

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

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Books  
WEBEXCLUSIVE

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## Status Update: MATTHEW VOLLMER Speaks with Joseph Salvatore

Recently the writer Matthew Vollmer began posting a series of beguiling, engaging, and suspiciously literary status updates on his Facebook page. Friends and followers (myself included) were enthralled by the first one published on July 6, 2016. Requests for more filled his comment box. And so they came, one after the other, day by day, these strange autobiographical fragments.

That it was Matthew Vollmer who wrote these texts makes them even more interesting. Vollmer has been playing with genre and form for most of his career. After his startlingly assured debut, *Future Missionaries of America*, (which brought his work to my attention and which I reviewed for the *New York Times Book Review*), he brought out a book of hybrid essays, *Inscriptions for Headstones*, followed the same year with an anthology he co-edited with the writer David Shields, a volume specifically interested in innovative, experimental genre-play, titled *Fakes: An Anthology of Pseudo-Interviews, Faux Lectures, Quasi-Letters, “Found” Texts, and Other Fraudulent Artifacts* (W. W. Norton, 2012). The book includes forty-two stories that re-appropriate other genres of sub-literary writing—grocery lists, math problems, a police blotter—demonstrating how the form of a story suggests more to the reader than content alone. And so when Vollmer began posting these “status updates,” I leaned closer to my computer screen and reread them, and the next day, another one appeared. No information other than its being a status update. I discussed these literary events over email with Matthew Vollmer to see if he would share something about their nature and composition.

**Joseph Salvatore (Rail):** I love these “status updates,” but I’m so curious about them. Did you envision them as a series? How many are there so far?

**Matthew Vollmer:** I was surprised to look back and see that I’d written *ten* of them, which means for ten days I did this. It was actually a nice break from thinking about my manuscript, but there were a couple days near the end there where I thought, I CANNOT

DO THIS ANYMORE, but then somehow I pulled it off.

**Rail:** So it seems these texts were a formal experiment. Can you talk about what they taught you?

**Vollmer:** It was an interesting exercise for a number of reasons: it felt liberating in that I was breaking free from how I normally approached writing, and the fact that I was posting them on social media gave it an immediate audience, contributed to a kind of performative aspect.

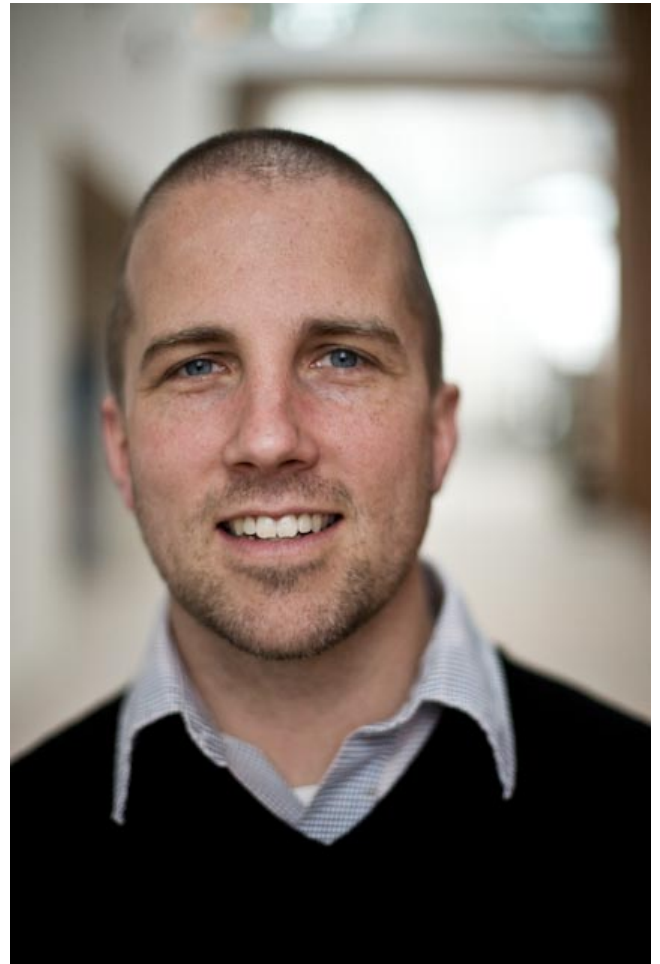
**Rail:** So beyond playing with the form of the genre of the “status update,” you also experienced its context, the immediacy of its dispatch and reception. How else did the medium affect the writing?

