

Acknowledgements

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Power Out

If you ever want to float through a place, imagine you've just woken up in the late afternoon at a desk in a corner of the downtown library in your hometown. Somehow, you find yourself there in the late summer of the year that you are twenty-one years old.

It is hard to say for certain why I was in Greensboro then: failure to find a internship in the all-important summer before my senior year, uncertainty at what it was that I should "do" with my biology degree in the first place, a vague idea that I would write about the city, a general tendency wander and to linger too long in a place. Regardless. There I was.

Within such uncertainty, I'd come to the library that day for a clearer reason. I was looking for a copy of the *Greensboro Daily News* from a certain morning in 1955, to see if a story that had unfolded the day before would or would not be reported there. It was a story that I hoped would give me a window into an unfamiliar past of this place, Greensboro, the place that was feeling all too familiar then. It concerned a corner of the city that I did not know well: Gillespie Park, the old, run-down municipal golf course in a neighborhood off Florida Street, close to downtown.

The extent of my experience with the course: a few rounds of high school golf, on the afternoons when one of the two inner-city schools in our conference hosted their matches. My school's home course was Bryan Park, Greensboro's newer municipal golf course, out in a beautiful expanse of woods by a lake north of the city. In high school, I worked there as a cart boy so I could play for free. Bryan Park is idyllic, about the closest that a public course could come to a resort, with 36 holes of "championship-caliber" golf and a conference center. Gillespie has nine holes, each with two sets of tees to simulate a front nine and back nine. It takes up what feel like only a few city blocks—there is an elementary school close on one side, old apartment buildings and housing projects all around. High school golf people called Gillespie the ghetto course. They joked about getting your tires slashed while you were out on the course (one time it actually happened to our team bus) and bemoaned having to play there in the first place. I kept it to myself, but I liked the feeling of Gillespie, the way its holes wove compactly around the overgrown creek that wandered through the course's middle.

And I became more interested in the course after hearing a certain set of rumors about it; I probably heard them first from some of the same golf fathers who held forth on

tire slashing, men who owned concrete companies and the like. They said there were still golf hustlers out at Gillespie, real ones, some of the last ones left anywhere: guys who would show up to the course in overalls and carrying five clubs and would join up with you on the third hole and hit a few slightly embarrassing shots and then ask on the fourth hole if you wanted to play for some money. Guys who could shoot sixty-five if they needed that to beat you, but who wouldn't ever top you by more than a stroke and would stay losing to you as long as they could. The challenge of golf hustling hinges on the fact that golf bets can be re-negotiated hole by hole, shot by shot. The hustler does not aim to play as well as possible as often as possible, like the pro does, but rather to hit each shot exactly as well as is needed to maintain the illusion of competition, to string along the imagination of his opponent, letting him think he'd be smart to double down at the critical juncture, cultivating the most lucrative opportunity to pounce. To hustle well is its own type of art.

The hustler is dying out, if I had to guess, because of Tiger Woods and golf carts. Tiger because the PGA Tour has ridden his talent to such a glut of corporate sponsorship that the whole tour is exponentially richer than it was even 20 years ago—the best players in the world no longer need to hustle, whereas before, most touring pros relied more on hustling than professional winnings for their living. Golf carts because they've killed caddie programs at most courses, eliminating virtually the only way in which talented players who are not rich and white (those who have least access to the professional golf, even in its current form) have been able to pick up the game in the first place.

I was intrigued by the prospect that there might still be hustlers at Gillespie. The hustler was a symbol of anti-golf; the image of him swindling one of the concrete dads

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was one of resistance to everything boring and oppressive about the game of golf through mastery of the game itself, the actual shots and strategy of it, the only part there is to love. I kept the idea the hustlers pleasantly in the back of my mind until that summer, when I had the time to wander into what might be interesting about the Greensboro, and I started asking people who knew the city if they'd ever heard about the hustlers at Gillespie, and how I might get in touch with any who were left. Those I asked had heard stories of them too, but no one knew for sure who they were, or if they were still out there. Go and see was the obvious answer.

I'd gone first to talk with Kelly, an old teaching pro I knew from my high school days, who taught free-lance out at Gillespie's driving range. He's steely-eyed, goateed, fit—he knows more about the golf swing, the mechanics of it, than anyone I've ever met. I can only picture him with a wad of dip in and wearing heavy black rain pants no matter what the weather. A country radio station is always playing in his teaching studio. His irons, whose shafts heft like telephone poles, have wear marks about the size of a dime on their sweet spots. He played professionally for a while after he graduated from NC State and once shot a 60 with a bogey on the last hole. I think he'd be proud to tell you that he's had a falling-out with the management at every private club he's ever worked for—thus, eventually, Gillespie, his new home base. He still coached probably half of the best junior players in the city; college coaches fly him across the country to spend weekends working with their teams, and he works with a few players on the PGA and LPGA tours. His boy and girl play baseball and softball, not golf. He once told me that the day he retires from teaching, he's going to go off somewhere and fish and never touch a golf club again.

He told me when I asked that Gillespie had been not bad lately—with traveling gigs he could make more in a week than he had back at Sedgefield Country Club, and people pretty much let him do his own thing out here. And he was excited because the Bryan Foundation, the one that gives the city money to run Bryan Park, had just announced plans to help the city build a state-of-the-art practice facility at Gillespie, on top of where the city utility truck lot was then, between the clubhouse and driving range. He thought it would attract a whole new stratum of golfers to the course. It's going to be different here, he said. The whole image of this place is going to change.

I asked him if he happened to know of any hustlers who still hung around the course.

He didn't answer immediately.

"No, not anymore," he said. That's dead out here."

"Yeah?"

He gave me hard eye contact.

"Yeah. I've seen everyone out here." He stuck out his lip and shook his head slowly. "I'd know if there were."

I'd sensed a moment of calculation in his pause, but I had to figure that he was right. He'd be one to know.

A few days later, I played a round at the course by myself and on about the sixth hole joined up with a guy in his early 20s named David: a good player, super friendly, an armsy backswing, a narrow stance, and a bad attitude about his game, left over from high school golf. It turned out had worked as a cart boy at Gillespie when he was in high

school. As we came up to the clubhouse after the round, I asked him almost as an afterthought if he knew of any hustlers still out there.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Tons of ‘em.”

He said the best might be Red—a guy who works for a Budweiser distributor and wears all red all the time and shoots well under par on his best days. “Or else Smitty. Everyone uses nicknames out here.”

“Hey Gerald,” he called up to a man maybe in his 60s, with thick forearms and mustache, who was leaning against the clubhouse door. “Gerald, who's the best shark out here?”

Gerald (as if it's obvious): Me

David (ignoring him): Red?

Gerald: Red's in the running. Or Smitty.

David: What's Smitty's real name? Charles?

Gerald: Charles Smith.

I took down as much information as I could from David and Gerald—they offered to put me in touch with all the ex-hustlers and hustlers they knew. I fantasized about talking with them, befriending them, playing with them, getting to observe from the inside as they did their thing. This was the mounting fun.

Before I go on, I must address that all the regulars I'd ever met or seen at Gillespie were black. That was one of the ways in which I had always known the course: the black golf course in town, the only such course I'd ever seen. And I'd assumed, I suppose, that it had always been the black golf course. But when I was preparing to talk with the hustlers, I wandered around on the Internet to glean something about course's

history beyond the pleasantries on the Greensboro parks and rec. website, and I found a chapter of the course that I'd never known. Though Gillespie was built and opened in 1940, the first black players had not golfed there until the afternoon of December 7, 1955. I had gone to the library that summer day to see if the paper the next morning had carried the report of their arrest.

From reading some oral histories and academic papers, I had already pieced together some idea of what had happened on December 7. That morning, George Simkins and five other young black men gathered in Simkins's dental office. It was a Wednesday; Simkins and the others had the day off. On such days they often golfed together at one of the few courses in the area that was open to blacks, usually at Nocho Park, a nine-holer in the south part of town, a "goat pasture" in Simkins's words, that the city threw up next to a sewer plant in 1949 to comply with the "separate but equal" doctrine. That happened after several black citizens complained to the city council about being denied access to Gillespie, the only municipal course in town, which was then in a ritzy, exclusively white neighborhood. Nocho, though clearly inferior to Gillespie, quelled complaints for a while. But in 1954 the Supreme Court handed down *Brown v. Board*, and the decision inspired challenges to the separate but equal doctrine not just in schools, but in all types of city facilities. And so around noon on December 7, 1955, the six men walked inside the Gillespie clubhouse and said that they were there to play a round of golf. The head pro happened to be out of the office—the assistant pro informed them that Gillespie was a private golf club, but if they'd put their names down, he could present them to the membership committee for consideration, and he'd get back to them in a few weeks. This was the other side of the ploy that the city council adopted in response to the 1949

complaints. They formed a non-profit corporation, the Gillespie Park Golf *Club*, and leased the course to it. That way, they figured, the city could dodge any argument that taxpayers' ought to have equal access to a public facility. The course was not a public facility, but a private one.

Except the city still paid to maintain it. The course had still been constructed with public money, 65% of it from WPA programs. The land still belonged to the school board. The president of Gillespie Park Golf Club was the chairman of the parks & rec. department. The amount of the lease was \$1.

White golfers could buy yearly memberships to the "club," but they could also pay per play, like they always had. Black golfers, when they showed up, got the spiel that the assistant pro gave Simkins and his friends. No one ever heard back from the membership committee.

The six men each placed their 75 cents green fee on the counter anyway. They walked out of the clubhouse and teed off.

When Gillespie's head pro, Ernie Edwards, returned to the clubhouse, someone told him what had happened while he was out. On the third hole or the fifth hole, he caught up to the group. He brandished a golf club and trailed a sheriff's deputy. He asked the six for their names and they gave them. Then he asked them why they were there.

"For a cause," Simkins told him.

What cause? Edwards demanded.

