “I’ve read this book.”
For six hundred and sixty-five days I was a missionary in South Korea. With extremely few exceptions, I spent those days approaching people—on the street, in their homes, on buses and in taxis—asking them for a minute of their time.

Nine out of ten people would smile and mutter and walk away. And those ten were the one out of ten who had stopped at all. Having thousands of chances to practice my method, I learned that if you said hello and offered your hand too early, a person could skirt around you effortlessly as you bowed. If you started too late, the person would either fail to notice you in time to stop or could feign not noticing and continue walking briskly anyway. The trick was to catch someone at just the right distance, about seven paces, making the slightest bit of eye contact before stunning them with a brilliantly pronounced “Annyeong hasaeyo, seonsaengnim.” The sudden novelty of an American speaking Korean and offering an appropriate handshake—two handed, to show respect—might spark enough cordiality for a returned bow and a handshake. Koreans are, in general, a very protocol-conscious people.

Surprise, though occasionally an effective missionary tool, is short-lived. It must be replaced by genuine curiosity if someone is to remain in your company. This means asking a question, and although I had any number of topics I could raise with anyone I met, I think my favorite question involved the book I always held in my hand. It was simple and direct; it appealed to the reader in me and thus, I hoped, to the reader in them; and it quickly identified me and my purpose. “Have you ever read this book?” I would ask, and turn out my hand to show the gold letters on a blue cover, the Book of Mormon.
“I’ve read this book,” I said to the missionary.

“But have you read this book?” he countered, and I saw that he meant to ask whether I read this particular edition. I could see that his copy of the Gita was considerably thicker than the one I had read; the cover showed that it was filled with explanations and annotations by a holy-looking man with a long, foreign name.

“No, the one I read was much thinner. It was paperback and had an introduction by a scholar. Her name was, uh—”

“A scholar?”

“Yeah…” I grasped for the name on the cover of my own copy, the one I had bought for an Asian literature class that had been cancelled the first week of school when only three students registered. I had decided to keep the books and read them on my own, and the Gita, with its short, dense stanzas, had made a great bathroom book (not that I’d tell him that). The cover was a colorful Hindu painting, the kind of thing you could stare at until its tiny details slowly revealed themselves, which I had done, incidentally reading the translator’s name dozens of times and rolling it around my mouth for its feel and rhythm. It was a solid name, with even syllables; it trod on the tongue much like my own name did. What was it? There it was: “Barbara Stoler Miller.”

“Ah, Barbara Stoler Miller,” he said and nodded. “That’s the same one I first read, but it’s not this one.”

“Oh?” He had me. He had read the same edition I had, had recognized the name of the translator. I could tell he was sincere about that in the way his voice sped up
slightly with the excitement of finding some common ground. Up until that moment he had spoken, not slowly, but unhurriedly, deliberately. It was an odd bit of gravity to see in a young man just a few feet from a college campus known more for its parties than its studies.

Establishing common ground is essential in missionary work. It’s hard for people to see you as a real person. Missionaries are, in essence, monks, separated from the normal activities and concerns of life. Mormon missionaries maybe especially so. Who up and leaves home—in my case just when I should’ve been getting through college—to stomp around some strange place annoying people? We didn’t watch television, didn’t go to the movies, didn’t read newspapers or novels, didn’t listen to the radio. We didn’t go on dates—didn’t even flirt with girls. Very suspicious, if you ask me.

I wasn’t Korean and knew precious little about Korea, couldn’t understand the suffocation of having grown up between China and Japan for three millennia or more, couldn’t fathom the impact of having been at war with oneself for fifty years, and this directly after having been colony, the culture and language having endured systematic attack for eighty long years. I didn’t know how serious young Koreans took their education, wasn’t aware of the weight the college entrance exams placed on their shoulders, a weight which fueled a six-day school week supplemented by hours and hours of private instruction in special tutoring schools called *hagweon*. I wasn’t privy to the social and economic pressures that divided work from home, to the conflict between eastern tradition and western progress that kept many men working sixty-hour weeks to provide
for families they rarely saw, families that suffered when fathers were obligated to spend even more time with their office mates when the boss would rent out a bar for morale’s sake (attendance not optional). Under mission rules I wasn’t even allowed to go to the karaoke bars or, without a broken water heater or busted pipes, to the bathhouse. And, being Mormon, there was to be no bonding over a cheap glass of Hite beer or a shot of soju. I could drink tea but only herbal varieties, no greens or blacks.

What did that leave me for common ground? Precisely this: the Korean-born pitcher Chanho Park had just been traded to the Texas Rangers in my home state. I spoke fluent English, a coveted skill. And I was, despite the distance of age and race and history, still a person, with all the questions we all are born with. Who am I? Where am I going? What’s right and what’s true and how do I know?

“What’s so special about this particular copy?” I asked. The missionary proceeded to explain that the scripture itself was interwoven with commentary by a holy man, an expert who made its meaning clear. I asked why his commentary was better than Miller’s.

“Miller isn’t trying to lead people to truth. She doesn’t believe in the truth of this book. She’s a scholar and sees it as a poem only. This man is holy. He isn’t trying to sell books. He only wants to help others understand and be happy.”

He went on—I don’t remember his exact words, of course. As he spoke I noticed how striking his eyes were; they were very light, an icy blue, clear and focused even as they darted from the book to my face to some middle distance whenever he searched for a word. His hair was very dark, which set his eyes off even more, and it was buzzed short
except for one long patch in the back. I could see that his hair was fine and soft like a baby’s. He was in his very early twenties, I guessed. He told me his name was Patrick.

When he finished his explanation he didn’t rush ahead, didn’t take control of the conversation and guide it towards a chosen subject. He just stopped for a second. Perhaps he was feeling out the reverberation of what he’d just said, checking to make sure it had the ring of truth he trusted it should. Maybe he was just giving me a minute to digest it all. It occurred to me that I could ask an unfair, malignant question, the kind meant to undermine, the kind asked of politicians at press conferences. I’ve heard my fair share of cheap shots. Putting one together would be no problem, and in the momentary confusion it caused I could make my escape. Or I could watch him talk himself into a corner.

The impulse to one-up this kid was very real, and for a moment I teetered on the edge of cruelty. But Patrick’s genuineness was inviting me to be genuine, and I asked him my real question.

“How do I know this book is true?”

When I failed to convince someone that I was indeed a real person, they would quickly find an excuse to leave. Missionaries are, by definition, fanatical, after all, and it’s dangerous to linger near a maniac.

Sometimes while out walking the streets I would hear the staticky sound of a megaphone and turn to see a pair of pretty young women in neon vinyl miniskirts and tube tops dancing outside a newly opened restaurant, periodically announcing the virtues of the proprietor and his prices. Or it would be a passing flatbed truck laden with bushels
of garlic, the driver hawking his wares from an intercom in the cab. Or it would be a missionary standing sharply at attention, yellow sash with a red cross and black letters draped from shoulder to hip, one hand holding the mic up to his or her mouth, the other firmly grasping the loudspeaker like a holstered gun. The vinyl clad “rocket chicks,” as we called them, spoke with the wildly enthusiastic tone of a toilet bowl cleanser commercial, and the truck drivers had the native, welcome rhythm of a carnival barker or a stadium beer seller. The missionaries, however, imitated the Korean pastors’ oratorical technique, a clipped, falling intonation that became a sickly parody when applied to the short command-form statements they typically made: “Repent. Believe Jesus. You will go to Hell. Repent.”

As important as it was to make myself appear a real person, it was more important to treat those I met as real. Having hundreds of two-second relationships a week is demoralizing; it dehumanizes in both directions. On the one hand I felt like a machine at times, at others, a ghost. I had minutes of anger, learned to laugh at myself in pitiful moments. Sometimes in the desperate belief that I had become a cliché, that no one really saw or heard me, I would say something completely unexpected just for the shock of it. One night knocking doors in a particularly trying apartment building with my companion (Mormon missionaries always work in pairs), I rang a doorbell, and when a lady asked who it was over the intercom, I said, “We’re two large and hungry Americans. Can we come in and have some dinner?” She mumbled something about the baby being asleep; I laughed and assented, content merely to hear something new.
On the other hand, the repetition made it hard to see the people I met as people. Koreans already all look the same to an American, and it was all I could do to resist talking at them as if to a robot. At first my struggle with the language kept me on my toes, listening intently to try to catch every word a person said in our short exchanges, but before long I knew my script and every possible permutation thereof. Just as easily as some polite person could mindlessly fire excuses my way in hopes I would give up without their having to be assertive, I could deflect such attempts without blinking. How easy it is to be heartless.

Mine was the business of constantly tempering a thick skin with some degree of vulnerability, to regard each person I saw as a brother or sister without taking things too personally. To fall too far towards one side of the balance was to become manipulative, a salesman; to fall too far to the other was to risk despair.

Here’s what I learned as a missionary: real conversations occur when both parties risk something, when they both acknowledge the humanity of the other. I’ve never been a great listener—I’ve too many ideas in my head at any given time for that—but those few moments of my time in Korea that I would classify as touching grace all occurred within conversations. They occurred when I put aside my ego and my insecurity and was paid the same respect. It was both scary and sacred.

Patrick never had a single ready response. He heard my questions as if they had never been asked before. I watched him consider each one and formulate his answer. I

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8 As it turns out, Koreans all look different once you get to know them, and Americans all look the same once you’ve been gone for two years.
heard him speak sincerely, not eloquently, but with short pauses as he arranged his phrases. He held his book in one hand as the other was tensed softly, fingers spread as if holding a softball, and he made gentle grasps in the air as he sought the proper path. I got the impression he hadn’t been doing this long.

“How do I know this book is true?”