**Vollmer:** After writing the first two, there was also this sense of obligation, like I almost *had* to keep writing them—not sure if I will keep posting on such a regular basis, but I like the idea of producing an entire book, maybe, of these shorter (“go anywhere”) pieces. Even the ones that took longer to write, like the LaVey/Geraldo Rivera one or the Patches the Horse one, both of which took me *most of the day*, were enjoyable because I spent so much time researching random shit on the internet (I now know a *lot* about Aleister Crowley and the Church of Satan).

**Rail:** When I asked if I could talk to you about these new pieces, you sent them to me. I was struck that you had titled them. Status updates don’t normally have titles. Why did you decide to do this?

**Vollmer:** Even though they were published as “status updates” I was always thinking (except for the very first one) that they might have life beyond the Facebook platform. You’re right, you don’t normally title status updates, but these also behave in ways that status updates do not: some are more associative than others, some were interesting to me because of juxtapositions. The puzzle became, sometimes, how could I turn my jumbled-up thinking into something that might entertain others, that might take an audience on a very quick tour of what it’s like to be in my head, or for me to try to represent certain kinds of movements between ideas/concepts.

I have also been reading Joy Williams’s *99 Stories of God*, each of which are numbered, and each ends with a capitalized word or phrase, a kind of summing up, a kind of strange reveal, and a subversion of



where titles normally go (at the top). Titles often come after I've written a piece, and I assume it's this way probably for many writers, which is interesting, since even though a title isn't the first thing you come up with, it's the first thing a reader will see. Titling something strikes me as essentially an interpretive move, a way for the author to play with how the piece should be summed up (or not). Though I suppose they are also a writer's first barb, the one they hope catches a reader's attention and pulls them in deeper.

Here are Matthew Vollmer's first barb.

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## “STATUS UPDATE”

7.06.16

2016 and homes are still being raided for marijuana. Tropical Smoothie Cafe opened in Blacksburg today. Another black man was shot by police. I can't believe I'm running the dishwasher again. My bike can't ride itself. I miss the ocean. My closest family members are in Wyoming, which is possibly the most beautiful state ever created. I saw a baby deer nursing from its mother today in the middle of the road. I ate a slice of pizza big enough to wrap around my face. Ernest Becker's DENIAL OF DEATH is a good book. My best friends don't live next door. But my neighbor brought me a piece of junk mail and laughed at the look on my face because I was sure she would be a proselytizer. I don't understand all the New Yorker jokes. A chipmunk lives in my basketball goal. Earth is a planet I live on. Time to watch TV with wife.

## “HATCHLING”

7.07.16

Today, I watched a video of a black man who had been shot by a white police officer with the volume down because I didn't want my son to see his blood-soaked shirt. I didn't want to see it, either, but I kept watching. I didn't turn the volume up when my son left the room, and I didn't listen to a press conference given by the mother of another black man who had been shot dead by a policeman. I didn't read any comments. I thought, today, during a long bike ride, that words can't change any mind that isn't already disposed to changing, and remembered that Lao Tzu said, “Those who are stiff and rigid are the disciples of death. Those who are soft and yielding are the disciples of life.” I shut down the browser, picked up my phone, checked Instagram. I added words to a manuscript and wondered why anyone in

their right mind—or wrong—would ever read it. I went upstairs to get a power strip and came back downstairs with something else, went back upstairs and then down again empty handed, and imagined a future where I couldn't recognize myself in the mirror. I remembered to put ointment on the bumps on my arms caused by a mild skin condition I am just vain enough to half-heartedly manage. I read something about a presidential candidate who, according to an “insider,” never wanted to be president, but wanted to finish at a solid second place, so as to increase his popularity. I thought about this guy who lives in my neighborhood, a retired financial analyst who challenged me to find anything about him at all on the internet because it just isn't there, and who claims that there's an impending economic collapse because banks are playing with pretend money and soon the billionaires will be buying up land like crazy and jacking up the prices and so non-billionaires need to band together and buy land so that they can manage local foods/agriculture. I looked out at my neighbor's lush garden, for which she won't accept compliments, due to the amount of weeds there are, and acknowledged to myself how it's been so long since I've grown anything, and how there are zucchinis from that neighbor's garden in my fridge, and how they'll probably go bad because honestly I can't say that I'm that big a fan of squash no matter how roasted and cheese coated. Then, when my wife finished a string of texts by sending me, inexplicably, a chicken emoji, so I did the only thing I could do: I filled up the whole text box with a square halo of rooster heads orbiting a line of baby chicks with their wings out, sitting in the bottom halves of their broken, just-hatched eggs.

