

STATUS UPDATES: THREE ESSAYS

PRECIOUS METALS

Despite lying in a dark field for over an hour, I only saw four shooting stars during the Perseoid meteor shower; I wanted to blame it on light pollution, but a people live-tweeting it in less remote places said it was like watching “gods write with cosmic chalk” or “burning jewels melt.” According to the Weather Channel, July 2016 was the warmest month on record, and the fifteenth consecutive warmest month since humans began keeping track. Sadly, I still don’t know how – and apparently lack sufficient evidence – to convince people I love that climate change is not a hoax, and they’re not the only ones who’ve been duped: LeBron James thinks that Michael Jordan gets too much credit for the Bulls six titles, and a Knoxville man believed – for five years – that he was dating Katy Perry. Thanks to a Tumblr called “mcmansionshell,” I now have a vocabulary for why so-called McMansions are such monstrosities: most of the problems appear to stem from the absurd imbalance of principal and secondary masses. In the last two weeks, I’ve spotted at least three dead birds I’d never seen dead on the side of the road: chickadee, a northern flicker, and a cardinal. At the Pete Dye Golf Course, where English department faculty had gathered for an annual retreat, and to brainstorm in small groups, everyone paused their discussions on experiential learning and diversity and inclusion to watch a thunderstorm blow a blizzard of leaves past the two story windows of the vaulted ceiling-ed room we’d rented. According to a colleague of mine, George Gershwin couldn’t stop smelling burnt rubber, couldn’t get the smell out of his nose; what he didn’t know: the scent was the result of a phenomenon called “phantosmia,” an olfactory hallucination created by a brain tumor that would prove malignant. The other night, I dreamed that,

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in order to survive, I had to kill someone: that I had to eviscerate a fat man with a sword. Afterwards, I realized I was back at my old boarding school, and that my old girlfriend was living across the hall from me; I embraced her and woke up hugging a pillow. Later, I sent to a good friend who doesn't use social media a screenshotted announcement about an upcoming novel by a writer we both know and whose ironic vanity, we like to think, is still vanity, and unwarrantedly so; this same friend, who once took a dump in a litter box and called his wife to come take a look at what the cat had done, was surprised to learn that Copenhagen was home to the most beautiful people he had ever seen— young blond models, radiant, sipping coffee in cafes—the sheer volume of whom made him feel, in his own words, like a troll. As much as I envied his travels, I was perfectly satisfied staying here and walking the dog to the horse hill to view, at sunset, the green backbone of Brush Mountain mountains tufted with clouds; this same view reminds a guy in my neighborhood of the verdant ridges in the Sri Lankan jungle he once called home, and where, on his sixth birthday, he woke to an elephant's trunk nuzzling his face. The man who helped engineer the sale of my family's old house and the purchase of our new one stopped by the other day to drink a beer and tell me that he'd woken that morning feeling the imbalance, and that everything in the world— religion, government, politics— was off-kilter, and what he wanted me to know, what he felt he had an absolute responsibility to tell me, was that I should transfer at least ten percent of my assets to precious metals. I overheard a girl in the library stack say, "I can't even come up with the point of even living anymore." The boy she was with said, "If you ever kill yourself, I would so die." "Me, too," she said, and when they laughed, I thought about someone I love who recently confessed that he'd spent twenty years of his life thinking about killing himself, and that if there had been a magic button he could've pressed that would've allowed him to erase his entire existence, without causing pain to anyone else that he knew and loved, he would've pressed it. Several times, as I neared the end of a bike ride, I thought I heard a car approaching me, and gripped my handlebars tightly, imagining, as I almost always do, a

car's bumper clipping my rear tire, or a truck's heavy duty side view mirror whacking me in the back of the head, but when I glanced over my shoulder and saw that nobody was there, I realized that what I'd heard was the sound of my own spinning wheels.

