

Wed., 10:35 p.m., 11 MARCH 2020—DERRY, NORTHERN IRELAND

P—I am not sure if you are receiving my texts, nor I all of yours. It is like we are in different regions of outer space, or are existing in the ever-popular “different dimensions.” I was up later than the rest last night, per the norm, like a good old kitchen light. “Gale force,” for the record, is too hackneyed to do justice to the pounding that Derry was, perhaps aggrievedly and not indifferently, receiving from the Big Indifferent. Think of all the tales you’ve heard of an Irish spring and turn that to eleven, only take away the there-is-a-god interludes of sun. The braggadocio we Minnesotans have regarding our changeable weather has been rendered impotent here by the temperamental ravaging of all this near-the-sea-ness. Praise be to this old brick building in which we have rented enough rooms to stretch our legs and etcetera in. It is unmoved and unswaying—a secret member of the wind’s sect, perhaps, or, dare I venture, that the lintel of the entrance is marked.

MM

Wed., 11:05 p.m.

P—I just read in the Guardian that Dear Leader has announced a travel ban for “everybody in Europe.” I’ve checked to see how the Post and Times write it, the old fact checker still alive and well within me, like one of the last remaining survivors of an old tragedy, the lessons I have to teach of the sort that only PBS cares to remember. Bless these reporters trying to clarify what he means. They are like an underground ready to rebuild once the armistice comes. Seems it’s not all dog whistling. They are saying to a source that the ban goes into effect at midnight tomorrow, all carriages then transformed into pumpkins. Aer Lingus—they’ve a good app—shows everything is still a go for our return on Sunday. Though it would be too early to announce any changes, the officials there relying on the same breaking news as the rest of us. This idiot tale-telling, for we with our wee wild and precious lives in Derry, signifies, contrary to Faulkner’s take, quite a bit. The others are awake in their bedrooms. I hear them, on their phones trying to make sense of the announcement, I’m sure. My feeling is not anxiety, but something halfway between the dull clockwatching one does when proctoring a final exam and the suppression of expectations one engages in upon hearing you’re a finalist but that the judge needs more time to make a final decision. I sit here trying to do my best imitation of this lovely brick.

MM

Thurs., 8:31 a.m.

P—More and more the Troubles, as I speculated, seems to be perfect as lens through which to see better our own violences, fractures, and feuds—the spades of domestic terrorism we seldom call out as such—and more and more I have the sense that the expansiveness of our geography, our sea to shining seas, is what keeps us from descending into open and perpetual conflict with neighbor and kin, and as well from facing what we need to face if any of our mottos and creeds are to be anything other than curriculum. There is too much water in the pot and not enough propane in the tank to get us to the boil that turns a set of ingredients into memorable soup. It is as though after the Civil War we have been placed into suspended animation for the long trip to strange new worlds where none have gone before, lacking the boldness of doing it with our eyes open wide. This trip has been as fruitful as a tree from which you can’t give away all the edibles before they rot. I have listened and learned much. Those to whom I’ve listened are always sad to tell me what they have to say. It is why the commingling of coffee and whisky for breakfast is so easy to embrace as its own sustenance, why using real cream indeed matters.

MM

Thurs., 5:40 p.m.

P— You know how when you travel cross country on the interstates you'll pass or be passed by the same sets of travelers days in a row, as if the country and its roads were a kind of board game, all of us with our various playing pieces taking turns in the lead? It's been that way with the bartender from the Grand Central. We have crossed paths three other times, most recently at the Tesco where D. and I went for stock. I could easily be stranded here, quarantined in Derry, and I mean easily in five of its seven forms, all of which I've looked up. While our financial hand has no run of the same suit, not face cards or otherwise, and nothing close to four of a kind, I'd say we have a high pair bordering on two pair if we get the right draw—enough to overcome our lack of savings if we pool the spending limits on our credit cards as a kind of kitty. It would get us by for a not-insignificant while. If not for the cats at home, I would be suggesting more than a little bit that we hunker down here and see if, like the creatures adjusting to climate change by marching north, it is our natural habitat which has moved, and we are merely completing a match that was always meant to be. Perhaps an extended sojourn, as with the faces of those long married that grow to resemble each other, would turn us into expats, Derry our home.  
MM

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“The bog-bodies of the late first millennium BCE are a classical archaeological puzzle: men, women, and children murdered yet respected in death and adorned with items of fine clothing. Bogs could have indeed been seen as liminal places positively connected to another world, which might welcome contaminating items otherwise dangerous to the living.”

from *Roman Reflections: Iron Age to Viking Age in Northern Europe*  
by Klavs Randsborg

A stretch of window glass perpendicular to the sidewalk  
is saturated

like a bog  
with the reflections

of everyone who's ever walked by, everyone

who's ever eaten inside. I touch it (the glass) like  
the mournful walk on sacred ground  
(it was warmer in my mind).