## “LAST BLOOD”

7.08.16

Woke up this morning to an email from Australia; a friend of mine sent me a video of his two-year-old asking me if I had feelings. Turns out I do. My son's former soccer coach—a black man from Georgia, who some parents complained about because he insisted that their 11-year-old boys run Manchester United drills—came out yesterday as gay, and I asked him if, to celebrate, he'd Fed Ex me an Oreo cookie pie, which is a dessert he made and delivered to our house last year when my wife was recuperating from major surgery, back when she'd been sent so many flower bouquets the sight of them made her sick. I forgot—and will likely forget again—to look up the name of the blue flower I keep seeing along the back roads of rural southwestern Virginia. I should know this flower, probably. It's everywhere, along with purple clover buds and the ivory spray of Queen Anne's Lace. Once, for an elementary school project, I gathered flowers and pressed them in paper towels inside volumes of World Books stacked on top of each other and then drew a grid and taped each dried, smashed, dead flower inside one of the squares, wrote the name of the flower beside it, laminated the thing, and submitted it for evaluation. Whatever grade I got I owe partly to the chemist William Farish, who, during the Industrial Revolution, developed our current system of grading—a method that allowed him to process

more students and thereby increase his salary. How do you grade 200 drum-beating students? That's a question a cellist I know will have to answer next spring, when he teaches a new experiential art class. On my way to meet him for coffee yesterday, I passed a man on the street who was talking to himself. Another guy who noticed him shot me a glance. I pretended I wasn't concerned. A massage therapist I know has a patient who requests that the therapist not play Native American flute music, because it causes the patient to imagine that a Peeping Tom is at the window. I wanted to think that patient was stupid, but I too am guilty of tricking myself into thinking things might happen that don't, like strangers yanking pistols out of their pants and shooting me in the head. I don't own a gun, but when I was a kid, I found a stick shaped vaguely like a semiautomatic, and carried it around for weeks. I also held a Fisher Price tape recorder to a TV so that I could record a movie review of *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, and which featured a scene where a gunman fired round upon round of bullets into the river pool where Sylvester Stallone was hiding, submerged, because at that age there was nothing I loved more than the sound of a machine gun. Now I'm the kind of father who gleefully runs over pedestrians while playing Grand Theft Auto and shames his son for being a failure at cleaning up spilled Legos; the snow shovel he used to scoop up 95% of them is still on the floor, along with the dinky spaceship he built. I think he could be a little more ambitious. For instance, there's a replica of Noah's ark, engineered to the bible's exact specifications, that just opened for business in Kentucky. I'd like to see it. I imagine standing in a line of grandads and meemaws with concealed carry permits, telling their grandkids that without that long ago real Ark they wouldn't be here. That we humans now can't imagine how wicked the world used to be. I don't know what to think about that; it's hard to imagine one worse than we have. I do know that I'd like to continue living as I have, without getting shot in the head. But part of me can't help thinking: *it's only a matter of time.*

## “ROBOCALL”

7.09.16

I want a medal because I woke up wanting to tell my wife I think she gets more beautiful every day but didn't because commenting on her appearance makes her self-conscious. During the night, something bit me on the backside and now I have to rub cortisone on a quarter-sized welt on my left cheek. I had a dream that I was looking over a precipice into a room filled with water and I wanted to jump but was hesitant, which was good because it turned out the room wasn't actually filled with water, a tub in a nearby room had overflowed and it was only a puddle, which disappointed me, so I got a bucket and by god I was gonna fill up that room with water until my wife asked me to stop because the floors were stained bad enough as it was. Also, while I was asleep, five police officers were shot and killed by a sniper who died when police blew him up with a bomb deploying robot. According to the *Mirror*, sex robots may be the biggest tech trend of 2016. I'd rather think about sex bots than death bots, though