"The cause of democracy," Simkins said. "This is a city golf course funded by our taxes and we should be allowed to play it."

Edwards told the deputy arrest them for trespassing. But the deputy refused; he didn't see what the problem was. Golfers on a golf course, who had paid for their round.

Edwards turned red. His lips trembled. He stayed by the golfers as they tried to keep playing, waving his club, cursing at them, "you black SOBs."

Edwards wouldn't leave them alone. Simkins was nervous every time he stood over the ball to hit. He started losing his shots to the right—he said later he didn't want to think about what kind of score he made that day. By the time the six reached the 9th hole, around 1:30 pm (they played fast), they were too tired of his harassment to continue to the back nine. They left. Edwards went to the city police with their names and swore out a warrant for their arrest. That night, black officers were sent to their homes and arrested them for trespassing. They would have spent the night in jail if Simkins's father, a dentist himself, had not covered bail for each of them.

It had not even occurred to me that there would have been a time that Gillespie was whites-only. I'd just wanted to find some hustlers. I was embarrassed that I would have never known about the course's deeper past, would not have thought to look for it. A buried chapter, essential to the course, which spoke of the city. A complete reversal—how one thing could become another. It started on that day, on that course.

And so in the library, I sat at one of the microfilm machines—those anti-ergonomic beasts, with a glow somehow both harsh and dim—and I scrolled to the December 8, 1955 paper. There it was, at the bottom corner of the front page.

"After Warning, 6 Negros Play Links; 5 Placed Under Arrest"

The paper had picked it up. The article held details I had not known. For one thing, there had been another "incident" at Gillespie the week before—four black men (I

cannot find who) had showed up at the course asking to play. Edwards had taken down their name for the membership committee. In Edwards's account to the paper, Simkins's group "threw" their money on the counter, rather than "left" or "placed" it. (By all accounts, Edwards hadn't witnessed the action). The men brought four black caddies with them, rather than use the caddies staffed by the course. The paper from December 7th had predicted a high of 56 degrees that day—good for golf as North Carolina winters go—but the December 8th paper showed it had reached only 42 degrees. Colder than the six might have expected. The last words of the article were, "Trespassing is a misdemeanor." I couldn't help but read it like a warning. The Greensboro Six's court date was already set.

The play-in, one of the first of many at public golf courses across the South, happened nine years before the Woolworth's sit-ins that put Greensboro into the general narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. It was odd to think of municipal golf as an early civil rights battleground, but it also makes perfect sense. What public facilities are so tied to class and racial privilege as golf courses? "Municipal" and "golf course" can only be juxtaposed somewhat paradoxically. An apt place for social forces to clash.

I wondered what else was going on in the world then. I looked around the rest of the paper. From the Sloan-Kettering Institute: "Approach to Control of Cancer Claimed." The same article had new statistical evidence that lung cancer in urban populations is associated with tobacco use. "Fans Acclaim James Dean Best Actor." Apparently without dark humor intended, "Body Named to Seek Out UNC System Head." The trustees were unhappy with recent admittance of three black law students and the first black undergraduate to UNC. This committee would eventually nominate Bill Friday, who was slow to continue integration over his 30 years in office. The outgoing president of the

system, Gordon Grey, would move on to a job as head of Eisenhower's Office of Defense Mobilization. The paper had stories saying that Ike capped the defense budget at \$34.5 billion, and also that he made a national media plug for quilts knit by an army buddy of his who had lost his eyes in the war: a perfect gift for Christmas. There was no mention anywhere in the paper of the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, which, after months of planning, had begun the week before. Simkins would say later that they were a direct inspiration. A joke on the second page of the paper read: "The best labor-saving device ever dreamed up? Tomorrow." Some knew better.

It is enjoyable to wander around in old newspapers. To get out of your own life for a while, and float around in moments past. But eventually my attention came back to where I was—the eyestrain, the shoulder hunch of reading the microfilm machine suddenly made me melancholy and overwhelming tired. A few days earlier, in the same library room, I had run into an old newspaperman I know. He was on the machine next to me, reading some of his old stuff to finish a chapter of his memoirs. He said he had just gotten through the part when black students took over an academic building at Duke in 1969, barricading themselves inside to demand fair treatment on campus. Somehow, on assignment, he had ended up inside the building with them. The police drove the students out with tear-gas and clubs—he remembered choking on the gas and seeing people beaten. But anyway, I had always wondered about my old friend's hunch, which is pronounced, and of an unusual shape, and then, seeing him for the first time in front of the microfilm, I saw that it was a patently microfilm hunch, optimized, in a way, for the machine. And he wasn't reading microfilm at 21. He was in the army. I got up and stretched and paced around the library.

I moved to a table and picked up where I'd last left off in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Before I dozed off at the table, I read the part where Huck judges that he and Jim are three nights from the bottom of Illinois, which is where, Huck says, "We would sell the raft and get on a steamboat and go way up the Ohio amongst the free states, and then be out of trouble." They are on a fast-moving part of the river, and a nighttime fog comes in, and they decide to stop and make camp on a towhead, "for it wouldn't do to try to run in a fog." Huck paddles ahead in the canoe, carrying the line to tie up the raft. He throws the line around a sapling on the bank, but the raft with Jim on it goes swinging by in the fast current and pulls the sapling out by the roots. The raft goes on downriver, and in a moment it is vanished in fog. Huck tears off after it in the canoe but he cannot catch up, or cannot find it; the current sweeps him through a labyrinth of little islands, and all through the night, Huck and Jim are calling to each other in the fog; Jim sounds far away, then he sounds close, and then Huck loses his calls. Huck is exhausted and tries to catnap, but when he wakes up he can tell he is way down the river, the river is calm and wide, and the fog is gone. The sky is full of stars. In almost dawn, he sees a speck downriver, and chases after it. It is the raft, with Jim slumped over the rudder sleeping. Huck slips aboard the raft and sits there, waiting for Jim to wake up. When he does, Jim rejoices to see Huck alive, he kisses and hugs him, but—What fog? What islands? Tarnation, Jim, you must have dreamed the whole thing. Jim doesn't believe him, but then he does; he says it was the most powerful dream he ever had, and he goes about interpreting it, saying that the first towhead was a man who would try help them, and the current was another man who would take them away from him; all the islands were

troubles they would face, but they would make it out of the fog, into the free states. When Jim finishes his interpretation, Huck asks him how he interprets the leaves and trash all over the raft. They are there from the raft having actually been swept around in the islands. Jim doesn't say anything for a minute and then says this is how he interprets them: after he lost Huck's calls in the night, he thought Huck must have crashed and died, he collapsed in sorrow and exhaustion and didn't care any more what happened to him or the raft, so he let it drift and crash through the leaves and trash, and that's what people who make fools of their friends are: trash. Then Jim goes by himself inside the teepee on the raft.

And when I woke up, the power in the library was out. The air was heavy and stale with no air conditioning. And hot—that's what roused me. It was not supposed be summer in there. The big upstairs room was dim, with only emergency lights by the exit signs. Walking around the room, between the shelves, I didn't see anybody. Did someone come around and kick people out? They could have overlooked me.

Closer to the stairs, there was a man in a white t-shirt sitting at a desk with his head cradled in his hands, sort of moving side-to-side, and another man in a tank top, whose arms were very skinny, sitting in front of a dead computer screen and writing intensely in a little notebook. Both of them looked like they didn't have anywhere else to be.

I thought about how the part of the story I had read is where things start to collapse together for Huck. He had gotten on the river to get away from his own life, because he doesn't have anywhere else to be, just wants to wander, but he is realizing that he is wandering with someone else whose journey has much higher stakes, or maybe he

doesn't realize that so much as he feels it—at the beginning of the chapter he says that *we* will be up in the free states and out of trouble soon, and that gets more to the point, which is that he is learning to respect and even to love Jim; he's getting there. Just earlier he watches a tremendous storm from the raft, with the wind howling and the rain coming down in torrents and the sky blue-black and thunder like barrels rolling down from the heavens to the underworld, and he watches the storm pass and he says, Jim, this is nice. I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here. He feels friendship—but he is also still in his first mode, the mode in which he left home, the mode of wandering from day to day and aimlessly playing tricks, often on Jim, but after the fog Huck sees that he cannot have it both ways—that he must abide by his friendship with Jim or lose all. The ending of that chapter, where Jim sets Huck straight, took me by surprise. I was still Huck's first mode, I was ready for the chapter to end on Jim's interpretation of the dream, vaguely portentous, and for Huck to keep his trick to himself, maybe feeling bad about it only in private. But things are not left at that. The chapter ends right at the heart of things. Huck goes back into the tent and humbles himself before Jim and tells us that he'd do it again, and he wouldn't have played his trick in the first place if he had known it would make Jim feel that way. Twain, like Huck, has a way of wandering into the most essential thing. It takes you by surprise.

I went to the bathroom, which was lit by emergency lights, and peed and washed my hands and washed my face, but there were no paper towels and the drier was dead, so I walked down the stairs and through the vaulted, circular lobby under a bronze statue of a tree branch and out the front door with my face and hands wet and lukewarm. Outside it was bright and not very hot but humid. There were a few gray clouds and no wind.

The power looked to be out all through downtown as I walked south, past shop owners in slacks and white aprons, smoking in their doorways. There is something in a city that changes when the power is out. It is quieter. The pull of the present slackens. You notice the very old brick porticos of the second stories of the downtown buildings. The city could be of any age. People have a chance to step out of their lives for a moment and rest, to rest and smoke in the doorway. You feel somehow closer to the people around you.

There were cops at intersections, directing traffic in neon vests. A man walking past me said to the man he was with, "Sometimes I look at it like, 'Why shit happen to me?'" and he paused, and then said, "Why not to me!" and the other man said "Right," and they continued on but I couldn't hear the rest.