PERMANENT EXHIBIT

Descending into the valley always feels like entering a secret world — but only when I'm on my bike. Today, along the shoulder of Catawba Road, I noticed green plant life receding. Streams slowing. Brown stalks on tomato plants. The bottom half of a creekbed was bone dry, its boulders chalky with dust. Someone said recently that the insect world already sounded like autumn, and though I couldn't identify a single contributor of the endless buzz that engulfed me, I had to agree. Ash trees, a friend told me, are the first to turn; I wondered if that explained the yellow leaves on the parking lot behind the old Christian Science Reading Room. I climbed a gravel road, dodging the bigger rocks, the way the spaceship in the game Galaga has to swerve to avoid the bombardments of insect-like aliens. I scanned the woods for the owl I'd seen a few days before, the one who, in the dappled light falling through the forest canopy, flapped itself up onto a maple branch, turned its head to look at me, then flew deeper into the woods. Today, though, I didn't see it. Twenty-one years ago, on a cold January morning, I saw an owl — it was snow white, and though I might have been high at the time, I'm as sure about this fact as I am about my own name — near the "Right Loop" trailhead at Tsali Recreation Area in southwestern North Carolina. The owl landed on a branch about fifteen yards away; we looked at each other for so long, I thought it was daring me to move. I caved; it flew away. The Tsali Recreation Area was named after a Cherokee Indian named Tsali, who, after Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830, refused to leave the mountains where he hunted and tended a hillside garden and lived in a cabin with his family — at least until a group of armed U. S. soldiers rounded them up. According to one account, a soldier jabbed a bayonet into the back of Tsali's wife, which prompted Tsali to communicate, in Cherokee, to his fellow men, to overpower the soldiers; in the resultant scuffle a soldier's gun went off, two other soldiers were wounded, and one of these eventually died, and in order to save his friends and family, Tsali surrendered

himself as a sacrifice. According to another account, one of Tsali's men slipped a hatchet that had been hidden in his clothes and sunk it into the head of one of the federal troops; he and the other men were later captured – by a group of Oconaluftee Citizen Indians, who had been granted permission to stay – and tied to trees, where they were shot by a firing squad. You can visit Tsali's grave – which is fenced by an iron gate and marked by a boulder bearing a metal sign – in Robbinsville, North Carolina, and afterwards you can visit Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, where you can stand beneath 400 year old yellow-poplars, some of which are more than 20 feet in circumference. During your visit, you can also read the poem "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer, which begins with the line "I think I shall never see/ A poem as lovely as a tree" and ends with "Poems are made by fools like me/ but only God can make a tree." Presumably, Kilmer would have been happy to know that a National Park – one that now is home to the largest stand of virgin forest east of the Mississippi – had been named for him, but probably sad to know that, 75 years after the park's opening, the forest's hemlocks were devastated by the woody adelgid, and because the decimated trunks posed a safety hazard to the 40,000 hikers who visit the park annually, and because it is unlawful to use a chainsaw for any reason within the park's boundaries, the U.S. Forest Service used dynamite to fell them. One of my father's patients claims that there are secret Indian burial mounds at Joyce Kilmer; as a kid, I could never figure out why Indian burial mounds didn't get ransacked, in general, and by me, in particular. I don't know how long you have to be dead before it's okay for archaeologists to dig you up, but I like to think about in-the-future humans plundering my grave, wouldn't mind donating my body to science, as long as my skull became a prop on someone's desk, like the skull that used to sit on the desk of my Uncle Rick-Rick, who used it as a macabre puppet and referred to it as Mr. Bones. Perhaps I could arrange for my skull to be turned into a kind of permanent exhibit; using animatronics, the skull would live in a cube – in a museum? a cemetery? the family graveyard? – where its jaw would move, and speakers would play words that I'd written, and perhaps it would even read

what I'm writing right now, and tell the story of the dead snake I saw on Catawba Road, and that I had seen it alive, in the same place, two days before: enrobed in lustrous black scales, and presumably attracted to the heat conducting properties of the asphalt, it had laid on the shoulder in a luxuriant tangle. It seemed stupid to feel sorry for a dead snake, but no stupider for the wasp nest above my garage that I sprayed with Raid. I'd opened a hinged door in the ceiling and blasted a stream of poison at the nest, an assemblage of hexagonal paper cells affixed to the outside of the attic's vent. Immediately, the foam I'd shot dripped like toxic spit back onto my head; in my haste to lay waste the wasps, I hadn't thought about gravity, nor had I expected that, as soon as I sprayed the nest, I would feel anything but relief, or that, when I shut and secured the door, I would do so not only because I wanted to avoid getting stung, but also because I didn't have it in me to watch the writhing of insects as they died, or to imagine how, moments before, they had been so industrious, so inexplicably engrossed in their building, with no way of predicting, in the end, what was to come.