there's something disturbing about the guy from that *Men's Health* article I read who has a human sized doll he screws, and whose vagina he likes to remove and then "walk around with." The father of a kid on my son's soccer team—a professor of robotics, a guy from Rome—shouts words of encouragement for his son in Italian and addresses the boy as "Pizzolino"; when one of us finally asked what it meant, he said, sheepishly, "little penis." The landline rang today and like an insane person expecting a different result, I answered it, and once again, it was the automated guy who begins every call with the exclamation, "Seniors!" which made me wonder: does he call because I have a landline or because I'm over forty—and is one of those explain why I get so much mail from AARP? The women I've befriended in the last five or so years whose company I enjoy the most—a retired schoolteacher, a retired professor of religion, and a retired Sunday School teacher—are all over the age of 65, which makes me wonder: am I old, or just looking for a mother figure? My father called from Yellowstone to tell me about two discoveries: one, whenever he made a squeak by blowing air through his tightly pressed lips, female mule deer came running, and two, he'd read an article about how the THC in marijuana could reverse memory loss, which made him inquire about whether or not I might have any connections. I suggested that he pay Colorado a visit. What I forgot to say, and what I would've said, if I'd thought he was serious: if you find anything good, save some for me.

## "CAN'T FEEL MY FACE"

7.10.16

Florida's toxic algae bloom smells, according to a boat salesman, like "hundreds of dead animals that have been baking in the sun for weeks." Meanwhile, in our backyard, the hydrangea is blossoming. As is the tree—I'm not always good with names of things, especially in nature—where the previous owners hung a furry orb held together by what appears to be strips of wicker; at first I thought it was some kind of witch ball—not that a "witch ball" is a thing but that's the phrase that appeared in my head when I saw it. I've since been informed that thing is supposed to be a supplier of material for bird's nests. If that's true, few birds seem to like it; it's the same size it was four months ago. So, "witch ball" it shall remain. Speaking of witch balls, a friend of mine—a woman who, when I was a kid, convinced me that two bite marks on her arm were the result of an encounter with a vampire—sent me a string of Facebook chats about how she's making a medicine bag—for protection against evil—and how she did a rain dance and then it rained and that, recently, a vulture talked to her. I like the idea that such a vile-looking bird might have something to say, or have some kind of wisdom to dispense. Earlier, on my bike, I surprised a venue of vultures (that's what a group of them are called, I know this because I looked it up), as they were pecking at the bloody, fur-ratted rib cage of a dead deer: the explosion of black wings nearly caused me to swerve into a ditch. Later, as I walked behind a lawnmower, light-blotches appeared and disappeared in the shadow cast by a tree, depending on whether or not a cloud was passing in front of

the sun, and I anticipated the satisfaction I knew I'd get from eyeballing a just-mowed lawn, and how this particular sensation might be explained in part because shorter, more uniform grass blades create a pleasing symmetry, but also because it allows me to bask in the illusion that I have restored order and—for now—staved off chaos, and thus death. I was happy, once I re-entered the house, to hear Spotify playing “Can't Feel My Face,” a song that leaked on my birthday in the year 2015 and is—at least in part—about the numbing effects of cocaine. The composer, Abel Makkonen Tesfaye—otherwise known as “The Weeknd”—is the son of Ethiopian parents who immigrated to Toronto. A biologist I know—a man who grew up in a community of power plant workers in China and who has for a number of years been developing a vaccine to help smokers who want to stop smoking to quit—told me recently during a long car ride from a soccer tournament our sons had played in that he—the biologist—doesn't approve of Tesfaye's hair, which *Rolling Stone* described as having “its own distinct personality” and that the front portion is similar to a “flopped-over moose antler” and that the back resembles a baby octopus. Aside from the fact that Tesfaye sounds so much like Michael Jackson, his hair is my favorite thing about him, especially after I learned he doesn't do anything to it except give it a good wash now and then. He doesn't style it at all. The hair does what it does on its own. All Tesfaye has to do? Just leave it alone.