Then there was a knee-high printed folding sign standing out in front of a convenience store: "NO MORE POWER," but it only said that because I had already gotten used to the signs, like the one on the door of Oglethorpe's Optometrist, apologizing that they were closed for the day because of *no power*, and looking again I realized that this sign was for the lottery, and it said "NOW MORE POWER,"—in reference to the lottery, of course—but, in the second after I read it the first way, I must have reasoned that they had it sitting in the back, waiting for this sort of situation.

The Greensboro Six refused the guilty plea offered in their trespassing case, in exchange for which they would have had to pay only a small fine. George Simkins never forgot how the judge and prosecution grinned and joked with each other during the trial in municipal court—he said the experience is what inspired him to dedicate most of his working life to civil rights. He went on to serve for 25 years as president of the

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Greensboro NAACP, fighting long, hard-won battles to integrate schools, swimming pools, and hospitals.

It started because he just wanted to play golf at a better course; he played golf and tennis before he ever tried to integrate anything, and he continued playing them his whole life. His wife said that he would have been thought of as a conservative aside from his work in civil rights. Their daughter called him “Victorian.” Through golf, he wandered into a role as perhaps the most enduring figure in Greensboro’s long civil rights struggle.

In the golf case, the Greensboro Six’s criminal trespassing charges were appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which, because of an error on the part of the defense attorney, ruled 5-4 against them, upholding their sentence to 30 days in jail. Earl Warren wrote such a strong dissenting opinion that Governor Luther Hodges commuted the sentences.

While the criminal case against them was ongoing, Simkins led a federal class-action suit against the city for maintaining a whites-only golf course. A district judge agreed that the city’s transparent leasing agreement was no ground on which it could escape legal duties to taxpayers, and a declaratory judgment issued on June 28, 1957 gave the city three weeks to integrate Gillespie (Simkins’s attorneys didn’t have to look far for evidence that the leasing agreement was bogus: several white jurors stated in their *voir dire* examinations that they had played the course without membership).

Two weeks after the order came, someone burned down the clubhouse in the night. The City Council jumped at the excuse; they condemned the whole course, and then decided that it would stay closed—they said the city had insufficient funds to operate a golf course. It was seven years before Gillespie finally re-opened as an

integrated facility, and in the meantime the city sold the back nine so that a highway could be built over it, through the middle of the surrounding neighborhood. The neighborhood had seen swift white flight—by the late 1960s, the course and neighborhood were majority black. Hustling flourished at Gillespie. The city decided to build the utility truck lot right next to the clubhouse. In 1972, the last white businessman in the neighborhood, a service station manager named Joe Melvin, was killed in a hold-up by two young black men, both of whom have spent the rest of their lives in prison. Joe Melvin's son, Jim Melvin, was serving his the first year of his first term as mayor at the time of his father's death. He is the mayor who infamously did not have police at the scene when Klansman and neo-Nazis killed five Communist demonstrators in 1979 at a organized rally in front of a predominantly black housing project. In one interview, when questioned about his controversial record on race during his years as mayor, Melvin mentioned, as a way of demonstrating that he was from an "interracial situation" that he had caddied at Gillespie growing up. He didn't mention that the course was segregated and in a mostly white neighborhood when he did. He lets you imagine, as I would have, that Gillespie was always the black golf course.

Also in the 1970s, cotton magnate Joseph Bryan gave Bryan Park to the city as part of a foundational grant. The city gladly accepted the gift, and diverted even more funds from Gillespie to maintain the new course, which also received sustaining support from the Bryan Foundation, which Jim Melvin happens to chair. I still loved Bryan Park—it is where I learned the game—but I saw it differently though the history of Gillespie. And Melvin was now interested in building this state of the art new practice facility at Gillespie, the one Kelly mentioned. The practice facility at Bryan Park is

named for Ernie Edwards. Next to the driving range at Bryan Park, when I worked there, there were concrete volleyball courts where Hispanic families often gathered to play and cook out. One day I came to work and the nets on the courts were gone. I asked one of the old timers who worked the range what happened. Jim Melvin came to hit balls here, the other day, he said, and he didn't like seeing all the Mexicans.

Melvin has publicly forgiven the men who killed his father. One of them died in prison several years ago. Melvin has written in support of the release of the one who is still living, Calvin Benjamin. His practice facility could be a good thing for Gillespie. It could be a good thing for the neighborhood. Maybe we are wandering toward something better. It is hard to tell sometimes how things will change, or if they have.

I could imagine mournful Mingus jazz as I walked along, "Reincarnations of a Lovebird," or something like it. Maybe Mingus and Jim were the same sort of poet of the blues. Billy Eckstein would have been 100 the other day, and they played an old interview with him on NPR. He said that when he started out, a black man could only sing the blues, except he wanted to sing about being in love, too. Maybe Jim sing about being in love and also the blues. I don't think I know about love. I'm almost positive I don't know anything about the blues. But I listen to those songs and wonder.

I approached a guy walking the other way who had sat at a table near me in the library when I first got there. He had only pulled up his socks and then left. I realized that I thought I would never see him again. He was greasy and sick-looking and wearing a wrinkled white shirt and a black tie and black pants and black walking shoes and white tube socks and a tan trench coat and sunglasses, which he was peering over as he now walked toward me, breathing through his mouth, and he was the kind of person who

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hangs out at the public library during the day and then wanders around downtown, and so was I.

I wanted a cup of coffee. Everywhere looked closed: antique stores and pizza places, abandoned storefronts and tired young shops half-heartedly gentrifying ancient brick buildings and selling I could not tell what—sunny accouterments of the hip and grim; one of them had rope-and-plank swings in the open front window where people were sitting and talking about what, one wonders.

I had needed to get more research done than I did and when I passed people and looked at them, I feel like I could just start talking to them, like maybe we were drunk or dreaming, drifting on some same current. I crossed the street and turned back north and leaned up against a painted pink brick wall and wrote down what I had so far (the impulse to write this down occurred earlier than I'd like to admit) and then headed farther back north. I thought maybe this was all just as good as what I'd meant to do. Or maybe just as well.

It was breezy now and the traffic cops were gone—they power came back on without me noticing.

I went into a bookstore with a coffee bar, and they still had no espresso, the guy at the counter said, which was irrelevant, but the hot coffee needed to be re-brewed, and he said he could go ask Jim how long that would be, but, no, iced coffee would be fine. And a glass of water. There was one guy reading at a table and an old woman down the bar with a younger woman beside her. The old woman was asking the guy behind the counter things like whether they made the hummus there, in the back—Yes, and the pimento cheese?—and whether there were any blues clubs in town, no not a blues festival, a blues

club, like in Durham. Well, Durham is the place for that anyway. (None of them knew about the Cajun bar way out by the airport, where I go sometimes and listen, where truckers and bikers and hippies go.)

The old woman was small and sharp looking, with small, sharp eyes, and she too old to give a shit about being low-key hip and grim; or maybe she was drunk. She asked for another glass of wine and waxed on, rambling and wandering through conversation, with the young woman sort of smiling at the bartender and the man at the table still reading his book.

A storm was gathering out in the street; it was darker. There was soft, distant thunder. The young woman left to see about their car—to make sure the windows were up or to bring it closer to the shop or something. It was quiet and eerie yellow gray out the front windows. Is that a notebook? the old woman asked me, and I considered laptop on the bar: Yeah.

Well, she needed a new one. Didn't want one, necessarily, but needed one, because when you're an old white woman, and traveling alone, your friends will assume that something horrible has happened to you if they don't hear back from you within a day, or sometimes even less time than that, and so you've got to do emails, whether you want to or not. Once your friends become parents, you'll see: they get that way about everything. What of notebook is that? Is it good?

There are differences between Macs and PCs, which must be discussed, so we discussed them.

It is wonderful, she said, what computers let us do—we can talk anywhere, all over the world; and then there's research, but even online, you have to know how to go

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about it the old-fashioned way—but the life of using computers can really be horrible. There were about four chairs between us, and she talked across them.

Well, who knows what comes next. That's for your lifetime. Hopefully I'll be dead. Seriously, she said.

She told how she had been a lab manager at ECU—microbiology, cell biology, and immunology. Some med school stuff, too. The med school is a great thing for that part of the state, she said. When she had her chemotherapy, she asked around, whether she shouldn't go to Duke or UNC, but all the faculty at ECU had been trained at Duke, and the chemotherapy was the same, everyone told her, so she stayed close to home.

She had wanted to be a chemist, and took gen. chem. in college, but a professor told her: maybe you had ought to think about a different profession, and so she did.

I was sympathetic to the old woman—I decided that I liked her. I had tried to study physics my first few years of school, but figured out that I couldn't quite hack it. That I couldn't think in math as well as I'd need to. I was not sure how I had wandered from physics to where I was now.

The rain had started quietly, but now, beyond the dribbling awning, there were grey curtains slanting heavily down Elm Street. The old brick building we were in—through its walls and rafters—murmured with rain on the rooftop. The murmuring made my shoulders drop and my belly settle. Even with the high ceiling in there, everything felt small. There was no leaving now. The young woman returned; she went up by the front windows and browsed books by the door.

I mentioned my friend Max, who was going to UNC med school in the fall, and told her about him, how he is hard working and kind and only ever wanted to be a doctor.

You hope he's the kind who gets through, she said. But, you don't know how being at med school might change even him. Never underestimate the ability of a place to change someone. But you're right, you do hope.

There was loneliness to her talk, but also warmth. And something unafraid. She was traveling up to Kentucky to visit family in Lexington, which was where she grew up; her family was from east Kentucky and worked in the coalmines. She had gone to a Catholic school in Lexington. And her husband was recently deceased. That was her wording, and I could not remember how she brought it up; she just slipped it in somewhere. I could feel how it was still broken the way that she said it. Not yet story or chapter.