He squinted—he was either remembering what he had been trained to say or was searching his feelings for the truth: “You read the book, you try out the things it teaches in your life, and you see if it feels true, if it brings you peace.”

At times it was scary talking to him. I asked him the questions I had long ago figured out were the most important to me, the ones I wished people on the streets in Korea would think to ask, and his answers were eerily close to the ones I would’ve given. It was as if I had met myself from seven or eight years before—it put a suddenly clear perspective on my life since then. I seemed to see all that would befall this boy in a few short years, and I didn’t know whether to lament the passing of time or to put my arm around him. He was me, but then, he wasn’t.

Is this how a father feels seeing his son walk a strangely familiar life? Is this what my own father, who was a missionary in Scotland in 1974, saw in my letters home from Korea in 2001, what he sees every day on a 27-year delay? I’m 27 myself, now, though I don’t yet have a child of my own.

The strange discomfort of listening to Patrick struggle was mixed with an odd pride at seeing him do so successfully. I gave him my final question: “Okay, so what is it you want from me?”
Confused look.

“You’re a missionary, you’ve told me about your book, you’ve told me how to know if it’s true. Now what?”

“I’d like to give you this book.”

There is one statement for which there is no reply a missionary can give. Every person who doesn’t stop seems to say it; most of those who do, say it in one way or another: “I’m not interested.”

To be a missionary is to live with disappointment. But it’s hard to know exactly what you’re disappointed in. Are you disappointed in yourself for not being a stronger, purer vessel? Or are you disappointed in people for not getting it? Or is it just the world and the way it works? You tell yourself that you are making a difference but that it’s a difference you’ll probably never see. You go on in the belief that books given and words spoken will find their way into the hands and hearts of those who need them, when they need them. But you’ll almost certainly never know.

On the flight home from Korea, I wrote out a list of things I wanted to incorporate into my life, a list of lessons learned. Near the top of the list was the caveat that I never forget how it felt to be on the side of the door shared by pizza guys, mail carriers, door-to-door salesmen, and missionaries. I need not feel obligated by anyone, I decided, but I wouldn’t be rude. I also resolved to somehow incorporate regular “I love you”s into my interactions with my parents.
I didn’t take the Bhagavad Gita from Patrick. I looked him in the eye and admitted that I agreed with everything he had told me, that I felt he had given me all the right answers. But I confessed that I wasn’t looking for anything new in my life, that I wasn’t dissatisfied in any way. I thanked him for his honesty and assured him that if I ever needed something more I would know where to look. He made no reply, merely stared his acceptance as I turned and walked away.

Oh, how I wish I had taken that book.
SECOND COMING

I. Disorientation

The day I returned home from two years of living in South Korea as a missionary, I made my way to the grocery store and walked briskly to the bread aisle, holding my breath for the last fifteen feet or so, so that when I breathed in anew it would be the breath I had anticipated for months. Despite a new-found love for rice, I was ready to be re-Occidented by the heavenly smell of manna in the marketplace, the flesh and blood of the Western diet. I took the final steps of the day’s seven-thousand-mile pilgrimage (Seoul to Tokyo to San Francisco to Houston to Gerland’s Food Fair on Eldridge Road), looked lovingly at that archetypal shape multiplied endlessly before my eyes—enough to feed a multitude—and inhaled.

II. Sacrament

The ancient Israelites pleased the Lord with sacrifices. As instructed, they often burned only the fat of an animal—the Lord accepting his part of the meal as smoke rising to heaven, incense and flame as insurance: let the Lord be not incensed, nor inflamed—while the priests, and sometimes even the family offering the sacrifice, feasted on the meat. They broke bread with God.

As a missionary I would sometimes bake banana bread as a gift for friends. Maybe because they had never seen such a thing and thus did not know what use they would have for it, or maybe out of a complex Eastern etiquette I didn’t quite understand, the bread was often received with awkward smiles and then cut up and fed mostly to me.
III. And the Glory of the Lord Filled the Tabernacle

Wedged in between a salt sea and the Phoenician harbors and consistently at odds with neighbors, Jacob’s children led lives of smell: the shepherd’s wool and manure, the soldier’s blood and leather, the Sabbath’s candles and scripture and the nearness of bodies in the synagogue. The sweet scent of wine and the ceramic savor of still water in an urn. Wilderness: locusts, reeds, honey. Jerusalem: a congregation of the clean and unclean. And the temple, a family reunion and a barbecue celebrating day-old memories of sweaty, sandy Egypt.

Once scattered, Israel pined for its temple. Not that they couldn’t please God with the sweet smells of sacrifice while in the wilderness—Abraham and Moses showed them they could—no, they yearned for everything else that went along with the familiar smoke rising to heaven.

While in Korea I was not deprived the joy of eating bread. In fact, some of the best I’ve ever tasted I tasted there. Gigantic white pillowy slices sold in half-loaves—“milk bread,” they call it—formed the basis of my French toast, and long loaves of faintly yellow, faintly buttery “corn bread” flanked my doses of peanut butter. But these were merely placeholders during my sojourn in the wilderness. Tents, not tabernacles. No store I visited ever had a whole aisle of bread; no bread smell could ever defeat the pungency of kimchi and soy bean paste. Even stockpiled it wouldn’t have been the same, for it wasn’t just scent I was missing. It was also the gauge of the plastic, the presence of
the twisty-tie, the wideness of the aisle, the comfort of knowing root beer and marshmallows were steps away.

IV. Reorientation

Seven thousand miles to stand before Saint Sara Lee and her wonders, to breathe in the ovenly aroma of fresh loaves, the yeasty exhalation of bottom bread squished by top bread. A two-year pilgrimage to break bread with my past: I remember in that breath the summer swimming pool smell of my own skin, the barefoot popsicle quest, my mother pushing the cart. Also, a two-minute prophecy, because every rite is a shadow of what is to come: a girl whose hair will smell faintly of pizza dough, a birthday gift of oversized muffin tins, the craving for rice.
GLORY

I walked into the coffee shop, pulled out my earbuds, and quickly found a seat alone on the far side of the room. I was just in time to catch some clumsily symbolic refrain about “wild beasts in Cain’s garden” or something like that, sung in two-part harmony by some guy with a fauxhawk who was cradling his mic in both hands and his friend, who was fingerpicking cruel, endless E-minors on an acoustic guitar. Both had their eyes closed and were swaying meaningfully. Welcome to Open-Mic Night at the Student Center.

On the walk to campus I had turned up my iPod, avoided eye contact with other pedestrians, and gathered my pride around me the way I do whenever I’m going to hear live music. I was steeling myself, putting on my “I can do better than these guys” face.

Having arrived, I was pretty sure my face wasn’t lying about the presently performing duo. Their sound had all the allure of the bottom of a well, and, fittingly, both of them were wearing black pants and black, collared shirts with the top two buttons unbuttoned. Hello Darkness, my old friend. Still trendy, I see.

This isn’t a deliberate thing I do, criticizing other performers. I can’t help it. It isn’t that I genuinely think I could do better either—it’s that I can see so clearly what’s wrong with someone else’s act. I’m a sharp critic. I sit in darkened rooms and fault musicians. I fault them for talking too much between songs—either in introducing each and every number with a detailed etymology of love and loss or in repeatedly declaring the still-single status of various members of the band. I fault them for refusing to vary the constant drone of three chords with a bridge or a truncated refrain or an alternate
instrumentation on the second verse, as if they believed each moment of captured emotion in their opus is too important to pass up, even though a song may pass the six-minute mark. I fault them—hate them even—for using worn-out metaphors and hapless clichés; for poaching lines containing any variation of “driving all night,” “walls falling down,” or “the world not understanding”; for neglecting the performance part of performing while singing not to the audience but to the still-bleeding heart they wear on their sleeve in an attempt to be seen as “sensitive” or “deep” or “poetic,” as if others don’t have comparable pain and have nothing better to do than admire the no-one-knows-how-I-feel mystique of a young guitarist, that unacknowledged legislator of the heart.

In other words, I fault everyone else for everything I used to do. I too learned to play the guitar in high school, wrote a stack of aching songs, played them for friends at parties and in parking lots. We swayed meaningfully and grasped at the awe we felt surrounded such endeavors. Alone in my room, I listened to my dad’s Simon and Garfunkel records over and over and marveled at the profundity of the neon lyrics they’d made.

Please.

I knew when I walked into the coffee shop that the criticisms I formed would incriminate me. But still I went, as I had gone for weeks—penance, perhaps? Research? No, I sat there and secretly wished to walk onto the stage, borrow a guitar, and set the room afire. I wanted to show these amateurs how it was done.

Fauxhawk boy and his mate finished their set and moved off to bask in the praise of their hip friends. The guy running the sound board got up and introduced the next act
by asking if some guy named Jake was in the house and ready to play. No one responded (perhaps Jake was in the crowd busily adoring the last act?), so without skipping a beat the sound guy grabbed a guitar, plugged it in, and began strumming an easy E with plenty of air and grit in it. I wasn’t really listening though—by this point I was busy reveling in a daydream: the sound guy looking around the room for volunteers to fill the space, eyes lighting on me; me reluctantly accepting the spotlight after a few feigned refusals, then launching into my best song; the group of hangers-on, suddenly realizing what real music was, what real performance was, leaving the boys in black to come sit at my feet.