The bird shadows seem to be speaking  
a language the glass can interpret.  
As if they're telling it their secrets,

the shadows mark a point of entry with X  
after X. I put my ear to the glass and  
hear, I see

you. I hear, I just had the best pancakes  
of my life.

In the math of the moment, a plus sign

adds the glass I see myself in

to the understanding that it is glass  
meant to be seen through. The minus sign  
notes that my reflection in it looks

nothing like a one-man-band. The equation

zeroes out. One of the thoughts  
I have at zero is that loitering

may be the bow that plays the fiddle of bliss.

It is bliss that  
allows a part of me

to dive not through  
but into the glass  
at the X,

where I join the light of day,

the confluence of room and atmospheric temps,

tiptoeing through the green trains  
that trail the fishes

I didn't know lived in glass. I settle  
cross-legged, a bottom feeder,  
a buddha in a tank. I pat

my head and rub my stomach. The fish  
school around me, try

to impose their will on my soon  
to be precipitate body-stalk.

They are trying harder than any ever have  
to recruit me

and are succeeding.

Even with my breath held

to recapture the old sense of buoyancy,  
I no longer rise.

Ask me what you would ask

your go-to objects of veneration.

Ask me what you would ask  
of the dead.

• • •

Which, recluse to recluse, I have named Emily Dickinson

A dead branch in the belly of the tree,  
hanging straight down

while the other branches reach,  
just some tree skin holding it in place,

as if ousted,  
as if refugee. Branch

that you have to be standing in the right place  
to see

through the gaps in the leafy green,  
to acknowledge with your eyes

the wish you share with it  
to change the world as it is.

This is not a music video.

The branch is not a lemon.  
I am not on sale.

This is an offer of clemency  
at a happy ending

that is also a blind beginning.  
The knowing branch,

as if dethroning  
this era of fencing-in,

(for the public  
I am about to return to)

has given me  
a piece of corduroy

to rub with, to get the many many masks  
I've both been issued

and have adopted freely

off my face.

You will never see the me  
you think of as me

again.

My face is becoming  
all light.

• • •

Fri., 9:59 a.m.

P— What a brilliant sun today. My brief experience with this Six Counties spring, though, has me reading it like the start of a scene I know will end with corpses all about the stage. D., L., A., and I have triangulated our theys, and so it is with confidence I can report that they are saying we will not get rain till later in the afternoon, and then only for a short spell. Although a rationing-out of rain and sun as predictable as what they're suggesting would be a first, I'm allowing myself to fool myself into expecting a lighter version of the predictable old Florida rains we used to get, when I lived there, before climate change. I'm not unlike a voter at the polls thinking that this which I do here today is enough to make the world a better place. Part of me thinks that, had we an overlay of the weather to set upon our itinerary, we would have moved several of the pieces around. Another part—that part that makes metaphor and distinguishes sentence from line—thinks that getting firsthand knowledge of the Troubles à la Derry from G. in weather that he is as adapted to as a duck is a gift such that we have never received, that we be forgiven for not first seeing it as such. Ah, hindsight. It is almost as good as a pen or pencil to cross out today that which a confident but melodramatic you put down yesterday.

MM

Fri., 2:22 p.m.—BELFAST

P— We have a spot in the city centre. Our first place, before the loop up to Derry and back—a kind of Sunday comics speech balloon if you see it in marker on the map—was in west Belfast, not far from the Falls and Shankhill Roads and the peace wall everybody signs (or, if you're a local still steeping in the brew, tags). Dm., our Troubles à la Belfast guide, explained how the the wall “literally keeps the peace,” in that it stops the rocks and golf balls that the ne'er-do-wells throw over it from escalating to worse: Molotov cocktails and the like. “Peace wall” had seemed to me from the outside as the strangest and silliest euphemism of all, topping all the great ones Zinsser lists in that still-great chapter on clutter. No more. And good god, I'm finding myself saying that a lot, not as a needle stuck in a groove but as a track on a CD intentionally using the sonic effect to double down on the words, or stand in for them if you can't make out what I'm singing for the accent or muddle.