## TREASURE BOX

While a hygienist cleaned my son's teeth, I sat in the waiting room of a dental office, reading the first volume of *The Collected Works of J. Krishnamurti*, which collects the lectures and Q&As of Jiddu Krishnamurti, a man who, in the beginning of the 20th century, was groomed by a group of Theosophists (who called themselves "The Order of the Star in the East") to be the next "World Teacher," a messianic role that Krishnamurti rejected at the age of 34, disbanding the Order and returning all monies and properties that had been donated to his cause. Claiming no allegiance to any particular nation, religion, creed, or philosophy, Krishnamurti spent the rest of his life traveling the world doing more or less what he had been prepared to do, which was "teach"; he preferred giving lectures over writing, since giving talks was a more immediate way of communicating with people. In 1933, Krishnamurti told an audience in Stresa, Italy—a town in northern Italy that sits at the edge of Lake Maggiore—that the source of humanity's conflict had everything to do with its desire for security, whether material or spiritual, and that human conceptions of God were false, because they were merely "speculative imitations," and that religious institutions had been based on such falsities, and that differences of beliefs and religions had been the source of suffering and war since the dawn of humanity, and that until humans freed themselves from the illusion of time and stopped trying to find security in anything apart from understanding their own minds, they would be enslaved by systems that kept them in line by offering them an endless stream of rewards and punishments. For whatever reason—I assume it had something to do with the word "punishment"—I remembered how, as a boy, I had on occasion earned a spanking—for tormenting my sister or cavalierly disrespecting a household rule—which meant that I would be sent by my mother to my room while she retrieved one of my father's belts from his closet. Once this instrument—in lieu, I suppose, of a "rod" or "switch"—had been retrieved, she would tell me to pull down

my pants and underwear; I would lie face down on the bed and my mother would use the belt to smack my backside. It's hard for me to imagine spanking my own son in this manner. I only spanked him on a few occasions and never with a belt; the last time I tried, when he was a toddler, he fought back with such ferocious desperation that I had no other choice but think: what the hell am I doing? Even so, I never resented my mother for spanking me—maybe because she proceeded each time with such calmness and rationality; I had disobeyed, I had earned this punishment, and she was merely its arbiter. Afterwards, as a kind of reconciliatory consolation, she embraced me, then knelt down with me beside my bed. As I was remembering this scene, and how I would repeat, after my mother, whatever prayer she improvised—a door at the other end of the waiting room opened. My son walked out; a hygienist followed. "Everything looks good," she said. I raised my eyebrows. "It does?" I said, remembering how, whenever he had occasion to snuggle with his mother, she often asked him whether he'd brushed his teeth, because if the smell of his breath was any indication, he had not. In the parking lot of the dental office, my son confessed that he too had been surprised by the hygienist's news. I asked if he knew how many cavities I had; he said, "zero," and I nodded, remembering how, on several separate occasions, I had fidgeted in a dental chair while my father had administered sealants. As far as I know, my father never spanked me, though once he yanked me forcefully by the arm and led me onto our back porch, where he talked to me sternly about something careless I had said. My son raised his arm to show me a rubber bracelet, imprinted with the word "groovy." It looked like it'd been tie-dyed. "I got this from the treasure box," he said proudly, and when I asked him if he wasn't a little too old for the treasure box, he shrugged and said, "She said I could take something, so I did." I thought about asking him if he could remember having been spanked, but then thought better of it; when he turned the radio to K92, and began to sing along to "Don't Let Me Down," I didn't try, as I often did, to change the station—I just let it play. ■