The sound guy, maybe fifty, with a gray and brown beard and little hair left on top, in a simple black t-shirt and jeans, rolled from that E up to an open A and down again, letting the thirds cut in and out of the chords like sunlight through branches. Then, in a completely unassuming way that allowed the well-wishers of the previous group to go on talking and shuffling around near and in front of the small stage (he had actually, cheerfully, insisted they play two more cringingly bad songs beyond their planned set), he began to sing some simple lyrics over the deceptively full sound his hands were producing. He sang sideways over the mic, brows arched but eyes closed, head shaking gently as if reading the words off his memory. He sang

\begin{verbatim}
Above the dark town
After the sun’s gone down
Two vapour trails cross the sky
Catching the day’s last slow goodbye
Black skyline looks rich as velvet
Something is shining
Like gold but better
Rumours of glory.
\end{verbatim}
I had been on the verge of standing up and walking out, but now I was rooted to
the spot. The sound guy wasn’t even singing his own stuff—it was a Bruce Cockburn
song—and yet he sang it so real, so purely. I was struck—not only by the beauty of the
words, the delicacy of the image, but by the way this guy’s stark delivery seemed to make
them mean as much as they ever could. And not immediately either, not fully at first, but
gradually, as he iterated over again in subsequent verses that there were “rumours of
glory” around us everywhere. I suddenly had the feeling that maybe this guy didn’t need
me to teach those others a lesson, that he didn’t need me to fill the space in the room.
And yet he wasn’t teaching a lesson himself, wasn’t comparing or competing; he wouldn’t
have cared even if not a single person had been listening.

When the scheduled act still wasn’t there he followed “Rumours of Glory” with
“Jesus on the Mainline,” a gospel tune that assures that you can “call Him up and tell
Him what you want” at any time. He picked it out with just enough color to keep the
simple melody and lyrics interesting without becoming gaudy or distracting. With perfect
restraint. When he finished I clapped loudly; I was moved to applaud by the unexpected
depth in his simple renditions. And before I could cool, he dropped the tuning into an
open D and did a cover of Springsteen’s “Thunder Road” that packed all the power of
the Boss without any backup band and without the need to open up his voice into a full
roar. The slow build done on a single guitar was flawless, and even on the high notes and
at the climax he just reached his voice up and called down the emotion by pure
inspiration: “We’re riding out tonight to case the promised land, oh Thunder Road, oh
Thunder Road.” The thing was that he was believing the music; he was singing a song,
body and soul, audience or no; he was telling the story and it was true. I hadn’t been
prepared for this brand of sincerity, wrapped up as I was in my pride. When he sang “I’m
pulling out of here to win,” not with Springsteen’s crow of freedom but with his own
softer passion, it was already true, and I was blown away.

Was it only me who was awestruck in that moment? I had stared in disbelief at all
the people who continued to get up and leave throughout this guy’s unasked for,
unprepared set—somehow the room had lost about two-thirds of its occupants by the time
he finished. And he didn’t take a bow or even look at us to see whether we appreciated
what he had just done; the second he finished the song he looked over at Jake, who had
since come in with his own group of awaiting admirers, and welcomed him to the stage.
With that, the glory that was present faded from the room, and I was powerless to hold
onto it.

I thought all those weeks I had been going to Open Mic Night for a chance to
claim glory for myself, but secretly—secretly—I had been hoping to be humbled. I had
been hoping to see, and had just been shown, something to which I could not respond, “I
can do better than that.”

Glory comes unbidden and leaves unasked. Glory, the opposite of cliché, cannot
linger. Still we look for it everywhere—in sermons and songs, in smiles and salutes—
hoping to be present when sincerity and skill meet in just the right balance, or whatever it
is that makes it possible. Sometimes the looking itself seems to prevent its arrival. We’re
like kids waiting up for Santa: in trying to stay awake we are sure to fall asleep, and it’s in
that moment that he shows up.
When I got home from the coffee shop, I immediately sat down to record this experience, to wrestle with words until they held some reminder of the awe I felt while watching Bruce—that was his name, I later found out—sing Bruce Cockburn and Bruce Springsteen. I wanted to recapture and comprehend those moments, but in both endeavors I knew this essay would never be more than an echo, a shadow of what was.

My hope is that in looking back so intently, looking to relive the awe I felt for just one moment more (and I tried—not only by writing—but neither Cockburn’s nor Springsteen’s original recordings even come close to recreating the feeling), I might somehow lower my guard once again and let glory in. With that hope, this essay becomes a rumour of glory: that it was here, and that it will return.
SING, DEAR GEMINI

The other day Ash, Steve, and I were dinking around the office when someone brought up the idea of dating people with your same birthday. On the one hand, it was suggested, it could be neat and really, really convenient (as far as memory is concerned\(^9\)). On the other hand, pointed out Ash, it might be dangerous, a form of “cosmological incest.”

As the only one in the room with any experience in this area, I assured them it did have a certain creepiness to it. I once dated a girl exactly one year younger than me, and it was weird, but not in the way you might think. The thing was that we had way more in common than just our birthday.

For one, we met at a concert. A concert we were both performing in. I was standing in the wings after doing my song when I noticed that the girl on stage was pretty good. I mean, I don't want to rag on girls or anything, but the truth is that it's kinda rare to meet a guitar-playing girl who actually has good technique, good rhythm, \textit{and} a good voice. And good song-writing skills.\(^{10}\) This girl had all that plus red hair, and a pink light was shining down like magic, making her all strawberries-and-cream.

\(^9\) My sister got married on my birthday, which has been great for me. I'm thinking of doing the same thing myself.

\(^{10}\) Before you jump to conclusions, let me explain. It's rare to find \textit{anyone}, male or female, that combines all these skills. It seems like no one gets through college without learning a few chords and how to play “Free Fallin’” or that Green Day song that was the emblem of everyone’s senior class a few years back. But so few ever take it further, ever learn how to really play. And given that the proportion of guitar-playing males to the skilled guitar-playing males is completely bonkers, and taking into account that there are that many fewer girls than boys picking up guitars to begin with, it follows that there are very very few girls who can do more than play third-rate Jewel covers. *

* If you were born after, say, 1989, change “Free Fallin’” above to “Wonderwall,” “Green Day” to “Dashboard Confessional,” and “Jewel” to, I don't know—“Michelle Branch”?*
Which brings me to the next thing we had in common: our good looks.

A few days later my brother got her number for me\textsuperscript{11} since they worked in the same building, and we went out a few times. I remember we went on a walk once early on and we were asking each other questions—you know those first-date-ish questions like “What's your favorite ____?” or “If you could change one thing about yourself what would it be?”—well, I'd ask her one of those and silently be thinking up my own answer, and then she'd say exactly what I was thinking. It was weird. I asked her when her birthday was, and when she said, “June 11,” I died. It was like I was falling in love with myself: it felt vaguely wrong—but I was just so damn attractive.

Once, we sat in my living room and sang “Somethin’ Stupid,” crowding together around a sheet of lyrics as I lightly shuffled out the chords. I did Frank Sinatra’s melody and she took Nancy Sinatra’s dark, low harmonies. We blended so naturally that my bones tingled, and I was afraid to look up at her when we got to the refrain: “And then I go and spoil it all by saying something stupid like ‘I love you.’” I walked her home and gave her a quick hug at the door.

That night and on into the next day I felt a dim uneasiness, a sensation akin to hearing the alarm while still too deep in a dream to register its meaning.

Sometime midweek I realized that her initials were S. G. My initials, not counting my middle name, are S. G. Walking to pick her up for our next date, I reeled off D-names in my mind: Danielle, Darcy, Daphne, Deborah, Diane, Dawn, Dorothy, Drew.

\textsuperscript{11} Actually he got a whole date with her. For me. What a bro.
SDG: Sensible days gone.

She was either the perfect girl or I was doing something really stupid. I knocked on her door, and practically before saying hello I demanded to know her middle name, sure it was Desdemona or Delilah or Davida.

Sense of Doom Growing.

“I don't have one,” she smiled, curious.

“Oh,” I said.

Sudden Death, Grover.

So we were just S. G. and S. D. G. 1981 and 1982. We went out a few more times, but nothing ever really happened. Perhaps we would've been star-crossed, ill-fated, cosmologically unsuited—we never got far enough to find out. Perhaps it was the lack of a D that did us in. That's always been the real mystery for me anyway: how some loves catch and some don't. How all the tumblers can line up but still the key won't turn.

How, sometimes, Something Doesn't Go.
MIXED BLESSINGS

My friend Kate makes fun of me because when we go to the grocery store together, which is often, since she has a car and I don’t, I’m always smelling things. I smell the marshmallows through the bag. I smell the circus peanuts and the maple nut goodies and the Necco wafers in the candy aisle. At the checkout I lean in close to the minty gums—spear, pepper, double, winter—and try to inhale their brisk, crinkled scent. I’d open the bleach and sniff if it weren’t a crime not to buy it afterwards.

When we get to the bread aisle I’m hopeless. I crouch a bit and skirt along the shelves with my nose just centimeters from the plastic bags; I hyperventilate in the effort to get as much yeasty musk in my head as possible. I want to gulp in the air, but it’s not a smell you can taste. I want to hold it in forever, but lungs don’t olfactorate either, and they must be emptied to get another whiff through my nose. Kate just laughs and keeps a safe distance so strangers won’t think we’re together.

The truth is that my sense of smell is very weak, and I’m so excited by the few things I can smell that I can’t help myself. For me the world is a mostly colorless smellscape. I can go on breathing for days without being reminded of my nose’s other function, but when I am, I’m as happy as if I’d been kissed.

* 

The first mixed drink I ever had was a screwdriver of sorts. I was at my best friend John’s house after school in the fourth grade. He asked me if I wanted some orange juice. I said yes. He brought me a glass and I drank it, upon which he asked, “Did it taste funny at all?”
“No, why?”

“I put rum in it.”

It was an odd moment for me. I felt alienated from John. Here I thought we were friends, and it didn’t seem all that friendly to slip a guy a drink. But John’s face didn’t hold any malice; it only showed a little mischievous curiosity, the same look I’d see the next year when we found a box of condoms in the attic or when there were reports of a stack of *Playboys* having been dumped in a storm drain. I didn’t know what John’s parents thought about alcohol or what they had taught him about its right or wrongness—his dad was a trucker, almost never home, and his mom was Filipino and spoke no English—but in my family it was pretty clear that alcohol was taboo. I wondered: Have I sinned? Was John a good friend or the type of guy they warn you about at church? Will I be drunk?