MM

Fri., 3:17 p.m.

P— This photo shows the bomb cage at the entrance of the Sunflower—a precursor to the cages on the Catholic homes next to the peace walls, a bit like a fledgling company with a good idea bought out by the bigs. They say it's the last remaining bomb cage in Northern Ireland and that there's been some pressure to dismantle it—to put this aspect of the past in the past, which I don't think they'd like to hear me say, is rather American of them. This is not unlike the evolution of the murals, where the more violent elements

—flowers that indicate kills, for one—have been over time removed as the 1998 peace grows from seed if not to flower then to something in the garden that looks as though it deserves our continued attention, because who knows. As regards the bomb cage, it will come as no surprise that I’m in the “keep it so you don’t forget” camp, much as I would try to keep alive the last redwood—or anything redwoodesque—which may become a thing we have to decide to do, what with the warming. The morning before we started the Derry loop, I left our flat, per my new routine—two days of the same thing give me license to call it that—to get coffee. One of the Sunflower bartenders, who the night prior had served me perfect hot whiskeys, was loading in for the day. We volleyed head nods and the Irish version of a “hey.” I’d become a regular at a Caffè Nero, a chain place, where I gave my quids to the same friendly barista every day, although here they don’t call them that, which is more weight on the scales for here. Not five minutes later the barista, not called a barista, told me she heard there’d been a case of the virus discovered at Queen’s, where she was a student, and that they may be closing things down for a day or so to sanitize. We drove past both the Sunflower and the Nero again today on the way to our place in the city centre and saw the now-familiar “Due to COVID-19” boldface at the top of the signs, after which you don’t need to read on. It’s like hearing the EAS alert when you’re trying to listen to a radio show. I took the bomb cage photo days ago, and didn’t think to share it then. It’s more poignant now, like a thing one neglected to love, or, in this case, pass through and be hopeful it’s a relic.

MM

Fri., 3:21 p.m.

P—The omnipresence of the COVID-related signs, whether imploring diligent hygiene or announcing the temporary cessation of business, bring me back to NYC post-9/11, to the makeshift fliers holding the faces of all the missing people, all the numbers to call if you’d seen them. I was there on business to schedule and sign off on a series of school-library books for middle-grade readers, nonfiction to complement the curriculum, working with over-placed editors at one of the major houses we had a packaging contract with. We walked the streets somberly at night, one of the editors much better at lower East Side hosting than bookmaking, a population turned to ash on the walls of buildings all across Manhattan looking at us, over us. I remember thinking then, When these streets are empty, if ever they are, all the dead will stare at each other, all these happy looks on their faces, as if the afterlife were grand—a big party along all the thoroughfares. Such sentiments in the moment are as close as I get to religion.

MM

Sat., 1:59 a.m.

P—This is a city that has seen the very worst of the Troubles. As Dm. puts it, “There’s Beirut, Bagdad, and Belfast.” In between sites on the tour, he showed us photos—8 x 11 stills—“wives and sisters and mothers,” Dm. says, going about their shopping on the streets while paramilitary actors raged around them. It was as if they couldn’t see the war, were on neither side, wanted only peace and by being defiantly routine, defiantly normal, were going to usher in a new era by their example, another kind of picture in picture. The folks at Bittles tonight seemed to have retained that wife-sister-mother, Troubles-era resolve. But in many other spots, the virus had done what the Troubles could not, which is to scare the shit out of people and close things down (Made in Belfast one). The Ox represents a midway mindset—those who want to be brave but are about to hunker down, once the decrees are official. I suppose that these are the three ur camps, and that no matter the situation or scenario for which our tribal, sectarian, or I-don’t-like-the-look-of-you conflicts get their names, we find ourselves either wholly in one of them or else on a border taking steps from one into the next. There are so many of them in the US, P, that I am more and more convinced it is space—vast, vast space and nothing more—that keeps us from warring, literally, with ourselves.