It was despair beyond me. We wander for different reasons. To wander is to leave own life for a little while, to float around and knock loose against things and people around you. But one can inadvertently wander into what's most important in someone else's life, into their most essential struggle. And what do you do with that? Sometimes we find in wandering what we have in common, what we can understand. Sometimes wandering brings you back to yourself. You see where you are in a new way, or glimpse yourself in strange faces. And sometimes you come to see that others wander for reasons that are beyond yours. You see exactly what it is you don't understand.

But the old woman was traveling now that she could and might was well for as long as she could. Going from place to place, visiting as many friends as she could—like the parents of this young woman, who was still reading books by the door.

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The rain was quiet. It was brighter outside, and, well, she said, they could go. But good luck, and she comes to Chapel Hill a lot for music. Durham and Saxapahaw too.

They left.

A while longer, and I left the place, also.

The city was gloomy and cool, steaming and drizzling in the evening. The thunder was familiar now. And I felt kind of good walking back toward my car by the library in the rain.

Ron, His Roast

Even his customers have tasted venison elsewhere, and most of them haven't, Ron's venison is not like most. Preparing it, he told me one day in the shop, lasts from when the bullet hits the deer to when the meat hits the plate.

As soon as possible after the deer goes down, you've got to hang it from a gaffel by slots cut between the back leg bones and tendons and field dress it, i.e. get the internal organs out of the body cavity. You cut out around the anus and then slit the throat and then pull out the esophagus down to the sternum. You cut out the udders if it's a doe; the testicles if it's a buck, taking care not to puncture the stomach or other internal organs, whose contents would ruin the meat. You cut from the base of the sternum to the hole left where the genitals were, then pull out the internal organs. The digestive tract should come out end-to-end, since you cut the throat and anus. And you must make sure to remove the

lymph nodes on the esophagus and in the legs—they will render the meat tough if you leave them. You wash out the body cavity thoroughly and let the carcass hang in a cooler with the hide still on for two weeks.

It is important to allow the two weeks of aging—if you try to butcher the deer right after death, during rigor mortis, the cuts will shorten and stiffen once they're off the bone. They will be too tough to eat. But after two weeks, you can skin the carcass, taking care to keep deer hair away from the meat, and then quarter the carcass, go over it two or three times to cut away any trace of deer fat. The fat spoils almost immediately after death, and any left on for roasting will render the whole cut pungent and rancid-tasting. Most people don't know to remove every trace of it, or don't have the dexterity.

You cut out the backstrap and the tenderloin. Those cuts and the quarters, you put in a Styrofoam cooler, cover them with ice and salt (the salt melts the ice into the meat), and prop one end of the cooler up on a brick with the cooler drain open so that all the capillary blood can drain out—it carries the bitter essence of all the twigs and acorns that the deer has eaten. You leave the meat to drain for three days. When people say they don't like the taste of venison—too gamey—what they're taking about is the taste of the blood and the spoiled deer fat.

Once Ron has done all of that, he goes to Triad Meat, an old-fashioned butcher shop not far from his barbershop, where they cut up the quarters the way he wants them for roasting. They also grind up some of the venison chuck for biscuits. And even when you get the cuts back from them, Ron told me, it's a good idea to salt them in coolers again to let more blood drain out.

Ron Teague is a barber. The venison is for his clientele. For almost 35 years, Ron has offered them a wild game roast on the morning of Christmas Eve. It consists mainly venison that Ron and his friends have bagged during the season. “I’d say no more than fifteen percent of them hunt,” Ron says of his customers. He doesn’t think any of them eat venison other than his.

I have gotten my hair cut in Ron’s shop, Style & Cut, by one of Ron’s fellow barbers, Larry, since I started 9th grade at a public school right around the corner and directly north of the shop’s address on Georgia Street, just off of North Elm. Because of the railroad depot that brought Greensboro into being, Elm is the old mainline of town, though the town has long since sprawled away from the street’s centrality. Style & Cut’s territory is about one mile north of the old depot downtown. The shop is small, glass-fronted, with a linoleum floor and two rows of chairs down each side. It sits in a nondescript strip of old shops between Fisher Park and old Irving Park to the southwest, where families of tobacco and textile magnates still live, and New Irving Park to the Northwest. To the east are the old Cone Mill neighborhoods. Just to the south is Moses Cone Hospital, which rose in the 1950s, as the mills neared their decline, and now centers the economy of the area. It is a geographic nexus of working class and rich, new and old.

“This is not deer,” one Irving Park lady once told Ron of his pot roast. “It’s too tender and too good.” Ron gets comments like that and takes pride in them. His customers do not see what meticulous effort goes into the meat. More than most hunters and chefs ever do.



My mom once asked me to go down to Style & Cut to ask Ron what to do with some venison she had gotten—her friend, who lives out in the country north of

Greensboro, gave my her a ham from the first deer that her 12 year-old son had shot. It was raw, wrapped in parchment paper with twine. I went into the shop and asked Ron about what to do with it. Not breaking from his haircut, he said how to let the ham bleed, and then how you have to let it soak it in buttermilk overnight and then just fix it like a pot roast, in a Crock Pot. Add potatoes and carrots three-quarters of the way through roasting. Let it get cool or cold, then heat it back up and eat it. Ron reiterated how much blood was going to come out of the ham at first. I scribbled notes. The man in Ron's chair looked at me, flint-eyed, and seemed to laugh internally. "You'd best ought not to trust that to your momma, son" he said. As he said it, Ron lowered a comb into one of his eyebrows, which was the same creature as his mustache, and ran electric clippers across it.



Ron has a long, fleshy face and high eyebrows that, with the characteristic tilt of his head, gives him the look of peering over his eyeglasses at you even when he's not wearing them. Ron is the biggest talker of the barbers in the shop, which besides him include Larry (my barber) and Red. From Page High School student Megan Loflin's ethnography of Style & Cut, "Mrs. Woodleif's 12th grade English class, December 2, 2002", which Larry keeps in a red braded folder on his shelf: "Larry once said to me that if I recorded Ron talking one that that it would take me another day and a half to play it back." You've got Ron's soliloquies, Ron and Larry's back and forth, the rare and kind-hearted snipe by Red. Ron's belly laugh sounds, so much so that you know it's real, like he is pronouncing "Ha ha ha, Ha ha ha" on an ascending scale, up in a child's octave. (It's my duty to report that Larry's laugh is *heh heh heh*. Red's, executed straight-faced, is *hoo hoo hoo*.) Ron sets the cadence and tone. Teasing and bullshitting abound.

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Arguably, Ron has made his living as much with the needle as with the shears. He brandishes each with professional ease.

“My hair’s getting mighty thin, Ron,” a long-timer, Harvey, once said. “You’ll have to start giving me a discount.”

“I’ll give you a discount,” Ron shot back, “but there’s gonna be a finder’s fee.”

Ron’s shop declarations come somewhere between a bark and a holler. He has that rare way of deadpanning very loudly, something like Jack Benny if he grew up in rural North Carolina.

Ron, Larry, and Red have been in business together since 1976; they have known each other since they were in grade school together in Siler City, NC, a small community about 45 minutes southeast of Greensboro. Their longtime partner Bill retired two years ago, on April 28th, right before his 70th birthday. “It’s hard to get off for lunch since he left,” Ron says. All the barbers are white, as are 99% of their clientele. A black man named Cecil shined shoes for many years in the shop—now he runs the locker room at the private course where Greensboro’s PGA tour event is played, but he will still shine shoes that people drop off in the shop for him.

The clientele, at an old-fashioned shop like this, stays loyal. There’s a multi-generational thing. One time, I remember, Ron finished with a customer named Mike, and took off the apron. “And good luck with that father of yours. I tell you what,” he said, turning solemn as Mike stood up, “I’m praying for you, man.”

Mike stared back at Ron. He seemed laid back during his cut, but now his eyes got desperate and aggressive. “I don’t know what there is to do about him,” he said. “He’s out of control. Ask me to part the Red Sea.”

When Ron said, “I’m praying for your father,” I pictured a sick old man. Now I pictured a sick, depraved, self-destructive old man. Too old to give a shit, capable of anything—a threat, possibly, to his family and community.

I heard a hoarse laugh from up in the waiting area and I looked over there. An old man whose hair Ron had cut before Mike’s stood up and made his way over to Ron’s chair. He put his hand on Mike’s shoulder and grinned. He, of course, was Mike’s dad, and he looked no more depraved than the rest of us. I hadn’t noticed that Mike came in with him and that he had been waiting around since his own haircut, which Ron did right before Mike’s. Mike’s son, maybe eight, was there too, still sitting in the waiting area. He was next up to the chair.



Last year’s wild game roast started at 9:30 am, Christmas Eve, and people began showing up at nine. Ron had been up since 4:30; his son-in-law Sean and Sean’s girlfriend Julie had been at Ron’s house since 5:30, helping Ron fix the 200 deer sausage biscuits, then carefully loading them, along with the rest, half a dozen different dishes, into their cars (“I’m his...girlfriend,” Julie told me, “Might as well be wife.”). When they got to Style & Cut, Ron’s friend Dan was waiting for them, bearing nine enormous bird pies: quail, wild turkey, and pheasant, all under cornbread crust. They set up everything inside The Healthy Shape, a nutritional supplement shop located next door to Style & Cut. The roast had been there the year before, too. The year before that, it was in the back of Drop and Play, a daycare on the other side of Style & Cut. Before that, it was in Style & Cut, which was the logical first, choice, after all, but eventually couldn’t hold Ron’s crowd, which was mostly customers, and expanded with generations. The pies were a

favorite with this year's crowd, but there would be enough to last to the end. The sausage biscuits were gone in about an hour.

The Healthy Shape is spacious and clean. In what rustic tableau would you like situate a wild game roast on Christmas Eve? This was the opposite of that, aside, maybe, from the Christmas tree in the corner (even that was covered with green paper ornaments had pre- and post-weight loss pictures of customers on them). The walls were lemon yellow and lime green. Ron ladled up venison pot roast and discretely poured shots of Jack Daniels from under a poster of smiling soccer star Lionel Messi holding up a glass filled with chalk-brown HerbaLife supplement.