I paid close attention to my physiology over the next hour, waiting for some sign of impairment or highness. But I didn’t feel anything, so I assumed John hadn’t put enough in to sway my ninety pounds. Things went on as normal.

*  

In college I dated a girl who wore Moonlight Path, a Bath and Body Works fragrance consisting of lavender and lily. My brother and I would show up at her house, or she’d come over for dinner, and my brother would take one breath and start pumping his eyebrows up and down in mock romantic reverie. “Smells like love, like…Moonlight Path!” he’d croon at her, teasing. I’d be so jealous because I could never smell it; all I could smell for some reason was the faint scent of pizza dough in her hair all the time. Don’t get me wrong—I loved it, it was comforting—but I hated feeling excluded from
something wonderful and womanly, and I worried that she would feel like I couldn’t appreciate her properly because I couldn’t smell her perfume.

* 

The first miracle Jesus performed was to turn water into wine. This he did at a wedding in Cana when his mother gently informed him that the party had run dry. She told some servants to do whatever he said to do, and then she left the room. He had them line up and fill with water six pots of two or three firkins apiece (about 120 gallons all told¹²), and when the servants drew from the pots, they found the water had transformed. Jesus had done so well that the “governor of the feast” joked about how people usually serve the good stuff first and put out the bad stuff once people were too drunk too care or notice. But here, he remarked, they had obviously saved the best for last.

* 

When I disembarked from the plane at the Kimpo International Airport in Seoul, my first impression was the smell. Cigarettes. Korea smelled like Austin, like my grandparents’ trailer, like my great grandmother sitting there at the kitchen table smoking. It was comforting to feel at home at a moment when home was as far to the east as it was to the west.

I was in Korea as a missionary; my job was to explain to people what Mormons believe and to help those who were interested come closer to Jesus by being baptized.

Over the next months I came to know the other smells of Korea—the pungent stink of garlic; the sour tang of kimchi; the ripeness of doenjang, a fermented soybean paste

¹² That’ll be about 600 bottles of wine by the end of the sentence.
much like the Japanese miso—and, despite many expat opinions to the contrary, I never really disliked what I smelled. Even the winter reek of urine and dirt and cold porcelain in a public bathroom was a kind of joy for me, part of the mental map I was constructing of my new home.

*

Mormons don’t drink alcohol. Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints\textsuperscript{13}, received a revelation in 1833 called the Word of Wisdom. In it, the Lord directs the members of the Church to live a law of good health, which includes abstaining from coffee, tea, tobacco, and alcohol.

Thus, as a practicing Mormon, I’ve made the decision not to drink alcohol. My first drink, an accidental highball at John’s house, was also my last.

*

There were things in Korea that I couldn’t smell. When people found out I liked \textit{doenjang} soup, they’d often ask if I’d had \textit{cheonggukjang}, another form of fermented soybean paste: “You like \textit{doenjang}? I thought Americans couldn’t stand the smell.”

“It smells alright to me. It’s delicious, anyway.”

“Oh-ho, you should try \textit{cheonggukjang}, then. It’s like the big brother to \textit{doenjang}. It stinks like shit, but it tastes like a dream.”

“\textit{Cheonggukjang}?"

“Yeah, pay attention when you walk in the market—you’ll smell it!” they’d cackle, tickled to death that an American approved of their foul-smelling edibles. I always tried to

\textsuperscript{13} This is the official name of the “Mormon” church.
keep an eye open for a sign and a nostril open for an unearthly stench (for a Korean to describe something as strong-smelling meant it should be clear as day to an American, I reasoned), but I never caught a whiff. It’s impossible that I didn’t at one time or another walk past a cheonggukjang restaurant. I could smell bundaegi just fine, the roasted silkworm larvae kids were crazy about. It smelt like melting tires and burnt hair mixed with mud. But no cheonggukjang, no delicious shit.

* 

After high school I started waiting tables at a local steakhouse. It was exciting to be challenged at work after spending months mopping floors and stocking shelves at a craft store. Waiting tables was a sudden test of charisma, memory, stamina, and balance, and I was good at it.

During my first month on the job I was required to become certified by the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission in the safe serving of alcoholic beverages. I spent a Saturday learning about the relationship between weight, blood alcohol content, and metabolism and listening to horror stories about litigation against servers. I learned it was legal for a parent to order a beer and hand it to his or her child, but that it wasn’t legal for me to hand alcohol to anyone but a confirmed adult.14 I learned to work story problems: A 200-pound man drinks a beer, a glass of wine, and a margarita over the course of an hour. He also eats a 16-oz. ribeye, a sweet potato, and a wedge salad drizzled with blue cheese dressing. What is his blood alcohol content and, if he orders another drink, should you serve him?

14 This may not still be true; serve responsibly.
More importantly: how big a tip should he leave? I didn’t just have to know how to safely *serve* alcohol; as a server I needed to know how to *sell* alcohol. For the first time in my life I learned the difference between vodka, tequila, gin, rum, whiskey, and liqueur, and I memorized which brands were our house and which were our premium varieties. I had to learn which mixed drinks contained which kinds of alcohol so that when a guest asked for a Colorado Bulldog I could say, “Stoli or Smirnoff?” and not, “Beefeater or Seagrams?” and look like an idiot. Martinis were served “straight up” (no ice), but could also be made “dirty” (with olive juice), “dry” (with less Vermouth), or “with a twist” (meaning you ran a slice of lemon peel around the rim before twisting it and dropping it in the glass); “neat” meant a shot of alcohol with no mixer or ice. Garnishing drinks became second nature for me—a Corona got a lime jammed in the bottleneck; a Lone Star Iced Tea got a lemon wheel wrapped around a cherry and speared with a plastic sword—and asking about preferences became a reflex: “So that’s a Sangria Swirl Meltdown Margarita™ made with our top-shelf Bacardi®, splash of Grand Marnier®, and no salt on the rim? Got it.”

I became proficient in carrying long-stemmed martini glasses filled to the rim in the center of a tray balanced on the tips of my fingers, across the restaurant, smoothly around corners, around bumbling guests, and down onto the table without spilling a drop. Same with tall, top-heavy pilsner glasses frothing with draft beer. I kept a wine key in my back pocket and learned how to throw a white napkin over one wrist and present a bottle of White Zinfandel or Pinot Noir to a table: show the bottle to the ordering guest for approval; insert key and remove cork (this is really hard to do while maintaining a
single, classy grip—an inexperienced hand tries first to hold the bottom of the bottle and then the top, looking for the best leverage); remove cork from key; present to guest so he can smell it, pretentiously; pour small amount of wine into one glass and give it to guest so he can swirl it, sniff it, swig it back, and nod his approval (as if that means anything); fill the other glasses and then the orderer’s glass all while holding the bottle from the bottom, letting the wine slosh just a bit as it pours and then lifting and twisting as you finish each glass; and finally place the bottle on the table with the label facing the guests. Then go check your other tables because you haven’t seen them in a while.

I liked being around alcohol, liked feeling natural around it. I idolized the bartenders a bit, Denver and Gerard, because they knew everything and could wait on the entire bar, the four smoking-section tables, and the thirsty people still waiting at the door—all while making drinks for the other sixty tables, keeping an eye on the basketball game, and sympathizing with whomever needed sympathy. I admired the good feelings among strangers that alcohol seemed to inspire, the camaraderie associated with a common hobby.

I liked being able to recommend a red wine with steak, a white wine with chicken or fish, liked gently upselling to our better brands.

Once in a while someone would ask me my personal preference on a wine or margarita. I’d stumble a bit, slightly embarrassed that I’d never once tasted a single beverage that came from our bar. “I’m only nineteen,” I’d say, feeling prudish and feeble, “but many of our guests seem to like the Kendall-Jackson chardonnay.”

*
Once a year or so my sense of smell will break down entirely. I don’t know if I’m ill or what, but for a week or ten days I’ll only be able to smell one smell. I privately call it the “Edward Scissorhands Smell,” because the first time I ever recall smelling it was the night I saw the Tim Burton film of that name. I was 13. My parents had just bought me a sleeping bag in anticipation of a Boy Scout backpacking trip I’d be going on that summer—a mummy bag, they call this kind, because there’s only an opening at the top—and I, encased, hopped into the TV room to watch with my older sisters.

I became hot wearing a bag meant for sub-zero temperatures. The movie was supremely weird. And I noticed that everything smelled funny—not bad, but a little bit sick. The “blah” way my stomach feels in the morning if I think about fudge or cotton candy. Like the memory of vomit or the shadow of nausea. I thought it might be the bag, but the smell remained with me the next day and the next. It made my food taste off and my clothes feel dirty. I’d try to forget about it by breathing shallowly while sitting in class or reading a book, but then I’d forget and take a heavier breath, filling my nose with the scent of sick—it was like being brought out of a daydream by a sudden noise and realizing that life would never be as good as I could imagine. I’ve been a little apprehensive of *Edward Scissorhands* ever since, even after the Smell finally left and life returned to normal.

It seems stupid to attribute such power to a scent, but we all feel this power don’t we? It takes only the faintest whiff of something to send us reeling into memories—my aunt’s apartment in Manhattan and her cat, Bob; the flat I inhabited one summer in London; my grandparents trailer home. The tiniest trace of car exhaust on a cold day can send me flying back to Seoul, and I’m sure it takes nothing at all—the breath exhaled
from a can of biscuit dough or the cold mist escaping the freezer door—to steep you in years of recollection. Small wonder I live in fear of a smell: our noses are time machines and resurrectors over which we have only limited control.