### “33rd BALLOON”

7.11.16

As I descended at full speed into the valley, I imagined—as I often do—a deer leaping into the road and knocking me off my bike. I'd wreck, snap my neck, suffer paralysis, or bleed out on the road, and expire. In the end, what startled me wasn't a deer but a rabbit—no bigger than a hamburger bun—on the road's shoulder, inches away from my oncoming wheel. It darted into high grass. The phrase “viciously cute” appeared in my head. I remembered the “rabbit scene” from the 1987 film “Summer School,” in which a ragtag group of underperforming high school students, led by a young teacher played by Mark Harmon, took a field trip to a petting zoo. The scene begins with Anna Maria, the hot French exchange student, as she pets a white rabbit with whom she appears to be smitten. Dave and “Chainsaw”—two loveable doofs who are obsessed with horror movies, especially “The Texas Chainsaw Massacre”—come running into view, screaming frantically. It appears, inexplicably, that maniacal rabbits have latched onto their faces and won't let go. As Dave and Chainsaw struggle to free themselves, the bloody flesh of their cheeks stretches, and they scream even louder. Anna Maria screams and throws her rabbit to the ground. Dave and Chainsaw collapse, as if dead, only to jump back up seconds later, bowing. Their classmates clap. Anna Maria, seeing now that the rabbits were stuffed, is confused. “Why did you do that?” she asks. Chainsaw says, “We did it for you, Anna Maria,” and she says, “Ew, that's disgusting,” pauses, and then adds “I love it.” Chainsaw explains that his bloody cheeks aren't really bloody, peels off a shred of latex, hands it to her, and says, “Keep it.” This scene proved inspirational to me as a kid, but I didn't have

latex, so I mashed up bananas mixed with red food coloring and spread it on my face, donned a gray wig that used to belong to my Aunt Maddie and filmed myself miming the roar of a wild animal in time to the recording of a wild animal. The bananas worked well as homemade gore, maybe because mashed bananas—the sight and texture—are disgusting on their own, which is too bad, because it turns out I can't swallow a bite of banana until I've chomped it to sludge. For the last month or so, I've been paying weekly visits to the house of a retired professor of Contemporary American Literature, who claims that, in India, there are countless varieties of bananas, each of which make an American banana seem even more bland and boring than they are. I've never understood the appeal of a banana split. Neither has my son, who was recently disappointed in our choice of ice cream scooper; he will settle for nothing less than one with a lever that, when depressed, forces the scoop into the bowl. If, God forbid, my son should die before me, these are the kinds of everyday things—in addition to the pulsing pain-hole I would carry in my chest for as long as I lived—that would haunt me relentlessly. Those of us who have not lost a child are compelled by stories of those who have, especially when those children are the tragic victims of senseless violence; the world in which they exist, we understand, is a darkness we cannot penetrate. We are less interested, it seems, in the parents of children who committed those acts of violence, except to wonder, maybe: what did they do wrong? I think now of a letter written by a professor to the parents of the young man who, on April 16, 2007, chained the doors of a campus building shut, then went in and out of classrooms, firing nearly 400 rounds of ammunition, injuring 17, killing 32, and then shooting himself in the head. In the letter, the professor—who is a friend and who, years later, showed it to me—told the parents that their son had been a student in her class. She wrote to express sympathy but also to assure them that not everybody refused to include their son in the tragedy's final tally, and that on the 33rd day after the massacre, the day after university officials, during a silent ceremony, released 32 balloons, each one drifting skyward, and each accompanied by the tolling of a single bell, this professor and her graduate teaching assistant visited the building where the shooting had occurred. There, they released the 33rd balloon. I don't know why she did this, but I suspect it wasn't just because the shooter had been her student—it was a way to recognize that though he'd committed inconceivably monstrous acts of violence, though he had left immeasurable devastations in his wake, he had once been a baby, a boy, a son, a brother, and that, if he had rarely been understood by his family, he had certainly been loved, a truth that, even if it couldn't shine through the dark sorrow of their shame, might make it easier, sometimes, when having to say his name.

## “FOOL'S GOLD”

7.12.16

Astronomers discovered a large, Jupiter-like planet orbiting three suns. At the Cascades, an iconic local waterfall, a man dove into the plunge pool to save his son, somehow pushed the boy safely to shore, but