Even Style & Cut is like this in a way—what is traditional or ritual in the shop lies not so much in physical details (there is not even a barber's pole) but in the way the shop works socially.

Ron wore a white button-down shirt, pressed black Carhartt cargo jeans, brown boots with a heel, a camouflage-printed cell phone holster on his belt. He greeted friends and meet families. Bill was on hand, and so was Cecil. They were chatting with old regulars. Larry and Red were still cutting hair next door in the shop. One of them would pop in occasionally to grab food for them both.

Filing through the door, there were cashmere sweaters, leather jackets, blue workshirts with nametags sewn into them, old flannels, cowboy shirts, hoodies. The mailman stopped in for a plate, and so did a friend of Ron's who worked at Jersey Mike's next door. Ron counted ten physicians and a veterinarian. There were more than two hundred visitors by the time the morning was through.



Aside from the pies, all dishes were venison that year. That was only because Ron had not been able to go elk hunting that season. “Elk,” Ron explained to me “is much better than venison.

“Well, I say it’s better,” he considered. “It’s much easier to prepare.” He explained that an elk is a grazer: eats grass like a cow. A deer is more like a goat in that it’ll eat any old thing—acorns, twigs, or whatever—and that flavor can ruin the meat, if you don’t know how to prepare it.

I went in for a haircut a few months later and decided to linger through the morning. An elk-hunting trip had Ron excited more than anything that day—which is to say it came up first with each of his customers. The talk is repetitive. Maybe more accurate, it’s iterative: lots of the same stuff, served differently depending on who’s in the chairs, with new permutations of the vast, old, almost entirely familiar clientele every 15 minutes. That morning, the rotation included the AR-15 Ron got for cheap from a buddy at Remington (An old guy with a glass eye, one of Ron’s first customers, not yet shaven, turned in the chair and looked up at him anciently for a second. “An assault rifle?” he asked. “Well,” Ron said, “when it’s *military* weapon it’s called an assault rifle...”), Ron’s Monday round at Bryan Park, where the greens were in mighty bad shape he’d hate to tell you, and the RE/MAX World Long Drive Regional Qualifier, also out at Bryan Park that week, always held during the hottest, saddest part of summer, early August in Greensboro.

September 28th through October 3rd, Ron explained while Red and Larry cut quietly, he was going to a hunting ranch, 8000-9000 feet up, in Junction City, Colorado, with his friend Elmond, the GM at a local Toyota dealership, another guy named Ron, his

veterinarian, who just retired and has never hunted before but for some reason wanted to kill an elk now, and also the vet's brother, who said he wasn't going to hunt but could bring his camera and shoot pictures. Ron handed me a brochure that was sitting by his sink (*Black Canyon Bulls at Top Rail Ranch* offers the chance to "hike, stalk and explore the diverse country side of tall thick ponderosa pines, spruce and aspen timber...3,000 acres of breath taking rock cliffs and open meadows.") and explained that this was the kind of hunt where they'll cater to your abilities—everyone in your party is guaranteed a shot. "This year," Ron told me, "we're gonna have elk." I had only been to one of his wild game roasts, the one the year before. I was happy how naturally the *we* came.

The shop for me is a vision of Southern manhood that I do not own, but for which I hold great affection. It is one I became cognizant of about the time I started high school, which was when I also started getting my hair cut at the shop. It was about the same time that I was baffled to observe that there were other kids who would wear khaki pants. My dad is from Michigan and wears jeans. There is something that I am trying to see into when I'm in the shop, something that is comforting. I think of the feeling of Larry shampooing my hair in the basin sink of the barbershop—leaning my neck back against the molded plaster. There is nostalgia to what the shop offers, its genteel charm, and it's a nostalgia that, like all nostalgia here, is also an implicit wish for a time that was worse in some way for someone. We must try to sort out what's good, what we can responsibly hold on to. Since going to school in Chapel Hill, I have become more cognizant of things like that. When I'm in Chapel Hill, I miss Greensboro, and when I'm in Greensboro, I miss Chapel Hill. I am usually in between.

After propounding about the elk hunt, Ron had disappeared into the back for a second. He returned holding a small Styrofoam cup—the kind for coffee in a church or YMCA—taped to a little piece of poster board reading “Ron’s Elk Hunt Fund” in black marker. In the cup was one penny and some stray hair clippings clinging to the Styrofoam.

“These two twins gave me this the other day,” Ron said. “They probably weight a couple hundred pounds each, but their daddy wasn’t one-fifty sopping wet, and he would come into the game roast and eat four big bowls of that pot roast—and he ate everything, but that roast which has the carrots and potatoes most of all—and I was worried about him as much as he ate. He owned a butcher shop in town. I never seen anything like it.”

Ron set the cup in the shop’s fourth chair, the one that used to be Bill’s, the one across from his. “I asked them if they couldn’t find a smaller cup,” he said, “and they said they probably got too big of one.”

“As you know, a large part of my clientele are smart-aleckey pants,” he said. “They were laughing at me. Matter fact, they had everybody in the shop laughing. I was really hurt.”



Style & Cut’s part of town was built by Moses and Herman Cone and their textile mills. There were five mills by the early 1900s (virtually the world’s supply of Levi’s denim once came from here)—“Coneville” the area was called on maps as late as 1919. This was apt, as the Cones built the villages their workers lived in, ran schools and summer camps, ran the stores where groceries came from. On Christmas morning, they sent a red truck around the mill villages—men jumped off of it and laid a company ham on each doorstep. Each boy in the villages got an identical metal toy—a car or

something—and each girl got an identical doll. The degree of paternal control that obtained is almost unimaginable now, but its patterns are still everywhere that mills profligated in the South, and in this part of Greensboro strongly. When Communist organizers swept through North Carolina mills in 1934, Cone Mills resisted it completely. Not only did they call in scores of national guard troops to ward the organizers away from the mills, but, as one mill worker recalled years later, the mill owners set a barrel of bats in the middle of the mill floor and told the workers that if any Communists stick their heads in the window, start bashing and the company will stand behind you. Whatever this is, the imagined family force that makes mill owners confident to set a barrel of weapons in the middle of the mill floor on a day of potential labor unrest is the same thing that made white men confident to let black barbers hold razors to their throats throughout the 19th century. Barbering used to be a black-only profession—dating to the times of slavery there were black barbers for white men and, separately, black barbers for black men. Around the turn of the century, the mores flipped—white barbers became the norm in white barber shops, and the recognizable pattern today, what we think of as the way it's always been, was established.

Whatever makes the Republican Party work in the South today lives in Style & Cut—whatever it is that convinces the sons of mill owners, who are still his customers, that they have something in common with Ron.



I had visited Ron the day before the game roast of last year, when he was in the thick of preparations. Ron lives far from the shop, in a single-story house with a brick carport down a quiet street off of south Holden road, behind a shapeless office park. It feels not even like part of the same place as the shop—sprawl confounds attempts to map

sense onto geography. It's a street that you could live in Greensboro your whole life without visiting, and a house that you wouldn't notice even if you did, were it not for Ron's red Corvette in the driveway. He's had it for years, but it looks brand new.

Within his Tuesday-Saturday workweek, the day before Christmas Eve is one of the only days in the year Ron takes off from cutting hair. Outside, it was grey, wet, and too warm for December. Sean's red Mazda rx8 was parked behind Ron's Corvette. Inside, the hot, peppery odor of roasting deer meat wrapped you up like a scratchy wool blanket. On Ron's counter there was an ancient microwave, two crock-pots full of chili, immense aluminum baking trays piled full of meat, and a Styrofoam Biscutville cup. Ron had been up since 7 am smoking meat—deer backstrap takes seven hours in the smoker. If you try to throw it in a 350° oven like you would beef, Ron will tell you, you'll get something you could make a belt out of. Venison takes time, and there are only a few ways to do it right. Ron seemed to cover most of them. There was deer ham, backstrap, ground venison chuck mixed with Neese's hot country sausage for biscuits, pot-roasted venison with onions and potatoes, and venison chili.

The deer were all shot by Sean, on land owned by Ron's customers. Ron traded one guy three bottles of wine for the hunting privilege. Customers give him wine as gifts and he has accumulated at least two-dozen nice bottles, kept in a wire rack on his kitchen floor. He doesn't generally drink wine. Ron and Sean hunted together for the first time this season, and Ron said he let Sean have all the shots—he said he only trophy hunts now.

There's a room in the front of Ron's house that's full of his hunting trophies. The mounted, wide-eyed head of a 1,200-pound elk that he shot on previous trip in Montana,

mounted on the wall, it takes up half of the room. You have to side-step around it to enter.

This was the first year, in fact, that Sean hunted at all. He didn't have any interest in it growing up, despite Ron's mania. When he was 23, he enlisted in the Marine Corps, served three tours in Iraq, and got out in 2007. Sean is not related to Ron by blood—he is Ron's ex-wife's son from a previous relationship—but you could think that he has Ron's high brow and nubby nose. His skin is the reddish brown of someone who's worked outside where it's hot. He is short and stocky; his hair is short-clipped fuzz, and his arms are thick, with tattoos. He looks you in the eye when he's taking and at the floor when he's not. After coming back, Sean worked on an associate's degree in Global Logistics at Guilford Technical Community College and briefly had a job that utilized it, but he said he didn't like working on commission. He said he was detailing cars and applying for work with a government contractor, looking to go back abroad, wherever they would want to send him, probably the Middle East. It's a slow process. Being an ex-Marine expedites things, he said, but it's still slow.