I’m so embarrassed to admit any of this to you. I’m very sensitive about my insensitivity, about my wonky sense of smell. Maybe I should be more mature about it, but I really do feel like the kid who’s just gotten glasses and knows his friends will see him tomorrow at school. I’m mortified. I’m jealous of those for whom life really is a bouquet of roses. Every week I find myself in a room where someone says, “What’s that smell?” and I don’t know if they mean “that awful stench” or “that delicious aroma” until they elaborate. Is it me? Do I stink?

And so I go to the store and pump my lungs enthusiastically at the bread and the gum and the marshmallows, happy just to have the fleeting sensation of a full life. The air passing through my nose momentarily excites my broken sense and it flickers, like a poorly wired Christmas light; me, an outcast Rudolph.

* 

John the Baptist was an ascetic. He scratched out a living in the wild by eating locusts and wild honey; he wore a rough garment of camel’s hair. He didn’t drink alcohol. He was known for his fasting. Said Jesus: “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.”

Why would God direct one man to abstain and another to partake?

*
There was another thing I couldn’t smell in Korea: drunk breath. Missionaries attract drunks like cheonggukjang attracts flies, and I was no exception. My missionary buddies were always telling me of all the times they’d been kissed by some happy inebriate who proved faster than expected: “The breath, man! I mean, it’d be funny—no harm done—but the breath. It’s like death.”

It wasn’t just in Korea that I’d heard about this; alcohol breath is a cliché, the butt of so many sitcom jokes and mordant sonnets. But it was in Korea that I realized it was missing from my life, that I’d walked the streets for months and talked to countless sots without ever reeling back in disgust. And this prompted another question: How many drunken people had I spoken to without any idea they were drunk? They don’t always try to kiss you, and if I couldn’t smell the evidence, how could I know who I was speaking with?

* 

God has always given commandments that seem arbitrary or contradictory. He withheld pork from the ancient Israelites, but allowed it to Christian Jews of the New Testament. “Thou shalt not kill” was preceded by the command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and it was followed by the command to Saul to “slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.” He made John a teetotaler and Jesus a bartender.

To Adam and Eve he gave the Garden of Eden, filled with all the good things he’d made, but he withheld the fruit of one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This presented a problem: life in Eden seemed good—great even—but how could
Adam and Eve know it was good unless they ate that fruit? At the same time, how could they know the good without also coming to know the bad—one tree, one fruit. They seemed stuck between sweet ignorance and bitter bliss.

They ate, and it’s been a mixed blessing ever since.

*

One day a few years ago I was visiting home and had arranged to meet some old friends from high school. Autumn and I met at the steakhouse where I had worked, and we got a table in the smoking section next to the bar. Over the course of an hour or so, people from way back when dropped in to chat for a while. Autumn and I got an appetizer to share and Autumn drank beer and smoked.

Story problem: Autumn, a 130-pound woman, drinks a few beers over the course of “an hour or so.” She also has some steak nachos, but the exact number is unclear because (a) she’s also smoking, (b) you’re a boy who loves nachos, and (c) Laurence shows up at the same time as the nachos and he is a boy who likes nachos. You’re not sure how many “a few” beers is either. And your TABC certification has long expired. When Autumn offers to drive you home do you (a) accept, (b) decline, or (c) forget to even consider whether this is a problem because you can’t smell her breath, have little sense of what intoxicated looks like (is it that much different from what Autumn was like as a teenager?), and have never in your life wondered if you yourself were safe to drive, having never had a drink?

I let her drive.
On the way home Autumn went to make a left turn onto a busy, divided, four-lane road (my house was to the right, but I thought it impolite to point out how much we’d all forgotten of our hometown geography in five years) and pulled into the path of an oncoming car. The driver had the presence of mind to swerve away from our vehicle, smashing at 35 mph into the front, driver’s side fender instead of the driver’s door. After confirming my own status as safe and unbroken, I looked to Autumn and the other car’s passengers—all safe—before it occurred to me that Autumn might’ve been impaired. There was a concrete wall that made seeing far to the left difficult at that turn, but this wasn’t a spot I’d ever seen an accident before. How many beers had she had? How long had we sat at the restaurant? Still, no one, not the police, not my parents when they showed up, not the driver of the other car, questioned her blood alcohol content, so I let it go. I didn’t trust my own judgment, of course, the way I don’t trust my sense of smell, so if no one noticed anything odd about her behavior, that was good enough for me.

* 

A large part of our sense of taste—some say up to 90%—is really just our sense of smell helping our taste buds out. So I can’t help but wonder whether what I taste as an unbearably delicious combination of sharp cheddar, golden grilled buttered bread, and basil-laden tomato soup is, to someone of full olfactory powers, a life-altering revelation. Whether my predilection for pumpkin and cinnamon is mere child’s play, and whether what I experience as a Fourth of July sparkler is, to the gourmet, a full-on fireworks display. Have I been coloring with six faded crayons my whole life while others have hundreds of tints and hues to enjoy?
I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking, “Hmm: seems like this guy’s sense of smell works just fine to me. He’s spends his whole life smelling things, things I’ve never even noticed.” But that’s just it—once I realized I wasn’t smelling as much as I should have been, I became slightly obsessed with smelling in an effort to compensate, like an undergrad who overdrinks to make up for years of parental supervision. There may not be any harm it, and I may not actually be missing as much as I think I am—smell and taste, like pain, are all subjective, anyway. But, on the other hand, there’s no telling how much trouble I’m spared by not smelling so much—Korea might’ve been a much different place to me had I a more potent sniffer.

* 

John the Baptist never raised a glass of wine at a wedding, just as I will never pop open a cold beer at a barbeque. Did that bother him? Did he feel like he was missing out on something important in life? Did he see Jesus “eating and drinking” and feel jealous, or did he understand that some things are mixed blessings?

If nothing else, John understood that he didn’t understand everything. When Jesus came to be baptized by John, John at first declined, saying, “I have need to be baptized of thee.”

Jesus’ response was more a request than a reason. “Suffer it to be so for now,” he said, and that was good enough for John: he suffered him. Maybe John never knew the reason why.

Maybe John was genetically predisposed to alcoholism.

*
The thing about alcohol that most tempts me is its variety, the sheer number of
tastes and smells it promises. Thousands of forms, brands, flavors. Wheat, rice, barley,
hops, corn, potato, grape, apple, honey, sugar, juniper berry. Single malt, blended, pure
pot still. Cabernet, Chardonnay, Merlot, Shiraz, Pinot gris, Port, Muscatel, Madeira. Jack
and coke, scotch and soda, Seven and seven. Hundreds of bottles of liqueur lined up
against the mirror behind the bar, creating the illusion of hundreds more. Variety: the
spice of life.

Distilling, fermenting, brewing. Mixing and pouring as art forms. Even the glasses
are a science. Tall, thin flutes keep the hand’s heat from warming chilled champagne;
short, broad snifters do just the opposite for brandy. Wine glasses force one to inhale the
bouquet when imbibing the wine; aroma is said to be the most important part of a wine’s
taste: “The nose is fruity with hints of black cherries and raspberries; it has an oaky finish,
high complexity, well balanced, soft tannins.”

I would like to smell those things, to taste those things. The pub crawl, the wine-
tasting, the champagne celebration. I would like die knowing I got to sample everything
life had to offer.

By choice and by chance, however, there are some things I will never smell, will
never taste.
LEFTOVERS

The onion begins to sweeten in the pan as the heat and butter loosen its natural sugars. Its white translucence has been stained pink with the juice from a freshly diced red bell pepper, and when the two just begin to char I’ll throw in some precooked, frozen fajita chicken.

Quesadillas are about convenience. My brother lived in Mexico, and he says that they are last-resort food, the stuff Mexicans are almost ashamed to make because it means there’s nothing in the house but crusty tortillas and a butt of asadero. My onion and pepper are fresh acquisitions, but the corn tortillas and pre-shredded cheese I’ll pull out of the fridge in a minute are leftovers of a meal I made for friends earlier in the week. I rummage around the pantry for a minute, checking my roommates’ shelves as well as my own for possibilities—canned corn, drained and pan-roasted, would be a perfect compliment to what I’ve already got—but I come up empty-handed, except for a few stray Cheez-its.

When the chicken is warmed through I turn the mixture out onto a plate and wash the pan quickly in the sink, drying it off with a paper towel before returning it to the burner. We only have one frying pan, but somehow we manage to be continually stocked with the luxury of paper towels. Bachelors.

Too much oil slides from the bottle into the pan, but I’ll let the first tortilla soak it up. It’s nice when the filling is already hot because then you can toast the tortillas quickly, making them crisp. The pan is so hot, though, that the still-uncooked top tortilla begins to curl, making it difficult to flip the thing without half the contents spilling out. Flip anyway;
spill anyway. I grab a quick bite of chicken before it burns, and I stack the tortillas for the next quesadilla on top to pre-warm them and prevent further curling. Is this what Emily eats all alone in Idaho, I wonder? I make a mental note to ask her in my next email, a continuing effort to discover the girl behind the cute bangs and brown eyes I met last December while traveling. It’s not a preferable situation, this proto-courting by electronic correspondence, but it’ll do for now. After all, there have always been chance encounters, wooings by mail, long-distance loves. And it’s been three years since my last relationship ended, since I became a leftover.

Quesadillas on a plate, pan in the sink: my roommates aren’t around this weekend to care if I let the dishes pile up. When the cheese is cooled enough not to ooze out at the pressure, I cut each quesadilla in half with a pizza slicer we probably picked up in one of the dozens of moves made by past roommates, those periodic disentanglements of property that punctuate the bachelor’s life and always leave some items in limbo. I find a jar of salsa in the fridge and head to the table.

