

CLOSE TO THE KNIVES

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As I set out on a cold and sunny day to walk to the university where I teach, I noticed, in the left side of my sunglasses's lens, the reflection of the corner of my eye. It wasn't the ball of the eye that made itself clear but rather the wrinkles that characterized the surrounding flesh there, which the lens was able to magnify, and for a moment I was tricked into thinking I was looking at a much older future self, when, in fact, I was looking at me *now*, at very close range. I squinted, and the skin crinkled: a mass of glistening, flexing tributaries. I was wearing a black knit cap, a black coat, black jeans, black Doc Marten's boots, and a blue button-up shirt, untucked and snug enough around my chest that it made me aware of my chub. In my ears, headphones delivered a song from a Spotify playlist titled "Deep House Relax," which was informing the rhythm of my stride, so much so that I had to repress — after all, I was a middle-aged man walking in public — the urge to dance. I thought, as I had so often that week, about Michael Jackson, and the documentary that detailed the grooming and subsequent molestation of two boys, now grown with children of their own, and of the article I'd read online earlier on the website Jezebel by a writer by the name of Rich Juzwiak, who argued that instead of banning Jackson's music, we should preserve it as a kind of text that, when read in lieu of these allegations of abuse, might allow us to interpret his oeuvre as "a sleight of hand from a hand that is doing exactly what its owner says it's doing." I couldn't help but wonder: might Jackson's so-called moonwalk be headed for extinction? Should I nix the obvious Jackson moves — the kick, the spin, that little stutter-step kick from one side to the other that I'd kind of perfected — from my own dancing-in-the-kitchen repertoire? Had I, like the rest of the country, been infected with the "should-we-erase-this" virus — a disease that seemed to be compelling contemporary humans to call for the deletion of public figures who'd been found to have done *very bad things*? That worried me. Self-righteousness, indignation, virtue-signaling: these modes of being were not, I had to admit, my jams. They hadn't been the artist and writer David Wojnarowicz's either, assuming his memoir *Close to the Knives*, which I carried in my backpack, was any indication. I wished I could raise Wojnarowicz

from the dead; I'd drive him around the country and visit seedy dive bars and do drugs and listen as he waxed poetic about the improbable future he'd been missing. Reading his book made me kind of wish I could've been gay in the 1980s — I know how naive that sounds but I'm saying it just the same — but maybe it was just his portrayal of random hook-ups and smoking cigarettes with transvestites and visiting diners where he ate "food that looked like it'd been fried in an electric chair" that made me acknowledge Wojnarowicz had been more alive than I ever would. I could generate another kind of imaginary camaraderie every time I read a Frank O'Hara poem; even typing his name, with its jaunty apostrophe, felt charged with potential, conjuring, as it always did, its own little universe of *Lunch Poems* imagery: "hum-colored cabs," "glistening torsos," "neon in daylight," Gauloises, and cocktail napkins preserving word banks for future poems. I try to raise him from the dead, too, sometimes, on these daily walks of mine, and of course strolling through my neighborhood of Mountain View is a far cry from Manhattan, where, according to O'Hara, "even the traffic halt is a way for people to rub up against each other." Here, on Ehart Street, I know my neighborhood trash by name: Budweiser can, Ross "Dress for Less" Bag, Cookout cup, Food Lion flyer advertising pink grapefruit, red strawberries, and dead meat shish kabob. All of these things live on the other side of a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire, trapped behind a metal screen: a zoo of the abandoned. At the end of the fence, on its last panel, hang discarded items that fellow travelers have picked up and slid between the zigs and zags of the chain-link: a baby pacifier, plastic combs, a sock, underwear, a single plastic lens from a pair of sunglasses — as if some neighborhood collaborative had taken it upon themselves to curate the World's Saddest Lost & Found. It's my understanding that this fragment of fence — it only encloses a quarter of the field — once bordered the town's middle school, which has since been razed. Now all that remains is a parking lot and that empty field, in the middle of which someone planted a tiny wooden sign that reads, "Cricket Meadow," though the insects that flourish here most during the warmer months are grasshoppers, hundreds of which dart like minnows as visitors wade through grass. In the future, according to the town's master plan, the field will be replaced by generic-looking brick buildings that will house retail and apartments, the sight of which will make me long for the days like today, when I walked the gravel path that leads to a

parking lot where older women exit their SUVs wearing yoga pants and carrying water bottles. I noted the buildings of downtown in the distance, and those of the university on the hill beyond, and of the blue spine of Brush Mountain, a scene that resembled the set of a movie in which I was playing the lead and which centered on the improbable story of a man from nowhere who got paid to talk to young people about art. An itch made itself known, a thirty-year-old scar that refused, after all these years, to let me forget it. *Gloude*man, I thought. He was the loud-mouthed teen who, back in my boarding school days, had stood naked, pudgy wobbling, in the sophomore hall showers, recklessly snapping his towel at me, the tip of which had struck and subsequently busted the shield of a bulb that lived behind a little wire cage in the ceiling above my head. Glass rained down on me, and my back began to bleed — a gash that the boy's dean had attempted to close in his office using a so-called butterfly bandage. That was nearly thirty years ago. I remembered an article I'd recently read in which the author talked about how brains aged and why time seemed to speed up as one got older — something to do with familiar routines; the only way to combat the sensation was to keep your eyes open and look for the new. Yesterday, I stood at the edge of a soccer field with my wife, watching the junior varsity boys play while sunshine fell on my face and wind cut into my clothes. A tiny woman wearing a puffy vest and a baseball cap bearing the name of our town mentioned that she and her husband and their four children were moving to a farm out in the country, and that her husband had discovered, after noticing hinges on a wall of shelves in one of the property's outbuildings, a secret door. Behind it, there was another room, inside of which lived a concrete vault, whose entrance had been secured with three padlocks. "Who knows what's in there," the woman said. "Maybe dead bodies." I suggested to the woman that her family should host a party and invite us for the unsealing. "Like what's his name, the gangster," my wife said. "Al Capone," I replied. "How funny," the woman said. I could see us all there, the soccer moms with their plastic cups of red wine, the soccer dads with their beers, the soccer players and their siblings with cans of lemon-lime soda. Perhaps someone might be snacking on a chicken drumette; hamburger patties might hiss on a nearby grill. I could see the woman's husband, a ruggedly handsome guy my wife has said on more than one occasion resembles the Marlboro Man, with a powerful set of clippers, the kind made for the purposes of cutting

metal, snipping the arms of the locks. Or maybe he'd have some kind of heat-producing tool — a wand from which a blue flame would wobble, and he'd use this to lick through the shackles. I could see each lock falling with a clatter, and the heavy door swinging slowly open, its hinges screeching. The man would shine a light on whatever lived inside. And all of us would secretly hope for the worst, praying that in this moment we might finally approach the kind of darkness we'd told ourselves we'd never know, and which lurks beneath the surfaces of everywhere we go.