never resurfaced himself, and drowned. When soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo—who pays his personal hairstylist to style the hair of his likeness at Madrid’s “Museum of Wax”—suffered a game-ending injury during the 2016 Euro Cup, a moth landed on the bridge of his nose, and fluttered its wings; even so, Ronaldo—perhaps because he was so crushed—did not bother to brush it away. In an empty parking lot outside a movie theater, I watched a crow pecking at spilled popcorn—yellow kernels, vivid as tiny nuggets of gold—and thought: *lucky*. A friend of mine who knows how to hunt mushrooms and has a map in his head of neighborhood trees that produce the best ones—“chicken of the woods” is now in season—told me that some restaurants douse the trash in their dumpsters with gasoline to discourage homeless people from scavenging. As I cycled up a mountain road, I spotted a cup in a roadside ditch that said, “Eat like you mean it,” and once I got home, I slathered a just-nuked corn dog with pimento cheese. At the Blacksburg farmer’s market, Weathertop Farm displays a flip book of plastic sleeves that feature photographs that document the trajectories of their chickens’ lives, from little yellow puffs to stately white birds in orange crates to featherless bodies at the slaughterhouse. Decades ago, one of my cousins, who had been raised a vegetarian for health and religious reasons, informed me that she’d only eaten animal flesh once in her life—a single bite of fried chicken—after which she had promptly thrown up, a proclamation she’d delivered proudly, as if her body’s automatic rejection of meat was proof of a kind of innate and irrefutable purity. The ACLU wants to know if I think people’s religious beliefs are oppressing others in my community but the quiz they sent via mail was too long, so I slid it sheepishly—and responsibly—into the recycling bin. The sight of the American flag, I’m unashamed to say, does not fill me with hope. Still, I can’t get these lyrics—from the song “Helplessness Blues” by Fleet Foxes—out of my head: “I was raised up believing I was somehow unique / Like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes, unique in each way you can see / And now after some thinking, I’d say I’d rather be / A functioning cog in some great machinery serving something beyond me.” The phrase “Fiddler’s Green” may refer to an afterlife of perpetual mirth, an extrasolar colony in Robert A. Heinlein’s *The Cat Who Walks through Walls*, a regimental poem of the U.S. 2nd Calvary Regiment, or the community of newly and garishly unimaginative homes spaced too closely together and that surround the original block of houses built in the 1960s where we live, and that also block our view of the horse hill in the distance; whenever I see the brick columns that designate the edges of this neighborhood, and which are decorated with a capital F and a capital G, I think: “Fool’s Gold.” For the first time in ten years, I hit every light on Main Street while it was still green, and though I silently cheered every time I made it safely through another intersection, I was disappointed to have arrived at my destination so early, because it meant then I’d have more time than I knew how to kill.

“TOP SECRET”

7.13.16

What once was more or less secret: the bunker beneath the Greenbrier Hotel in Lewisburg, West Virginia, a 112,544-square-foot facility that includes 18 dormitories, decontamination chambers, a power plant, a television production area and audio recording booths, a clinic with 12 hospital beds, medical and dental operating rooms, a laboratory, a pharmacy, a cafeteria, and meeting rooms. Its 3-foot thick concrete walls were designed to shelter the members of congress during the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust, and until the Cuban Missile Crisis, when a trainload of congressmen from D.C. got halfway there, two of the four access points were disguised, simply, with signage: on a back door, the words “High Voltage” appeared, and on the sole elevator that dropped to bunker level, “Out of Order.” Last fall, I mentioned to my Advanced Fiction class that a friend of mine claimed that Virginia Tech had a secret meditation room—that if you entered the elevator in Johnson Student Center and pressed the right buttons, in the right order, that this particular elevator would deliver you to a secret room between floors—and when my students begged to go see it, I had no choice but to lead an impromptu field trip, but once we arrived at the elevator and pressed the right buttons, in the right order—according to the directions one of the students had found on Reddit—we found ourselves in a place that didn’t seem very secret or special at all: a room with an opaque skylight, a dingy lounge chair, carpet that desperately needed vacuuming, and a door that led—as far as we could tell by peering through its window—to a regular classroom. I visited Graceland once, and though I felt sort of like an intruder as I wandered past rooms with shag carpeting and mirrored walls and heavy drapes and stained glass panels of peacocks (the house struck me as quaintly modest in size, which granted the tour an intimacy I hadn’t expected) I couldn’t stop thinking about the part of the house I absolutely wasn’t allowed to see: the upstairs rooms, which had been kept sealed like a vault ever since August of 1977, and to which nobody had ever had access, except for Priscilla, Lisa-Marie, Graceland’s curator, and—because he had once been married to Lisa-Marie—Nicholas Cage, who purportedly sat on Elvis’ throne and tried on one of the King’s leather jackets. At the Magic Castle, a turn-of-the-20th-century mansion that is now an exclusive Hollywood club for magicians and magic enthusiasts, there’s a piano room where invisible Irma—the ghost of a woman who used to live in the mansion—will play any song you request for a dollar; I tried to stump her by requesting an obscure hymn, but lo and behold, as the keys began to move—seemingly by themselves—I recognized the melody. Whenever my son used to ask me to reveal the secret to the one magic trick I could perform—making a quarter disappear, then pulling it out of his ear or spitting it out of my mouth—I always said, “I’ll tell you when you’re ten,” and no matter how insistently he begged, I remained resolute, for years. Finally, on his 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, I woke him and said, “You know what day it is?” He did. “Okay,” I said, “watch closely.” I performed the trick again, slower than usual, taking my time to show him exactly how it was done: by holding the coin between the thumb and forefinger of my left hand, I pretended to grab it with my right, while allowing the coin to drop into the palm from which I’d appeared to have taken it. My son watched, eyes blinking lazily, then shrugged. “I knew that’s how you did it,” he said. Then he jerked the blankets over his head, and disappeared.