My mom wonders occasionally why I haven’t found a girlfriend out here. Plenty of groceries at the store, so to speak.

In the dining room I spoon salsa over my dinner and eat with my hands. Cold tomato, warm tortilla: leftovers more delicious than the meal they were left out of. Quesadillas aren’t a last-resort food, I think, aren’t merely a merciful end to orts—I couldn’t have done better if I’d chosen each element fresh and on purpose. Something about the mistake of circumstance makes this meal greater than the sum of its ingredients.

Still, it would taste better if I had someone to share it with.
THE DEVIL'S HIGHWAY

In twelve hours it will be just before dawn and I'll be forced to make a decision: do I keep going forward or do I turn back? I'll have been driving for twenty-two hours straight without more than a fifteen-minute break.

I'll be 30 miles north of I-70 on US Route 191 in Utah; snow will have coated the highway and packed down into a thick, uneven ice. It'll be cold enough that snowpack is still dry and, thus, not too slick, but I'll be able to feel that the tires aren’t crunching into it so much as they are rumbling over it, and this will worry me. The asphalt road ahead of me will appear snow-gray in the headlights, a ghost road.

If I continue on, it'll be 120 miles to Provo, my destination. If I turn around, I'll have to cover those 30 miles back to the interstate and then drive 100 miles west to Salina before being able to cut around the mountains and follow the valleys north for another 100 miles into Provo. 230 miles instead of 120. Four hours instead of two. It'll seem simple, but then I'll think of the climb ahead if I continue on. Soldier Summit is a high pass, and the weather might easily tip against me. As the sun rises, the ice might melt and refreeze, making the road dangerously slippery, and even though the snow will be falling only sparsely in that moment of decision, at a higher altitude it might already be piling up. I won’t be able to see the mountains against the pre-dawn sky, but I’ll have the distinct impression that I’m driving into an unseen winter storm, that the mountains won’t be visible even when the sun does come up. The only cars I’ll see will seem to be fleeing the other direction, having already made the decision I'll be facing.
Weather, drive-time, road condition. A 2-lane canyon road I know well, a 4-lane interstate I don’t. I will see all the factors, will be able to hold them in my mind, but I won’t be able to combine them effectively, to assign each its proper weight. After twenty-two hours of focused consciousness, I’ll no longer trust my judgment, and to make matters worse, I won’t feel safe pulling over to sleep in the shadow of a possible blizzard with less than half a tank of gas out in the Utah desert. I’ll have to keep moving for two more hours at least, and every minute I deliberate will be two more minutes on the road if I turn around. I’ll suddenly feel very much like a kite, very much at the mercy of the wind.

Twelve hours before, I’m somewhere between Amarillo and the Texas-New Mexico border, and I glance down at the trip odometer and see that it reads 666.6 miles. Nine or ten hours out of Houston, I decide to take it as a good omen despite the biblical blip on my mental radar—I’m not superstitious, really. Besides, the weather has been wonderful, the car running beautifully, and I am making good time, already more than a third of the way to where I am headed: Provo, Utah.

But my mind continues working the way it does during the peaceful tedium of interstate travel. This is I-40, a river of asphalt laid over old Route 66’s broken spine. In a few hundred miles I will turn north on 491, which, until 2003, was US Route 666—“The Devil’s Highway.”

Six-sixty-six point six. Sixty-six. Six hundred sixty-six. I should’ve taken these as a bad omen.
Houston to Provo is a twenty-four hour drive. I’ve made it several times, both ways, but this is to be my first time doing it alone. As excited as I am to see my brother and his new wife as well as some old friends, I am just as eager for the opportunity to test my endurance. There’s something thrilling about the long haul, about trying to cover the most distance in the least time. Having both means and motive, I can do this hard thing: I can drive 1500 miles in one day, no sleep, no stops except for food and gas. This is something that can’t be done with parents or kids; it is something I probably won’t be able to do myself in another ten years. Male, mid-twenties: my sense of invincibility and my bladder control are at an all-time high. Unmarried, out of my parents’ house: my commitments and personal attachments seem at an all-time low. Danger and discomfort will have a hold on no one but myself.

The last time I made this trip I was pulled over for speeding right about here, but as of yet there is no sign of the police and my cautious seven-over-the-limit isn’t likely to draw any. Praise cruise control. Praise road trips and the long winter breaks from school that make travel like this possible.

I imagine that most people would hesitate to call this “traveling.” This sort of stripped-down, stop-for-nothing road trip seems more like transportation than travel, and I agree. When we say “travel,” we don’t mean the getting-there, we mean the being-there. If this were a plane ride I would have immediately gone to sleep and tried to forget the whole thing, and if I were conscious after takeoff, I’d have let my mind drift to the poles of the trip—to the people and places yet ahead, to the family and friends waiting to hear about it.
But this isn’t a plane, and I don’t want the miles to disappear. For me, this kind of travel is a meditation. After the first few hundred miles—from Houston to Dallas—it isn’t hard to stay awake or alert anymore. I’ve hit my stride. My hands manage the wheel, the music, the heater, a fountain drink. My feet move automatically to cover the brake or reestablish the cruise. My lips form the words as my throat sends up the notes to match each crooning voice from the car speakers; seventy miles an hour or more, yet I’m never out of breath. My eyes make a circuit from road to mirror to clock to dash to radio to road again, and my mind busily interprets the data and crunches the numbers. It is calculating my average mileage per hour, my gas mileage thus far, my estimated time of arrival based on current speed, over and over every hour as I creep along the Rand McNally pages out of order: Texas (spread over two pages), New Mexico, Colorado, Utah. I am watching for the green road signs—Albuquerque 95, Gallup 237—and then happily counting down on the odometer as the mile markers count up.

All this effort is, however, mostly mechanical. It’s reflexive, a state of rhythmic bliss. To drive across America is to mimic the landscape in how it both flies by and remains motionless. While one level of my consciousness is industriously concerned with piloting the car, and another level is enjoying and singing along to the music, on another plane it is completely unoccupied. It is serene and open. I feel as if the floor has been swept and all the drawers have been pulled open, and any slight bump can send a memory tossing up into view. A sign or a sight along the road will prompt reflection and connection—to this same trip the year before, to another trip halfway around the world, to a story or a face. Time blurs in this state—I am imagining the road ahead, how when it
gets dark I will tilt the mirrors down to keep the headlights out of my eyes and allow the night to be complete. I’ll lean way forward over the steering wheel and look up through the windshield to the stars for as long as I dare take my eyes off the road. I’ll listen to jazz, music in which the room is as much an instrument as the piano or bass, music in which the singer’s breath is as telling as her voice, and I’ll imagine the ceiling of that room is the sky above me and its walls are the invisible horizon. On the very darkest stretch of road in the very darkest hour of night—somewhere in Colorado between Cortez and Dove Creek—I’ll pull over and turn off the car and stand in the cold under the stars, slightly high on the thinner air there, and softly sing out loud until I can’t stand the chill.

I’m imagining all this, but really I’m remembering. It’s a year ago and I’m making this trip with my sister and a friend, hoping not to wake them up as I sing along. It’s two years ago and I’m making it in reverse with my brother and sister, fleeing work and exams to enjoy Christmas break at home. It’s four years ago, and I’m making the trip for the first time, with my parents, and I’m frustrated that Dad wants to pull over and sleep for an hour even though I feel perfectly awake.

It’s five years ago and I’m back in Korea, sitting in the dark of my room, legs drawn up half-lotus, breathing slowly and deliberately. Every thought that rises is either shooed away or quickly written down for remembering later; when I finally achieve a sense of peace and calm I can begin to plan and pray. I haven’t had that kind of clarity since I left Seoul, have I?

Except for in the car. In the car I am awake again. I keep lunging for the pen and paper on the empty passenger’s seat to write down the thoughts as they come so I won’t
forget: 666.6, 66, 666. At a McDonald’s miles ago, a metal air-conditioning vent fell from the ceiling and clipped a customer in the shoulder as she waited in line to order. I cautiously looked up at the ceiling above the table where I sat.

I pass into New Mexico without ever hearing sirens; the speed limit jumps up ten miles-per-hour, and the signs inform me it is only enforced by aircraft. In my mind the pages of the atlas turn to the new state and I imagine myself as a kite, string tied to the front door of my parents’ house in Houston where I’m spending the holidays. In the morning I told my mom goodbye and the string began to pay out as I made my way up and over Texas, blown north and west by the winter wind. As daylight closes I am still afloat with the wind at my back. The line is tense but not tight, tracing a gentle curve as it negotiates the growing weight of its length.

Or is the wind at my front? Do kites face forward into the sky or do they face backwards away from it? Are they being held back by the string or are they holding onto it to keep from flying away completely?

Minutes after I cross the border and the sun touches the earth, the rain starts, and it won’t stop for all of the 450 miles I’ll be in New Mexico. Sometimes it is a misty rain that windshield wipers can’t ever seem to wipe away, and other times it consists of fat, violent drops that obscure the highway’s painted lines completely. Rain like this frays nerves; it ruins carefully chosen playlists. My only satisfaction comes from daring to pass the eighteen wheelers churning up huge vortices of water in their wake or in seeing their lights motionless by the side of the road, their drivers either too tired or too nervous to
continue. I turn off the music, flex my hands against the steering wheel, stretch my neck this way and that to stave off the impending ache. Nighttime, my favorite time to drive, is ruined.

Perhaps it was a bad omen after all?

The rain succeeds in making me miss my turn off onto the Devil’s Highway. Somehow, inexplicably, I miss Gallup altogether—the only major intersection for a hundred miles, the only light in the desert darkness brighter than a combination casino/truck stop. It takes me until just over the Arizona border to rectify my mistake; I’m too cautious to attempt crossing the soaked median and travelling too fast to catch a rare crossover. Eventually I find an exit and follow a series of very rough roads along and under the interstate for miles until I can get back on. When I see Gallup it’s a wonder how I missed it; it’s like an oil refinery in a sea of black: gleaming, shiny, its every light reflected in the wet pavement. I’ve lost maybe half an hour, but again I’m Utah-bound.