Last year, Sean went hunting with Ron for the first time. Since then, he had fired six shots as a hunter and killed six deer. Three were running. The munitions they use are 270s, seven millimeter magnums, and 30 ought sixes. These are good clean shots that kill the deer instantly. They do not mess around with buckshot. The ham Ron's roasting is from a young doe, no more than 50 pounds, that Sean shot through the heart on a trip when all Ron managed to hit, he said, was a feral cat. Ron did the ham in a 190° oven with soy sauce, strong brown mustard, and pork bacon. He gave me a piece to try. It was a sharp, salty combination that melted into satisfaction on the second chew.

All his recipes, Ron said, he made up and refined through the years of practice; he seasons to taste and calls in Sean when he needs him. “Sean has got a pretty sensitive palate on him,” Ron said. “I don’t smell too good anymore. I want him to tell me the truth.”



Approaching Style & Cut or even just driving past it, the first thing you’d notice, almost certainly, would be someone who’s always sitting out front by the door, slumped over and staring glassy-eyed into the parking lot. He has been a fixture there for as long as I have known Style n’ Cut. He strikes most people, I imagine, as odd or scary—hold your child a little closer—although he is harmless and asks for nothing. Somehow, you forget he’s there almost as soon as you’re in the shop. On subsequent visits, you hardly notice him even as you pass through the door, so inert is he, and so irrelevant to what’s inside. I’ve never heard any of the old men acknowledge his existence. He is a stuffed Mickey Mouse, about the size of a toddler, and what you must grasp is his sun-beatenness, which is to a hideous degree, and fascinates. There are only suggestions of the original black of his head, the red and yellow of his little overalls. He has the look of something that could have escaped a child’s grip on a road trip, sailed out the minivan window, and tumbled plushly into a gully by the highway where he’s lying to bake until he rots. I don’t know if they even take him inside at night. Maybe they’ve always just left him out there, and no one’s ever fucked with him. Propped up on one side of the wood-slat bench under the shop window, he is always sort of tipped over, with one arm on the seatback like he’s welcoming you to sit down with him or maybe head on inside for a cut, kids. I have always liked this Mickey. How unsettling he must be to the children he’s meant to entice. He is a joke or a totem on behalf of the old men—take their favorite cartoon mouse, and

lay upon him the ruin of age. The last time I went in, I was shocked to see that he had been replaced by a smaller Mickey, who was brand new and bright, with a matching Minnie beside him. That's better, maybe. At least this one won't have to fade alone.



Last time I went in, walked past Mickey, I decided to linger after my haircut. I sat in Bill's chair. Ron told me how he started this morning at 7:15 am—"We don't open 'till eight," he said, "but if they want to do it, I'll do it. Because when I'm up on that mountain, and I see an elk a might bigger than the one I've paid to kill, and I shoot it anyway, that'll be about a thousand-dollar fine. But if I've been coming early in the morning and staying late until the afternoon and I can afford it, I just might do it."

I asked Ron, What is barbers' school like, anyway? What do you have to do to get certified?

"Well," Ron told me, "they stand you behind a chair. And give your some clippers. And you say 'Next.' And then you're doing it. There's no instruction or nothing. It's kind of like med school." He looked sidelong at the man in Larry's chair.

"There *is* an instructor there while you cut," Larry said, never sure what I did and didn't understand.

"Naw, it's just like med school," Ron said. "Does this hurt? No?' Well, keep going."

"I always figured if I flunked out of barbers' school, I'd just be a doctor," said Larry, now too looking at the man in his chair, and pronouncing *I always figured* on a slow decline, as if recalling sober fact.

"I *applied* to med school," Ron said, "but I was a 12 handicap. That's what kept me out. Had to be about scratch to get in back then."

The doctor in Larry's chair finally chuckled. "Maybe dental school is that way," he said.

"How 'bout it, Dave?" Larry called up to the waiting area. Naturally, a dentist was sitting there with his son.

This man was not part of the joke. He looked down at his boy. "There's no requirement," he said orthodontically.

"All the doctors I know is about scratch," Ron said, back to the wheelhouse. He pointed his comb at Larry. "I got sick once, and he went to take me to the hospital. I said, 'No! Don't take me to the hospital. Take me to the golf course, that's where the doctors are.'"

Ron is a blue-collar guy. His customers are, by and large, white-collar guys. How far does patronization emanate from the cash box? It is part of everything in the shop. It is part of the game roast. But there is too much irony and too much affection here. So much of life outside of the shop is, within it, satirized and exploded by the gleeful combat of the old and familiar.

Larry's customer: "Ron, while you're over there doing nothing, would you sweep some of this hair up off the floor? You're liable to get a lawsuit brought against you if I slip and fall."

Ron: "You slip and fall, I got my gun in the back. I'll put you out of your misery, like a horse."

"I'm in misery just sitting listening to you go on."

"Let me put you down, then."

The old man set his teeth. "Go on," he said.

Ron turned away from him. “Wouldn’t be worth the bullet,” he said. “They cost about forty-five cent apiece.”



Clipper strokes up a bristly neck sound, somehow, like shakes of a saltshaker with a metal cap. There are times to settle in your chair and hear it—lulls in talk when all three barbers are wrapped up barbering. When one of them is free, he can lazily stoke conversation between the other two chairs, sitting swiveled around in his own chair or sweeping up the floor’s salt and pepper alluvium. Also, he might just rest, watching local news or professional golf on the TV above the door.

Thursday through Sunday, the European Tour’s on The Golf Channel in the mornings. At the Scottish Open one morning, Phil Mickelson lofts a flop shot straight up out of the thick, short-side rough.

Larry: “Doc, I’ll show you how to do that, if you’re wondering.”

Phil’s ball drops straight down and perfectly. Larry looks back up in time to see it stop on the edge of the cup.

“Aw,” he said pityingly. “Mine’d of went in.”

Discuss also: necks and backs. Knees and hips. Surgeries. Dogs and sons and daughters. Golf games.

Ron: “You playing again today, doc?”

Larry: “It’s a might cooler.”

Ron: “It’s always cool down in the woods, off the right side.”

And how’s Larry’s brother Ray doing now? UNC football and UNC basketball. Ain’t that a shame? I know it, buddy.



I bit into a piece of shot on my third bowl of bird pie as last year's game roast wound down.

Ron, at the game roast, picked up the phone. "Merry Christmas, Eli!" Ron says. He told me it was a customer who's calling him from back home in New Jersey.

A group of doctors in running shoes came in later and congregated in a corner with their bowls.

"Hey Ron," Julie's daughter said, "look at my Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer." She holds up her toy.

"Don't show it to him," Julie said. "He might kill it."

Last year, when he floated that he was maybe too tired to keep doing the game roast, Ron said customers gave him death threats.

"I said, well, I wanna live." Ron smiled and shook his head, looking tired. "It's part of their holiday."

"People ask for it, and I think he really enjoys it," Sean said. "He's just getting old." He paused. "But as long as that barber shop's open next door, this'll happen."



Death hangs out here. I went to visit Ron on a late fall evening, right after the shop closed, to fact check a few things with him. It was dark outside when I got there and raining. Ron was the only one inside. We sat in the waiting area. Ron had a pistol beside him on the table, on the magazines. He was closing up and had to take the cash out of the vault when he left. First, he showed me some pictures from the elk hunt—he'd finally gone a few weeks before. He mentioned at some point the Styrofoam cup that the twins had left him, which had only a penny and some hair in it when I had last seen it. They had brought in another cup the next week, labeled "Elk Defense Fund." Ultimately, there

were \$50 in Ron's hunt fund and \$200 in the elk defense fund.

Ron mentioned that all the time Cecil had worked at Style & Cut, he had also had to work a second shift at a textile company. Ron said he thought the three barbers and Cecil had something special in the shop. He said that Cecil had told his sons that he wanted the three barbers to be among his pall bearers, if his time came before theirs. "I think that...would be unusual in an African-American church," Ron said carefully.

We got talking about Ron's military service. He had been in the Navy during Vietnam, and had taken what he saw as a safe assignment cutting hair on a destroyer stationed off the coast. Sean's military service came up. Ron told me something he hadn't before—Sean had held a clerical sort of job in the Marines, but asked to be transferred to a Humvee machine gunner. He said he "wanted to be where the action was," Ron said. Sean was deployed in Fallujah at the time. Ron looked scared, angry recalling it. "I said to him, 'Are you crazy?'" It was the opposite of what he would have done.

I asked Ron if it was true that he had cut hair of customers in hospitals in nursing homes. I'd read that in a newspaper article about the shop. He said it was. He told me he cut hair in funeral homes, too. He had to do it recently, at the request of an old man's son. Both were customers. Ron didn't want to say who they were. The man was already laid in his casket. "I only had to cut it across the front," Ron said.



The bell over the door went *tringle-ingle*. An old man, maybe five-foot-six, came swaggering stiff-legged down the barbershop aisle to Ron's chair in the back. "I qualified for the long-drive contest out there this morning," he announced to anyone who was listening. "A four-hundred and twenty-two-yard drive, I hit."

He leaned on one of those canes with four feet and tennis balls on the bottom. He did not walk like how you would expect someone with a cane to: hunched, but at the waist, with his shoulders sort of thrown back. His head lurched in a little circle with each step.

I was still sitting in the retired barber's chair, Bill's, which was in the back corner, across from Ron's. I recognized the customer, from when I had worked out at the public golf course in high school. Eli had worked out there too—he was a course ranger, one of the order-keeping rank of retirees. I had worked in the cart barn and we had never talked much. I don't think he recognized me.

"How's your back?" Ron asked him.

"It's alright. I'm going to get my neck done on August twelve."

"You got yourself a new-ro-surgeon?"

"Yeah, I got a neurosurgeon."

"Larry had his neck done not long ago," Ron said, pointing his comb at the barber next to him, "plates and all that."

"Yeah, I'm going," Eli said. "My veterinarian got a special, where he'll do my dog and then to me at the same time, price of one."

Ron finished his haircut fast. "Only sixteen, sir," he said as Eli stood. "We still haven't gone up."