MM

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The ballad of a brunch prep that brings me  
from intimations of paramilitarism  
to true hopes for peace, the radicalism  
of the pandemic making Easter morning  
a microcosm of the Troubles

I crack an egg on the edge of a bowl,  
pretend it's the skull

of one whom I refuse  
to sit at a table

and negotiate with.

I crack more eggs and think  
again of sects and skulls. My thinking,

I think, is limited

by the shape of my cookware,  
by what I'm cooking,

by the tribe of ovoid,  
oval,

spheroidal, round,

by the casings  
that keep

our brains.

I crack the eggs like a crow

who has figured out its beak  
fits perfectly the heel-hole of Achilles.

Hungry,  
hunched over,

I whisk,

as in utero, or as if  
reading a difficult work in a quiet room,

sounding a new word aloud,

like a ship captain blowing my horn  
in fog,

not as SOS, but like it.

• • •

How long must it last before we return  
to burying pets in our yards, our kin in family plots?

Before the democratization  
of starving yourself to nothingness,

remember how disquieting  
it was to receive news

of those first hunger strikes?  
Remember the sympathy pangs?

I have a story

because a man pulled his little truck over  
and carried his little dog to the grass

to do its business  
and then he carried the dog back to its seat  
next to him.

They sat hip to hip,  
like an early-stage love affair

in the days  
before seat-belt legislation.

He carried the little dog  
because the little dog

was broken  
and old.

He put his hand through a bag  
and picked up its death shit.

Because I am letting love rule,  
they drove out of my life

different



from how they had driven into it.

Somebody else  
or elses

had to be buried  
so that there was room for them to fit

in my limitedness.

Which of us is carrying

and which is the carried

and whether an ambulance  
or to bed is what

we're being carried to,

because one of us fell asleep  
on the couch or is in the midst

of dying ourselves, is so very hard to tell  
IRL.

The world will get the news.

The news is a child of Zeus and water.

It will make it seem like it's not  
hard to tell at all.

• • •

Sat., 9:17 a.m.

P—The bus stop where we were first dropped into Belfast is the bus stop from which we will depart, one of the many circles we're making full, only now it's not the foreign flower we were dropped into and left to figure out our bearings, but is a familiar aspect of the *mise-en-scène* we've constructed here—our flower, our little garden. The driver is as efficient as a machine, arriving with just enough time to open the cargo hold, check tickets, have a smoke, and depart on time, a Swiss watch transformed to ferry us. We learned on the two-hour ride here that the bus has no toilet, so this morning I have been on a liquid fast, save for the hotel-room variety of caffeine very early (plus I inhabited one of the habits of my Greatest Generation grandfather, taking a tug from the bottle of 12-year-old reserve I got from Bushmills, which you can only get there, they say). If the next time the road to Belfast starts in Dublin, I'll take the train, I think, if it has a lounge car and a loo. This bus will make rail coach seem like the old First Class, though of that I know only by hearsay.

MM

Sat., 10:29 a.m.

P—I had been looking out the window at the Irish landscape, which is as uniform by now and with as little new to see anymore as fields in farmland or pines in the north. A. was napping when the driver pulled fast to a small roadside parking area. I thought at first that perhaps his bladder had gotten the best of him, that he wasn't as Swiss-made as I'd presumed, but then we were boarded by two Republic of Ireland police, Gardaí. They said we must produce identification, the lot of us. A. and I had our passports. D. and L., in the seats ahead of us, had packed theirs in their bags, which were in the cargo hold. The police rather reluctantly accepted their Minnesota driver's licenses after they'd offered to get out and unpack, standing up to show they meant it. On the way into Northern Ireland, I missed the "Welcome to" sign, if they do those here, but knew we had crossed the border, as the Irish Gaelic that had accompanied the English on the road signs was no more, not once we had crossed into her majesty's domain. It is hard to imagine Brexit, once it's all resolved, not resulting in either a full-stop border or a reunified Ireland, if this is any taste, which is what my mind's tongue tells me it is. Though we had committed no crime, I felt we would soon be in search of a dinghy we could row to Istanbul before walking to the safety of a consulate in Greece, à la *Midnight Express*. Just for the accusation, just from the act of being boarded, I felt convicted.