The rain, the missed exit: inconveniences, sure, but not particularly dangerous ones. The New Mexico interstate is almost uniformly straight and flat and well paved; the only real danger seems to be the “falling rocks” drivers are warned of in the final miles leading into Albuquerque, and even those are no more than invisible threats. Still, if this trip was a horror movie, I’d consider these first hours a compelling opening. I was lulled into a false sense of security in Texas and then frazzled a bit by shadows in New Mexico, by the perceived need for constant vigilance. Missing that turn-off is a blow to my confidence, and now, when vigilance is more necessary than ever, when I’ll be rattling
through the Navajo Nation on the former Route 666 during the witching hour, I’ll begin to doubt myself.

No, I’m not superstitious. I’m religious, but in a practical way. I believe in sin and repentance, in grace and compassion. Sure, I believe in the devil, but I’m more interested in his relation to my soul than to my measly body. I’m more scared of regrets and missed opportunities than I am of myths and numbers. 666: the number of the beast, according to the Revelation of St. John. It has something to do with the end of the world, but what, I don’t exactly know. I don’t pretend to know. I don’t know if I want to know. 666 has never been more than a playground smirk, a muttered rumor about popes or politicians, an eyebrow raised at the end of a ghost story. My sister tells me of the man at the drug store who suddenly adds a pack of gum to his purchase to avoid a charge of six dollars and sixty-six cents. A friend in middle school explains how, by changing letters to numbers and performing some holy arithmetic—never mind the details; a brother’s friend’s uncle explained it all quite clearly, he swears—such-and-such band name is shown to be a code masking a group of musical antichrists. Even I do it—working as a waiter one day I serve three people at table 222. At the end of the meal one guest hands me a couple of twenties and asks me to keep five bucks as a tip; I close the tab, count out my portion, and make the change: $6.66. I share this in hushed tones by the salad cooler for the rest of the night.

This number’s power over me doesn’t come from what it is but what it isn’t. It means nothing to me, so it can mean anything. Coincidence becomes augury; facts become portents. It isn’t that I begin to see this trip as marked, that I believe I have been
given warnings to stop or to turn around. It’s that I know that luck runs in streaks. And, as with the rain constantly streaming down the windshield, it takes more than a moment’s swiping aside to change the forecast.

I drive north through the reservation. Where the night is usually calm and wide, tonight it is close and very dark. The mesas aren’t visible. The rain worsens. My kite climbs in the wind; the keys hanging from the ignition sway with the movement of the car as it darts like lightning across the map. This experiment in self-reliance continues.

I wonder: Am I bound to home or to Utah?

When I was a teenager, my mom wouldn’t be able to sleep until all her kids were home. Once my older sisters had moved out, and while my younger siblings were still young, this meant me. I’d habitually push my midnight curfew back ten or fifteen minutes—nothing extreme—and when I’d get home, often she’d be on the couch waiting in a half-doze. “You’re home?” she’d say in the grave-tired voice of a parent.

“I’m home,” I’d say and run upstairs.

On nights when she wasn’t waiting up, she’d expect me to poke my head into her dark room and let her know I’d made it. I can’t remember a single time when she or Dad didn’t acknowledge that I’d come back. A few times, usually when I’d pushed curfew later than normal, I tiptoed upstairs without stopping by their room. In the morning, inevitably, I’d be wakened with a plaintive, “David, you didn’t tell me when you got home last night.”
Me, with trumped-up grogginess: “Sorry, mom.” What excuse could I have made? I considered using the “I did, but you don’t remember because you were asleep” excuse, but that was too close to the one I used—often true—when she woke me for school and I failed to get up.

Even after all these years I’ve been at college, I get the feeling she’s always been waiting for me to come home. Once, during a visit, I casually said something about “when I get home to Provo,” referring to my dorm room at school. She got a little offended: “David, this is your home.”

“But Mom, my stuff’s in Utah. My friends are all in Utah. I live in Utah.”

“This is your home.”

Now I go to graduate school in Ohio, though I still come home for the breaks. Mom still takes me to Wal-Mart at the first opportunity and tries to buy me everything I could possibly want. We walk and she prompts, “Ice cream? Frozen pizza? How about some granola bars; you always liked those.” Junk food is nice, but I always explain that what I really want are some home-cooked meals: her lasagna, her tacos, even her tuna casserole. I’m serious when I say this to her. And yet, here I am on Christmas break, busily driving away from Texas to see old friends in Utah.

When we talk on the phone, which is rare—I always wait for her to call me rather than calling myself—we often talk about the insomnia that’s plagued her in recent years.

I am driving north on 491, compulsively flicking the headlights off and back on just to check whether they were really on to begin with. It seems so dark until I twist the lever on the steering column and the lights go out for real, leaving me in a blackness so
complete I wonder that I even doubted in the first place. At the other end of the line, my mom has gone to bed and is either sleeping peacefully or is lying there in the dark, thinking, waiting for the sleep that might not come. Either way, she’s expecting a phone call in the morning, an indication that I’ve made it to Utah safe and sound. If she is asleep, then it’s likely that there is no one in the whole world who is thinking of me right now.

It takes very little caffeine to keep me awake for a night of driving. I’m not sure if this is because of how I respond to caffeine or how I respond to driving. At my last stop for gas before dark I bought a 20-oz. bottle of A&W Cream Soda and a 32-oz. fountain drink filled with Coke and ice. That’s all I’ll need: roughly the same amount of caffeine as in an 8 oz. coffee. Much more sugar, though.

It’s curious, however, that I’m also the type of guy who responds heavily to anesthesia. After a recent knee surgery, I teetered in and out of consciousness for hours under the lingering effects of the drugs, and when I finally surfaced enough to go home, the nurse didn’t trust me to remember her instructions and had my roommate repeat them back to her before she let me go. She joked about how long I’d been out—much longer than most patients. I have similar trouble every morning. Waking up is difficult for me, as if I enjoy the annihilation of my consciousness more than I enjoy being awake. Some days I seem to linger in my dreams for hours after waking, never able to shake them off entirely.
Funny also that car consciousness—my insurance on a trip like this—is for me something that hinges on something tiny: when I’m in the driver’s seat I can stay awake indefinitely, but when I’m in the passenger’s seat, I’m out like a light. Three feet is the difference between here and gone. The low rumble of the engine and the vibrations emanating from tire and pavement put me right to sleep—I habitually get in a nap in the eight minutes or so it takes for my mother to drive me to Wal-Mart on my visits home.

Even after the Cream Soda has grown warm and the ice in the Coke has melted, I continue to drink them because it gives my hands another thing to do. Bringing my knee up to steady the wheel while my hands twist one way on the bottle, another way on the cap, is only a second’s work, but it is just enough movement to keep me alert. I’m awake, though; I’m not nodding. But looking at the road roll toward you for eighteen hours is hypnotizing. Even the rain, which at first is a deterrent to mental numbness, eventually becomes soothing in its uniformity, its regularity. I thought the rain would stop when I made it to Colorado—Colorado has always been nothing but fine weather whenever I’ve made this trip—but it just keeps on falling.

I pass the place where I would’ve stopped the car, gotten out, and stretched my legs. I would’ve welcomed the sting of the cold, but with the rain and the utter lack of stars it’s just not worth it. Instead, the road bends westward at Dove Creek and a few miles later I pass into Utah—the turns come much closer together now, which is good because my patience is thinning this far along. I stop thinking so much about the end of the trip and start thinking only of the next leg. Dove Creek to Monticello: 23 miles. At 60 mph that would take 23 minutes, five or six songs’ worth of driving. At 70 mph you do 7
miles every 6 minutes, so that would make it almost 20 minutes. 80 mph is one third faster than 60, so it should take only around 16 or 17 minutes—is that right? I can keep driving for that long. I tell myself: If I just make it to the next turn. I can always stop there.

I won’t stop. At Monticello I turn north on 191; 56 miles to Moab. 56 miles, that’s maybe 40, 45 minutes of driving. After that it’s 30 miles to the interstate—20-some-odd minutes more—then west for 25 miles to where 191 splits north again. I can take it in shifts. No need to get too far ahead. Concentrate on the next stretch of road. Sing along with whatever the radio picks up. Sing loudly.

But I notice that the raindrops are starting to flake just a bit. They are sticking to the windshield. I may have left old US 666 behind, but my luck hasn’t changed. At least it isn’t sticking to the road just yet.

A year and a half after graduating high school, I decided to become a missionary. I sent in my application to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints headquarters and waited for them to send a reply telling me where I’d be going. It would be my first time away from home for longer than a week or so, and it was to be two solid years—no visits, no phone calls except for Christmas morning and Mothers’ Day. When the letter arrived on a cool day in October I read the words “South Korea” with excitement; my mom quietly said, “That’s too far.”

While in Korea, I communicated with my family via letter. Each week I described the people I had met, the things I had eaten, the progress I was making with the
language. I was careful to temper any disappointments I had or any dangerous situations I’d found myself in—confrontations with roaring drunks, getting lost for an hour or two, feeling dizzy while riding my bike when fasting—I knew that my mom, seven-thousand miles east, sixteen time zones west, and ten days behind by post, would be tempted to read despair in discouragement, death in danger. I remember she said one time to me, after I’d returned to Texas, “You were the first kid that I wasn’t really ready to leave home. With your sisters, I was ready, but with you…”

The funny thing is that I never once felt like I was in physical danger in Korea. It was only in writing about things later, at the end of each week, that I ever understood that my experiences might be seen that way. I was twenty; I was invincible. I could eat anything put in front of me. I could hold it as long as necessary, until I finally found a bathroom. Only a few lines a week connected me to home and the people there who worried about me—worrying about them back was mostly futile. What could I really do for them but pray?