Eli looked at him for a second. "What a guy," he said as he got out his wallet.

Eli reached for his cane and worked his way back to the door, saying something about needing to get back out to Bryan Park in time for then next round of the long-drive contest, which was, at least, actually going on that weekend.

“Hoo hoo hoo,” Red, the third barber said. “Don’t go out in a lightening storm.”

“John, Eli might not be the biggest liar who comes in here, but he’s close,” Larry told me once he was out the door. He went on to say how Eli is a Northerner who moved down here from New Jersey several years ago and works out at Bryan Park, but has had some health problems. And “I don’t reckon has too many family,” he said.

Ron took his next customer. He started telling a story of how once, out on a hunt, he had been in a tree stand when six deer, does and young bucks, came at once out of the brush and stood grazing right underneath his tree. They did not detect him. He could take his pick. And just as he was about to, in the perfect stillness, he felt his phone vibrating. Someone was calling. Anyone who had been around knew he was on a hunt. He figured it must have been an emergency.

“But I looked, and it was just Eli,” Ron said. Eli had been up in New Jersey and just gotten out of surgery. He had probably not even known where Ron was that morning, or not remembered. He just wanted to check in and talk. The deer still hadn’t heard anything. He could still have his shot if he didn’t answer. Call him back later, Ron.

“Well, I answered it.”

“And the six deer were just laughing at you,” his customer said, shaking his head.

“That’s right. And we talked.”

Ron was quiet for a second. Regretting about the deer, maybe, thinking about Eli, or both—remembering how it was in the hunter’s dawn, up in a tree and out in the woods, and then just having a conversation there, on his cell phone with a customer just out of surgery in New Jersey. It could have been a dream.

And then it was as if he came back into the shop.

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“Aw, but if it had been a big buck, now,” he said, “I’d of let it ring.”

As If By Design

Professor Kier's class was where I found myself, in science. Most simply, most cynically, that's because it was easier than pure physics. I was coming off of two years of trying to convince myself that I could major in physics, and doing reasonably well at it, but the semester before, I had taken a class in modern physics, an introduction to relativity and quantum theory, and in it I realized, in the way that rarely happens so clearly, that physics has a language, and that language is not language, it is math. Perhaps this is obvious, perhaps most of all to one who knows physics well. But I saw that everything that I had learned, every equation, I had mentally translated into verbiage so that I could grasp it—not $2+2=4$ but two plus two equals four, if you see what I mean. Meanwhile, there were kids sitting in the front of my physics class who didn't have to do that, who could grasp the equations in their own terms, just as they were. At a certain level of complexity, what might take me three hours might take them ten minutes. I was

approaching that level. It'd be hard to keep up. I got discouraged. I still felt that nothing was so rewarding and beautiful as a physics (I would still study pure physics if I were good enough at math), and not to mention, I carried the prejudice, angsted along by my parents, no doubt, that science is for some reason the superior thing to study. I had to be a science major in some form. I had no clue what that would be, though. I signed up for Professor Kier's lecture in desperation.

Comparative Biomechanics was the name the class I'd taken with him the semester before. It was all about using math and physics, the tools of a mechanical engineer, to look at how living things are designed. No, I'm not one of those people. Design, in this sense, refers to the outcomes of evolution: from that blind process, free of any purpose but each generation's to reproduce, arise creatures with compelling mechanical logic to them. Plants and animals live in a physical world—they take advantage of its laws in ingenuous ways. As put by Steven Vogel, the author of our textbook (and a mentor of Bill's from his Ph.D. days), design is much more tolerable as a noun than an active-voice verb, when one discusses living things. Biology asserts the paradox that we are of designs that were not designed.

The textbook was a first good sign about that class. Vogel could give you a coherent explanation of ways in which, for instance, fluids flow is utterly non-intuitive to us at very small scales (it is reversible, for instance), and he could elucidate all the pertaining equations, and then he could tell you what it means: a bacterium's physical experience in water is what ours would be in tar; when a bacterium stops beating its flagellum, it glides to a stop in a distance three hydrogen atoms thick. Elsewhere, he quoted Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, and John Updike. Even at the opening epigram of his

first chapter (“Physics-envy is the curse of biology”), I had a sense of being in the right science class.

Professor Kier lectures were akin to the book: engaging, well-organized, upbeat. His general manner was neat and energetic—he is a tall, slender man, with brown bangs and round, wire-frame glasses; he dressed in jeans, boat shoes, un-pressed sport shirts, a sort of not-for-show mid-Atlantic vibe, always put together. I once saw, from behind, a man biking across campus who I thought might be him, but I knew it wasn’t when I saw that he had missed a belt loop in the back.

All the beauty that I loved in physics was in his class, but the challenge was not so much in the physics themselves, which never got beyond some pretty basic principles, but more in how they might be revealed in plants and animals—it was more particular, more rooted in ideas about the natural world—it lent itself better to me. Much of the discipline was in building a physical intuition for living things. What I mentioned before, about fluids being different for the very small, is one example of that. Another example: smaller animals have a greater surface area to volume ratio, and so they have a greater metabolic rate. Their hearts must beat quicker, and they burn out faster. So the lifespan of a mammal is proportional to the duration of its heartbeat. (Humans don’t follow this rule, we live longer.)

I would stay up through the middle of the night writing Professor Kier’s take-home exams, with a pot of coffee and the textbook and my paper at my little desk by my bed, in front of the window. A question might be as deceptively simple as: How might a lumberjack know a tree had broken from high winds, rather than from being overloaded with snow? You had to know the equations and also think more expansively. I was good

at that class. Along with a writing class I took the same semester, it set me on my feet again.

I took Professor Kier up on the offer he made to the class, to visit him in his office if we had particular questions about the material. I think I asked him about octopus suckers. He sat down with me at a table in his office and explained their principles. He gave me a paper he had co-authored on them. Visiting his office that time and several more, I learned that marine invertebrates, including octopus and particularly squid, are his real passion. He specializes in the study of muscular hydrostats, which are appendages that support themselves not with any rigid skeletal elements—like bone or shell—but entirely with muscle. A squid's tentacle is one. So is an elephant's trunk. Your tongue is one. Muscular hydrostats are the most mechanically versatile of all animal appendages—one thing they can do, which is completely counterintuitive, is get *longer* by force, which exactly what squid tentacles can do to catch prey.

Professor Kier mentioned at one point that was part of an engineering project to make soft robotic appendages that could work in the same ways. He was the token biologist on the project, he said. In the video he showed—I'll never forget it—the matte black prototype wraps around a purple kickball and hoists it up into the air. A real Doctor Octopus arm. Nightmarish. But designed with noble purpose. Its development was prompted by pitfalls of the post-9/11 search and rescue efforts, when the stiff, jointed robotic rescue arms deployed to dig through the rubble were often not maneuverable enough to fit down narrow corridors in the wreckage. This soft robotic arm, they hoped, could revolutionize search and rescue.

That kind of direct application, I came to learn, is an exception to or an extreme of

the knowledge that biomechanics typically yields up. It is not as glamorous or well funded, Professor Kier warned, as genetic and molecular biology, where the payoffs to human good can be powerful and immediate, where you can search for a cure for cancer (our class met in the Genome Science Building, a newly constructed, glass and steel research battleship, state-funded monument to just such hopes). There are a few cases, as with the robot squid arm, where biomechanical knowledge feeds biomimetic engineering—technology on design principles borrowed from nature—but more often and at heart it is a pure scientific field: it is the pursuit of natural insight for what might as well be its own sake, trying to discern the physical sense of a bit of nature, hoping to find one knows not what in particular, only a glimpse into the way of things.

In fact, when I finally worked it up to ask Professor Kier if I might one day be able to work in his lab with him, he self-effacingly admitted that what he does in the lab day-to-day is not so exciting by most people's standards. He showed me how he takes a very thin cross section of, say, squid muscle, and puts it through intricate chemical preparations, trying to preserve it as clearly as possible for a microscope slide, trying to discern the structure, hoping to elucidate its function. He explained in detail how he had prepared the slide; he showed me some of his work under the microscope. Beautiful patterns of fibers.

I think he meant to discourage me by showing me the minutiae of what he does, the methodical nature of it. But I was fascinated. There was something exhilarating about the method and even the obscurity of it. And exhilarating in particular that he worked with squid. Squid themselves are nightmarish. Where I would have looked at a squid and seen only the forbidding mystery of it, a real thing close to dark delirium, an animal that

is all but actually our imagined sea monster, he looked into the logic of its design, the physical principles that could produce the dread effects of its suckers and tentacles, the arcs of sense that could be traced through a living symbol of the mysterious.

And just as I was inclined to look at a squid so opaquely, I might also have been inclined look at a man who devoted much of his working life and prodigious attention to squid and see only what was bizarre or one might think even frivolous or wasteful in that. But as I talked to professor Kier, I came to see how his work brought him a hopeful, even joyful wonder. He had learned more than anyone about squids' powers, their freak physical genius of evolution. His method, his application of process and logic made the banally dreadful into the wonderful, did not diminish its mystery but deepened it, revealed mystery's inexorable link (a link of wonder) to the essence of sense. As much as I desired superficially a science that I could do, something I was good at that would still fall under the arbitrary blanket of the worthwhile, a place of study, whatever it was, where I could flourish (and I did want that, I would have taken it wherever), I also saw, or perhaps I only see now, that by no knowing design, I had found what I need more deeply, what Kier had: a way of seeing into mystery. Learning from him was a quiet, radical personal evolution.



When I told Bill that I would like to work in the lab with him, that was when he told me that he would be away on sabbatical in the spring, so I might as well look around the department and see if any other biomechanics faculty had openings. I finished the semester with him and then I did look around elsewhere. Then I was surprised one day in early April, when I was in the biology building and I ran into him.

Oh, hey Bill, what have you been up to? I said. How's your sabbatical been?