MM

Sat., 11:44 p.m.—SWORDS, REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

P—I forgot to tell you about the strangest exchange of all, one that perhaps foreshadows the two sides we'll have to choose between when not in the suspended animation that the current conditions have we travelers, trying to get from continent to continent, over an ocean, in. I feel like not much more than iterations of Mendes's famous plastic bag, whose ballet is a function not of agency but of the winds of the moment. The luxury of choice in matters beyond whether I get a burger or fish, a Carlsberg or a Guinness, is largely not ours. So this fellow, a local I presume—and perhaps one not at all amused by the throngs of foreigners from virus hotspots populating his suburb like a festival crowd unconcerned about who cleans up the trash it leaves in its wake—said something to our little group of four on our way into the Old School House for that final meal, that fattening up for the journey ahead. And I couldn't make out what he said through his accent. I have generally found here that a stranger having something to say is an exchange worth the make. There's good advice, guidance, and humor to be got for free. It's not at all like at home, where the unsolicited exchange is best ignored if not preempted by averting the eyes. Each time I said Pardon me? the young man got closer, as if my inability to get what he was getting at were the result of proximity, how its reduction increases the volume in the ear. By the time I could make out the English via the Irish, he was within the range one needs for seduction by tongue. And what he said, more and more adamantly, was you can get it there—don't go in—don't think you can't—it's not safe—washing your hands won't stop it—not in that crowd. Irony's halo was the atmosphere under which we breathed in and out, after we were finally able to communicate. We'll see what tomorrow bring, my friend.

MM

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As doubly good as the gift of socks from Mara Mori  
is the acceptance of an offer to dance at highway speeds

From the backseat  
of a motor vehicle, you can look

into the backseat  
of a different motor vehicle

and sense connection  
sensing connection.

Like seventh graders

who only know  
how to slow dance

one way, you can fall  
into one another, via gaze,

like a pillar

not holding anything up. Like  
the ruins

of having previously held.  
A something

assembled  
into a greatness

beyond the sum of its parts. Like

the species of bullfrog  
that jump

and simply never come down.

As if great hand  
were lifting you, like a marionette,

from the opera you thought

was all there was.

• • •

The friable quality

I smile as I verify  
that my driver's license

shows that I checked  
the organ donor box,

thinking of my eye

in your socket looking back  
on a past that imagined us  
inside each other more wholly.

I almost die from the joy, seeing  
like elders whose advice-to-the-young

eye sees by standing atop a pyramid

the elders didn't know, until they were too old  
to climb back down, that they had never been paid to build.

Our futures

are futures of walking multitudinously,  
part butcher, part cobbler, part Hindu,

seeing the same cow.

We make more and more sandwiches  
for all the unexpected visitors

drawn—they know not why or how—

to our kitchen of nearly fatal joy  
with bread we were saving for another use.

If you like flags, wave us. Sing  
to honor the (many just now)

dead. The dying. The air  
that has ensnared us in its web  
is wrinkled and corrugated

and wavy in the wake of Romeo

Romeo-ing it, Juliet juggling  
us like her offspring in the inflatable

bounce-house of her mouth.  
What a blast,

riding words time-released to self-destruct in a kiss, breaths  
breathed out like prescriptions

to heal, as if the tongues  
were picks, the tongued guitars,

such that we almost

miss that we have maybe sixty seconds left

before the future is what was meant  
to be.

• • •

Sun., 8:46 a.m.—DUBLIN AIRPORT

P—There is a strange kind of situational déjà vu in the airport, having entered into the same atrium where we exited eight days ago, getting a cup of coffee from the same vendor—another Caffé Nero—though as far as déjà vu scenarios go, there is a dystopian tinge to the here and now, the old bright painting restored by a dark visionary. None of the tables at the Nero are open for seating, all the chairs upside down upon them, as at closing time, when such a rearrangement gives the broom or mop space for its solo. The barista (not called a barista) is gloved, the atrium seeming to have been rezoned in order to save the echo, as if it were now an endangered species.

MM

Sun., 9:39 a.m.