The only time I sensed my mortality in Korea was in the last two weeks before I returned home. I felt that things couldn’t get any better for me—I was healthy, happy, at peace with God. I said to myself that if I died then, it wouldn’t be so bad since I didn’t seem to have any unfinished business. That thought made me suddenly suspicious, though, and I looked both ways twice at every crosswalk during the rest of my days in Korea, certain a renegade taxi or out-of-control city bus would mow me down in my prime. My suspicions proved unfounded.
It’s been twelve hours since I saw 666.6 on the odometer, and things couldn’t be worse. The last 150 miles have been snowy, and my nerves are ragged. I’m 30 miles north of the interstate and on the home stretch, but I’m thinking of turning around and going another way because of the weather. The atlas is balanced on one knee and propped against the steering wheel—I’m trying to gauge distances and calculate times in between judging the road’s worsening condition and imagining what the climb ahead will be like if I continue. Soldier Summit is steep and I’ve a feeling that there’s a storm ahead, but turning around now means at least four more hours of driving. I’ve got to make a decision, but I no longer trust my reasoning.

The first stirrings of dawn begin to reveal the world around me, and in the half-light I can’t at first tell what I’m seeing. Where I expect to see brown winter plains stretching away to the right and left, I see pink washes of color—broad snow drifts—it’s as if I went to sleep in Texas only to wake up on the moon.

I’m not sure what finally tips the scale, but I slow down and make a full turnaround, careful not to slide off onto the shoulder. The kite string goes momentarily slack as I drift back towards Texas, and then it pulls briskly tight when I turn west onto I-70 half an hour later, as if a fresh gust of wind has sailed in with the morning. It feels like I’ve made the right decision: the asphalt is clear and dry, and the lanes are wide, divided from the opposing traffic by a grassy median. I consider the next hundred miles, do some quick math and push the accelerator down to bring my speed up close to ninety, knowing full well it’s not the best idea. But I’m worried that my judgment will only deteriorate
further the longer I’m out here, so I determine to make the best use of good weather and road.

The sun finally peeks over the southeastern horizon, more to my left than behind me, lighting up the San Rafael Swell in a high relief of winter pastels. As the road curls through the canyonland I see rock faces undulating in ocher and fuchsia, each ridge tipped with burning dawn and shining snow. I’m dazzled. It’s a wash of weathered complexity, a stadium-sized arabesque, a lightshow more dense than any night sky or Fourth of July. And where seconds before the atmosphere was a dark curtain, it is suddenly glass clear, the sky is as wide and empty as I’ve ever known it to be. The effect of one against the other—of the shattered stone rainbow against the void of fathomless space—is sublime, and for a moment I think that this is what the omens must have portended: a heaven after the hell.

But I’m wrong and I know it. Rapture doesn’t come out of delirium. Heaven is clarity, not this numb panic. I’m insensate. My eyes are wide, but they can’t really focus. I try to clench my mind, but it isn’t a muscle.

And then a huge black mass of clouds sails in from the northwest—what I had been fleeing on 191 turns out to be a storm straddling the entire state. For a moment the dawn and dark hover together over the interstate—this could be the plain of Armageddon—but the December sun is no match for the storm as it quickly dumps a fuzz of snow over the road, then a glaze. In seconds my situation becomes dire; I find myself crouching along at less than 20 mph with half a dozen other cars trying to stay in the tire tracks of an eighteen wheeler. The snow is wet and sticks to the tires, creating a layer
of almost no traction, and what is melted under the pressure of passing wheels quickly refreezes into a layer of shiny ice. I turn on the defroster and the wipers to keep the windshield clear and hunch over the steering wheel with bleary-eyed apprehension, but I’m having trouble concentrating for more than a few seconds at a time. I realize that I haven’t eaten in at least eight hours; that at this speed it’ll be at least three more to Salina and the first gas station or restaurant; that now I really can’t pull over and sleep because of too much cold and too little gas; that the closest snowplows are 60 miles away and travelling on the other side of the median; that I suddenly have to pee very, very badly.

Over the next few dozen miles I manage to keep moving forward without incident, but the tire marks left by the eighteen wheelers are filling more and more quickly as they get farther and farther ahead—being so heavy, big trucks can continue to push ahead in the snow while my car, light without the weight of extra passengers and their luggage, tends to slip and slide at the merest turn of the wheel—what I wouldn’t give for the weight and companionship of a sibling or two. When the snow lets up a bit or the road is straight, I push the car faster, as fast as I dare. When things get scary I take my foot off the pedal and let the car slow down, trying to read the minutest amount of drift from the tires. For a while I try to stay close to a pickup in front of me, taking cues for my speed from the imagined bravery and experience of its driver, but eventually I have to pull over and pee at the side of the road and it moves out of sight. A few miles later I pass the pickup, its driver at the side of road relieving himself. I smile weakly and drive on, reluctantly taking the lead.
All the time I’m crunching the numbers, bringing myself close to desperation with various estimated times of arrival. I edge the speedometer up to twenty-five, to thirty, to thirty-five, determined to make a dent in the miles left to go. To forty miles per hour. The road rises and falls beneath me, and the only good indications of its curving right or left are scattered signs and fading tracks. Several times I hear the noise of the rumble strips on the outer edge of the road when I’ve drifted too far from center. I change to the left lane, marking virgin snow with my passing.

Just as I am reaching the top of a rise, my foot having coaxed the accelerator into maintaining my speed against gravity, I make an instinctual tap on the brakes to check my momentum before the descent down the other side. It’s a reflex, nothing more, but I immediately feel the rear tires lift from the road and the back of the car begin to lurch around towards the front. The car—for twenty-four hours an agile extension of my body, weightless as a paper airplane—is suddenly 3000 pounds of dead weight in a full-fledged spinout.

Funny how crisis brings the clarity I missed an hour before. In the space of a single second I note the slope of the shoulder I am gliding inexorably towards and turn with the spin to see if any cars are following close enough to be dangerous. Cars: none; shoulder: steep enough to scare me. I can’t see the ground under the snow, any bumps or boulders that might cause the car to roll. In that same instant, my mind stretches to the poles of the trip, back and forth along the atlas’s pages—from mother’s house to brother’s—and I realize that the point B of that itinerary may have suddenly shifted.
considerably. It’s morning, and Andrew is waiting for me to arrive; Mom is waiting for a call.

In this helpless moment, I can feel the kite string twist and grow tense, just a few pounds from breaking. The thing about kites is that although they pull against the line, they need it. As soon as the line is cut, they fall—no matter how big, or how high, or how long they’ve flown.

The car flings itself sideways into the median, smashing through a thin metal post holding a yellow reflector at the highway’s edge. The contact knocks just enough momentum off the car’s movement that it swings to a stop in the median a few feet from the road. I’m facing backwards, and I watch silently as a car comes over the rise I’d just crested, tracing my tire marks until they swerve away from the road. I get out and inspect: minor damage to the rear fender, nothing else.

An hour or so later I arrive in Salina and stop at the first gas station I see. It has an attached Burger King, so I order some breakfast and use the restroom. I can barely eat, which, for a man in his mid-twenties who hasn’t eaten in nearly half a day, is about as alarming as anything—as alarming, at least, as the two semi-trucks I had seen pretzeled together further down the canyon. The sky had eventually cleared and I had seen plows out on the road, but none had overtaken me on my way into town.

After I eat I fill up the tank on the car, and then I walk over to a pay phone and pick up the receiver. My hands are shaking as I dial the 800-number Mom got years ago when I went off to school without a cell phone. I’m not cold. I massage my eyes with my
free hand while the connection is made; while the line rings I remind myself to be careful in how I portray any danger I was in, so as not to make her worry. Two rings. Three rings. The answering machine kicks in. I wait for the beep, or for the sound of someone suddenly picking up and switching off the recording.

Beep.

“Hey Mom, it’s David. I…I’m in Salina. I had to detour because of some bad weather, so I’m still a few hours from Provo.”

Where is she? Where is everyone? It’s Saturday morning—are they out mowing the lawn or running errands or something?

“I, uh, I actually spun out on the snow a few miles back. I hit a post on the side of the road but I’m okay. Just nicked the fender, scratched the paint.”

So much for being discreet. My voice is hollow, tinny, as if I’m speaking into a can tied to a string that stretches miles and miles across the map to my home.

“Anyway, I just wanted to call and let you know I’m alright and that I’ll be there in a few hours. If Drew calls, let him know. I love you.”

I hang up and walk back over to the car, stopping to look again at the damage to the fender. The panel that covers the gas cap won’t latch anymore, and there’s several gashes in the white paint. This is my mom’s car; she just had several nicks repaired and a fresh coat of paint put on. I look at the tires to see how they like this mountain air, and I get in. Then I see that the odometer reads 142,241—a palindrome, just like 666. You get out the same way you got in.
I’ve been awake for almost twenty-six hours, and I’ve got a hundred miles to go. I pull out of the station and back onto the highway; it is 8:25, and the radio is playing “Anyway You Want It” by Journey. I sing along loudly.

In an hour and a half I’ll pull into my brother’s driveway and walk in to find him playing video games with his 12-year-old brother-in-law. We’ll exchange only casual greetings, the way brothers do. I’ll mention my feat of doing the entire drive in one go; he’ll say something about the game they’re playing, about how they’ve almost collected a million pieces of gold and unlocked all the bonuses. Neither of us will act impressed. I’ll ask him to call Mom and tell her I’ve arrived, and then I’ll lie down on the living room couch and go to sleep, finally at rest.