## “HOLY HOURS”

7.14.16

Patches the horse—who'd been taught how to answer the telephone, retrieve a beer from the refrigerator, ride in a convertible, and use his teeth to pull the covers of the bed he slept in over his shoulder—loved cheeseburgers. Maybe you know this already. Maybe you've seen the video where Patches' owner pulls up to a McDonald's drive thru in a boat-like and possibly homemade white convertible splatted inexplicably with what looks like brown paint spots, and asks Patches, who's riding shotgun, if he wants a cheeseburger, and the horse nods and then sure enough, after the drive thru lady hands over the food bag, the guy feeds Patches an honest-to-God cheeseburger. Thinking about Patches and how he learned to do all that he did and whether or not he might've cared had he known that those burgers he ate with such enthusiasm had been made out of the meat of a fellow beast of burden, made me think about Mister Ed, the talking horse. So I Googled him. I learned that the actor Alan Young, who played Mister Ed's owner on the show, started the totally false rumor that trainers encouraged the horse who played Mister Ed—whose real name was Bamboo Harvester—to move his lips by putting peanut butter on his gums. This was maybe a better and more crowd-pleasing story than saying, “Though we used to put a nylon string in his mouth, he eventually learned how to move those lips on cue, simply by his trainer touching a finger to one of his hooves.” In 1986, an Ohio preacher claimed that the “Mister Ed” theme song—you know, “a horse is a horse of course of course,” etc.—contained a secret message and that if you played it backwards, listeners would hear the phrase “I sing this song for Satan.” If you were a Christian teenager in the 80s, as I was, you were no doubt fascinated by the idea that rock musicians were secret Satan worshippers. You might have read *Rock's Hidden Persuader* or *Backward Masking Unmasked*, and you may have watched the documentary *Hell's Bells*, in which a man with a mustache and a mullet narrates the ways that the devil uses rock and pop and metal to turn humans away from God, and though a thirty second section of this movie focused on The Cure, which was my favorite band at the time, it also seemed that the evidence against them was pretty weak, not only because the narrator claimed that “the unappealing nature of the church and Christianity is the subtle message of the song ‘Faith’,” or because the documentary then featured a shot of the album cover overlaid with the lyrics “I cannot hold what you devour/the sacrifice of penance during the holy hour”—and not only because who could say for sure what “the holy hour” referred to, but also because the song seemed pretty tame when compared to hits like “Blasphemous Rumors” by Depeche Mode, which claimed that God had “a sick sense of humor,” or to “Dear God,” in which the singer addresses the Almighty and outright says, “I can't believe in you.” I was thinking about this documentary—and also about my boarding school's assistant chaplain, who'd engineered a Walkman so that it would play cassettes in reverse, so students could listen to “Stairway to Heaven” backwards and hear Robert Plant sing “my sweet Satan” in real time—when an alert appeared on my computer, an email from a former student named Angel, who happens to be spending the summer working at her aunt's real estate office in West Virginia, a state where, Angel claims, there are Trump signs everywhere, and she has to talk to