P—There are many young people here with us—students, it seems, returning from spring break (those with backpacks) or from truncated study abroad (those with today’s wheeled and many-pocketed version of a travel trunk or two). It’s impossible to not overhear conversations, all of them held in New World English, the accents like the smell of a particular family’s home, immediately recognizable on goods they have brought out from it. A young man we are shoulder to shoulder with at intervals, as we make our serpentine ways through the innards of the greater snake we make together, is coming from Spain and was just yesterday with friends come from Italy. His friends say they are sure they have already had the virus, and he is equally sure he has been exposed. As in any belly, what was discrete or served in courses is mingled into a single mass for either digestion and later excretion, or for vomiting.

MM

Sun., 9:55 a.m.

P—One boy just ahead of us has on a Twins cap and has repeatedly told anybody who will listen—and the faeries in the air—that he is just trying to get back to Minnesota, is just trying to get back to Minnesota, is just trying to get back to Minnesota. He has repeatedly said a few things many times and again, his sayings accompanied by all the outward signs of an anxiety that barely caps his percolating fear, if you’ll allow me to read him as a geologist does an idle, but signaling, geyser. He needs, and receives, continual assurance that he is in the right line, that he will get to his gate, that things are proceeding as they must, as well, under the glut and deadline, as they can, not unlike a new kindergartener being gently coached for day one. When we are questioned again by one of the Aer Lingus shepherds, we find that we are in the line for those who must go to a different hub than they are scheduled to return to, based on transfers, layovers, and the new rules of the virus. We are not moved to the end of the long snake but are inserted into it where a break has occurred perpendicular to us, due to a slowdown at the base of the rattle—some confusion, it seems, over the questioning and line designating that got us in the wrong spot in the first place. This, of course, has increased the boy’s anxiety, further cementing in him the notion that he is in the wrong place to get him where he needs to go. He is the only one among the hundreds and hundreds of us (thousands?) showing any outward sign of unease. Were this the wild, he would be the one plucked by the predator a link higher than we on the food chain, our natural camouflage having saved the rest of us, we’ll think, as he is torn apart and devoured by claw, jaw, or beak.

MM

Sun., 1:43 p.m.

P—The current estimate from the attendants at our gate is that our departure will be delayed by only an hour or so. The mutual calmness with which the fluidity of our situation is both announced and accepted gives one the sense of being in a war film, although not at the front, but well behind the lines, waiting for a train to the next town. What we had heard in the last Irish line, which I had thought was official-speak, a bromide to tamp the itch, was, remarkably, true: the airlines are aware of the delays and are literally holding the doors until the last passengers make it through, not unlike the ending of *Casablanca*. It seems a handful slated for our flight are still in the queues, but how strange it is that the airlines know both whereabouts they are and whenabouts they'll arrive. It's rather straw on the camel's back of me to think of this as another nail in the debate on privacy, free will—all that we think makes us special—but there you are.

MM

Sun., 2:52 p.m.

P—I have, I think you know, in the face of the years of evidence that make up my blip of a life, accepted that for things to truly change for the better—that for us to get out of the grip of corporations, their money, the power grabs of gerrymandering and vote/voter suppression, the stupid faith in free market capitalism and a framework of policy and law assumed to be benign but in actuality a framework making the rich richer as they siphon so much, and not just money, from the rest of us—as if we are their IV—requires some kind of revolution, that, Trump-fueled angst and anger aside, will not come from the ballot box. The very nature of a system itself which more and more instills a flawed but Constitutional minority rule by a minority that on one side is comprised by the aforementioned über rich and on the other side by evangelical—big E and small—acolytes who believe the earth is flat, that vaccines causes illness, to say nothing of their racism, their etcetera, is a system that must needs fall via revolution. And while it has been said by many smarter than I that no revolution is the same, I nonetheless prefer ours fall on the velvet end of the spectrum instead of the bloody one—though, given all the guns we've got, my thinking borders on the magical. I say all that as preface to telling you that we boarded the plane in a manner most unexpected. There were no divisions as to whom was first class, business class, or coach—no divisions as to who paid more for a ticket. We all just got on board, and I am for now, as I give optimism this moment, willing to allow myself to believe that perhaps this small egalitarian grace intimates better behaviors, large and small, individually and collectively, lay ahead. Perhaps this spreading virus is the velvet I seek.

MM

Sun.—IN THE AIR

P—But for the cats and the necessity of showing up for work, I would have lobbied the group to have stayed in Derry, to ride things out there, dropping the traveler's cloak to try on that of sojourner, refugee, emigrant. But for the cats, the necessity of showing up for work . . . and the spending limits on our plastic. Decamping to Derry, of course, would require sacrificing the plants. I will not tell them what I almost did when I water them tonight.

MM

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A house in SOUTH MINNEAPOLIS—the last week of May 2020

A dumpster is burning in the center of an intersection a block south of Lake Street, like it's a distributary channel, Lake Street being, reports indicate, the primary thoroughfare of flame. It's the kind of dumpster a landlord sets behind an apartment building to collect the weekly trash for all the renters whose initials and last names fit in the small rectangles above the rows of mailboxes up front, mailbox setups that have always reminded me of mausoleums. I watch from a three-season porch with all the windows, double-

hungs, open wide. On the various screens where I watch it—television, laptop, phone—the dumpster-fire scene looks like a party. There’s a general sense of joy: dancing, hooting, hearty laughter now and again behind the reporters, sometimes making it hard to hear what they have to say, as if a fair number of really good jokes are reaching their punch lines. It is not unlike the sort of misbehavior and property damage that revelers would think long overdue on the streets here if the Vikings ever won a Super Bowl.

The revelers remain a block south of Lake and are thinking not campfire but bonfire, dragging into the intersection various smaller receptacles—those intended for recycling or compost, those that collect the refuse for single-family homes and duplexes, not the multifamily residentials. Though it is difficult to tell with their visages transformed by flame, what must be old household items left in the alleyways for solid-waste pickup are part of the fuel too. There seem to be actors and watchers, those setting fires, those who don’t want to miss it, FOMO types thinking, *This is history*. As the crowd grows on the various screens, a filling-in-the-blanks part of my mind is trying to see the people still inside the apartments, trying to see those in bedrooms? in basements? in the single-family houses and duplexes from which the receptacles have been repurposed? is it better to keep all the lights on or turn them off? is this like a tornado such that one is safest in the lowest interior room with thick walls and no windows? I imagine the children, the adults trying to calm them, the older children joining the effort, already changed. I think of the fear that perhaps only the refugees among us have antecedent for, the inheritors of transgenerational trauma trying to understand a vaguely tingling sense of *déjà vu*.

What was a block south of Lake Street is moving further south. Obsessively switching and refreshing to follow the progress provides an optical illusion of three dimensions, though it’s nothing on par with what you see in replays in high-profile NFL games, a wide receiver shown making a miraculous catch in what seems like a magical 360 degrees, as if captured by a drone camera that isn’t there, a trick of the digital age. My illusion is analog. A handful of motorcycles are now at the head of the channel of flame, circling it, a halo of cc’s. I have heard the motorcycles all night, on the move, east of me, west of me, south of me, north of me. I find the chorus of howling RPMs—the riders out-of-gear trying to out-rev one another—overly theatrical. I am a hypocrite. At the same time as I wry-smile at them rather than with them, I see the needle on a tachometer hard-bounce to the right and remember what it feels like to have my hand on a throttle, and wish I had a motorcycle still and the barely-populated, hot-summer-night streets of a town with a single stoplight upon which to ride it. The time it takes for the revving to travel from the screens to my ears is less time than it takes for the sound of a bat striking a ball in an MLB stadium to travel from home plate to the outfield, upper-deck cheap seats. The street that the traveling bonfire—that seems less and less like a party—is coming down is mine.

Tonight on the front porch, following the reporters as they name the cross streets and the fire line gets closer, will be only one unsettling night during this last week of May 2020. On another of the nights, five or six cars will drive down my street at intervals of perhaps ten seconds, perhaps twenty seconds, a kind of battle formation. The cars bear no license plates, are painted all black with the windows—save for the windshield—blacked out. Another night, the same number of blacked-out motorcycles will proceed in the same battle-ish formation, again at intervals of about ten or twenty seconds. The gossipy Nextdoor app will be used to identify and trace suspicious vehicles from neighborhood to neighborhood, a kind of citizen-brigade democratization of the surveillance state. Everything I have read from Belew regarding the desire of the white power movement to foment strife and eventually civil war, to come together when the time is right, feels like it is happening here, like Minneapolis has become a gathering place.