clients who think Trump is some kind of savior, and that Obama is a terrorist, and that the people who deserve to be blamed for stuff are minorities and millennials, both of which represent categories to which Angel belongs, and that she'd rather be at Virginia Beach, with her English bulldog, or in Atlanta, with her boyfriend, who she once painted a six foot portrait of, in a style that made him seem like some kind of baller gangsta saint—with a halo. Thunder boomed overhead. I welcomed it. I was at home by myself, safe in a house, supposedly writing, actually getting nostalgic about thirtysomething-year-old documentaries that purported to uncover the secrets of demon-inspired rock music when I realized that the windows in my car were down. I couldn't help, at this point, to miss my old neighbor and good friend Chris, who works at the Radford Arsenal, a plant that produces propellant for missiles used by the United States military, and who used to call me whenever it was starting to rain because he'd remember that he'd seen that I'd failed—once again—to raise my car windows, but now we've moved across town, Chris cannot see my windows, and my new neighbors are either less observant or content to let me lie in whatever bed I make, which means that today I had to run outside, into a downpour so furious that it made the air brighter, as if the day had every intention of washing itself clean.

## “BRING ME THE HEAD OF GERALDO RIVERA”

7.15.16

My best friend's mom's boyfriend used to refer to G. I. Joe men as “dolls.” “Hey,” he'd say, “you guys playing with your little dolls again?” and though we'd try to argue that they should be referred to as “action figures,” and that it was ludicrous to apply the word “doll” to a character like, Serpentor, who, according to G. I. Joe comics had been cloned with the help of Destro and Dr. Mindbender, who'd raided tombs the world over to harvest genetic material from history's most ruthless conquerors, so as to engineer the perfect Cobra leader, I worried that my best friend's mom's boyfriend might be right, that in the end our Joes were nothing but meaningless play pretties. On the occasions where my friend and I visited his mom's boyfriend's log cabin, we checked out the geodes arranged on a mantel, the dead flying squirrel in a freezer, and the picture of Jesus on that, if you stared at it long enough, would suddenly open its eyes. We loved my best friend's mom's boyfriend's record collection, and spent afternoons flipping through his vinyl, listening to Andreas Vollenwieder—a famous new age harpist—or studying the cover of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. “Whoa,” we said, whenever we pointed out Aleister Crowley, whose bald, pale head sat at the top of the left hand crowd of people, between Sri Yuteswar (an Indian guru) and Mae West (famous Hollywood actress). We knew Aleister Crowley was trouble, that he was an English occultist, ceremonial magician, and drug addict, and that Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page had been obsessed with him enough to buy his house. I admit that recently, when I thought about the *Sgt. Pepper's* album cover, the name that first came to mind was not Crowley but Anton LaVey, the author of the Satanic bible and the founder of the Church of Satan. Crowley and LaVey

look nothing alike; Crowley, at least in his later years, bears a resemblance to an avuncular British bureaucrat, whereas LaVey, with his goatee and shaved head—the result of a lost bet, and not, as he liked to claim, as a tribute to the tradition of ancient executioners—granted him a decidedly Mephistophilian appearance. If you were alive in the late 80s, you likely saw Geraldo Rivera’s two-hour documentary, “Exposing Satan’s Underground,” which was part talk show, part “investigative journalism,” and whose “featured guests” included Zeena LaVey, a sultry-looking blond dressed in all black who happened to be Anton’s daughter, and who had the distinction of having been the first baptism into the Church of Satan, at the age of 3. She and her partner Nikolas—a severe-looking dude with black hair, black clothes, and only one ear—had taken it upon themselves—in part because her father hadn’t been interested—to defend the church, which had been targeted by the media as bearing responsibility for the supposed wave of abductions and ritual abuse slash sacrifices slash murders that had been committed in the name of Satan, whose literal existence, it’s worth pointing out, LaVey and his church members didn’t even believe in. Zeena and Nikolas would both eventually renounce Satanism and the occult, though their dedication to mysticism remains; they co-wrote wrote a book about sex magick, a series of ritualistic practices based on the idea that sexual energy can help people transcend the ways that they normally experience reality, and in 2002, they founded the Sethian Liberation Movement, which “allows people to learn and practice magic without answering to an oppressive sect and helps free ex-cult members from their troubled pasts.” Vice magazine published an article by Zeena, in which she meditates on vice, and concludes by saying, “By resting in simply what is, instead of always trying to fix what is perceived as a defect, we open ourselves up to infinite possibilities.” It—the article—is worth reading. I’ll end this by saying that Zeena—in addition to all the other things she is—is also a musician, who’s recorded a number of songs and albums, one of which is titled “Bring Me the Head of Geraldo Rivera.”

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