Great, he told me. As ever, he was bounce-kneed and smiling. He looked refreshed. He said he had just returned from a marine research station on the California coast, near a spot where a big squid spawning had its season. Squid are his thing. He holds that they, not us, are the pinnacle of animal evolution.

He talked about how he had made pilgrimage to visit a colleague, an apparent squid savant at Stanford, whom he'd wanted to work with forever. The two of them had gone out on a boat and collected squid and studied them, and then had worked to test a new hypothesis they had about a specialized type of the muscle fiber in squids' attack tentacles. The squid oracle's equipment was in terrible condition, Bill confided: the lab was right by the sea, so everything was all corroded, and completely disorganized in the first place, and there were two large dogs who romped free in the lab, growling and tussling with each other and knocking into tables; there was dog hair floating around everywhere, but somehow the man always turned out perfectly clear data. They had gotten some promising results and wanted to do more work, but needed more funding. California had been beautiful, though. The marine station was on the Monterrey Peninsula, in Pacific Grove.

And then, next week, Bill said, my wife and I going to Kitty Hawk to start a tandem bicycle ride across the country.

I considered this. I think I said: What?

They always figured that they would have to wait until retirement to bike across the country, Bill said but they had the chance now, so they were going to do it. His wife, Kathleen Smith, is a professor at Duke, and that semester was the first time in their careers that they'd been able to align their sabbaticals. She, like he, had just finished a

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term as chair of the department. They were both sort of burned out. Riding our tandem is something we've always done together, Bill said, and we've always had our sights set on a trans-Am trip, which is a sort of a gold standard for long-haul cycling.

There was palpable giddiness when he spoke, and also a friendly, practiced kind of distance. It seemed like the same conversation he'd had with colleagues, family, everyone who might otherwise wonder where he was for the next few months. The email I received, after I said I'd love to join the group receiving their correspondences from the road, confirmed the impression:

Dear Friends,

Many of you know about our "trip of a lifetime plan" this summer (although for some of you this will be news). We plan to bicycle across the US on our tandem. The trip is both daunting and exciting: 2 ½ months, ~4200 miles, 11 states and 4 mountain ranges. We'll be leaving in the beginning of May and finishing sometime in July.

Of those we've told, some have questioned our sanity, while others are quite interested and want to know more. If you are in the former group, there is no need to read further! All you need to know is that we will be away for ~2 ½ months, checking email to stay in touch with family and friends and in case of emergency, but unavailable for most work related matters. If you are interested in the trip, read on.

Kathleen kept a blog of their progress. "We are two late 50's - early 60's biologists/academics who will be attempting a life-long dream this summer," began the first entry, posted before they embarked. She went on to answer basic questions: Why on a bike? "You travel at the right pace and you see, smell, hear and feel the countryside up close. People are open and generous when you wheel up on a bicycle. It is fun."

Why on a tandem? Riding tandem automatically means staying close together, plus a 30% gain in efficiency (carefully calculated, I was sure).

What sort of tandem bike? A Santana Noventa, with S&S frame couplers and a rear disc brake (not a banana-seat cruiser, but a heavy-duty road bike built for two—as long as a small car). Why ride it east to west? Because Rocky Mountain passes don't open up until late in the spring; they didn't want to start each morning staring into the sun; reaching the East coast is worse motivation than reaching the West; and it's not true on the ground that the wind prevails west to east. That's only up in the jet stream. They posted a link to a mesmerizing vectoral map of ground-level winds across the country, updated in real time, turning and swirling every way.



I decided to keep up with the blog, first for the sheer bizarreness of it, the almost fanciful sound of the idea of the thing—riding a tandem bicycle across the country, something like paddling a canoe across the Atlantic—and also because I suppose I was curious, on some level, to see Bill in this mode of his life with which I was not accustomed. Of course, this meant getting to know Kathleen, too, getting to know her even more, in fact, because she was the one keeping the blog. I saw, even from the pre-departure entry, that she was meticulous, thorough, a noticer, with a strong sensibility for the tangible. In her early entries, crossing Eastern North Carolina, I saw that she had a prodigious knowledge of natural things—wildflowers, birds, and geology most noticeably. There were also things deeper than that. She was thinking about her father.

On the day they intended to embark, a Nor'easter bore down on Kitty Hawk, making the beach like a sand blaster. They had intended to go down to the sea with their bike to dip the back wheel in the Atlantic, as is the custom on trans-Am trips, but in the storm they had to detach the wheel and carry it down there alone. They decided to postpone their departure a day. "Discretion is the better part of valor," Kathleen

remembered her father quoting. They spend the rest of the day in the museum dedicated to the Wright Brothers, the bicycle mechanics who gave rise to aviation, in all the forms its taken since.

The next day was clear and beautiful. They could ride across the sound, up the Alligator River, without being blown away. On the third day of their trip, they visited a Civil War museum on the Roanoke River, in Plymouth, site of the last major Confederate victory in the war—the museum featured a replica, in water, of the iron-clad ship that the Confederates used to break the Union blockade and re-claim the site. They visited on the 150th anniversary of that battle. The visit was bittersweet to me,” Kathleen wrote, “as my father, who passed away a few months ago, was deeply interested in civil war and naval history and I would have liked to share it with him.”

It was strange, getting to know Kathleen this way. Her husband was my professor, but on this trip they were not just “two late 50's - early 60's biologists/academics”—they were first a long-married couple. I felt like an intruder. That was tempered by the vivid straightforwardness of her descriptions, the texture of them. She was writing to reflect, also to be read.

She chronicled their route through Eastern North Carolina, up through the anonymous, vast, sulfuric tidal regions, the “pre-revolutionary” towns. They were very tired by the time they reached Tarboro for their third night. They were still riding themselves into shape. They admired Tarboro’s lush town common, the only one on the East Coast, apparently, apart from Boston’s. The only time they had heard about Tarboro was when it was in the news, when it was flooded by Hurricane Floyd in 1999. In the town, they saw that the ring of historical buildings around the town common was still

empty due to the effects of the flood. A resident told them it was because no one could make enough having business there to justify the cost of the rehabilitation. They would likely be empty forever. Already, they were learning things about small towns they had never known.

Four or five dogs chased as they made their way inland, back toward home. They saw lots of turtles and birds, but no bears or red wolves. Horses and cows, they noticed, have learned to ignore the passage of cars and trucks, but a silent, slower-moving, two-headed beast on wheels garners curious stares.

Coming into more rolling farmland, Kathleen noted the sprawling low- and medium-security prison complex that dominates Butner, North Carolina. She remembered that Bernie Madoff, high-rolling rip-off artist, had been a prisoner there. Into the Piedmont, it was hillier, there was light industry, and towns were more prosperous. They reached home, near Hillsborough, on day five. “Beautiful,” she wrote.



It was odd how they had ended up together in this part of the world. As Bill told it, they met over tongues. As an undergraduate, he had to choose between his loves for architecture and marine invertebrates, as every young man must. He expressed this dilemma to a professor at a party during a summer that he spent taking classes and doing fieldwork at Duke’s marine station, in Beaufort, North Carolina. The professor told him that he ought to talk with a man named Steve Wainwright, who had just written a book on a new approach to biology: analyzing organisms using principles of engineering and design. Bill did not have a car; he hitchhiked up to Durham, to Duke’s main campus, to see if he could talk to Wainwright. Their meeting seemed to go well (though Bill Kier wasn’t sure after he received a follow-up letter addressed to “Fred Kier”), and Bill joined

Wainwright to do his Ph.D. after he graduated. He soon found his specialty in muscular hydrostats, which include not just squid tentacles, but also things like elephant trunks and tongues. Tongues, Wainwright told him, are where you should focus: everyone is into feeding mechanisms. He suggested that Bill collaborate with a researcher in the medical school, a recently hired faculty member, fresh from Harvard, who studied feeding from an evolutionary perspective: how, for instance, marsupials' faces develop differently from those of placental mammals to allow them to suckle from the pouch. Bill went and met this researcher, and they worked for six months over tongues, studying their musculature, how they form, and producing a wonderfully intricate paper on them that ended up getting published in *American Scientist*.

And, as oblivious as I am, Bill said, it took me six months to realize that I was working with a woman. I realized I needed to investigate this further.

The woman was Kathleen. They were together before he finished his Ph.D.; they got married just afterward. When he got a job at UNC, they realized they could stay in the area, each of them with a reasonable commute.

They bought their first tandem together four years into their marriage. Riding a tandem is not for everyone. The person in back, the stoker, has to remain neutral. The stoker can't shift weight, or it affects steering in the front. The front person generally warns the stoker before shifting or braking. By the time of their trans-Am trip, Bill and Kathleen had ridden so much together that Bill didn't have to communicate those commands anymore. Kathleen could anticipate. They don't talk much on the bike. No chatter. But they talk about what they've seen, what their plans are, and the people they've met. She's got a rearview mirror to watch constantly and tell him what's coming

up from behind.



Day 6: Chapel Hill to Reidsville

Today was definitely one of mixed emotions. On the one hand we were sad to leave our friends and colleagues, beautiful garden, comfortable home and sweet kitty, but we were also incredibly excited to begin the main part of our trip. It is hard to leave our very good life behind for 3 months. We don't know exactly what to expect, but we do know that it won't be the "same old, same old". We are fortunate in many ways to be able to try this.

If ever anyone could know what to expect, Bill and Kathleen could. They had planned the trip meticulously. Their preparation was especially important for the first seven days, when they would not be on the official Trans-America route yet. They needed to know how to find food every 20-30 miles and lodging every 60 miles. Rural areas, Kathleen explained, have very scarce services. Google maps cycling will put you on rural roads but doesn't account for services. She took the lead on route mapping; Bill was in charge of maintaining the bike. She had to plan their early route from scratch. This was the nature of the trip for them: planned carefully, but, day-to-day, impossible to predict.

They hadn't expected to cry, as they left home following one of their standard training routes. A cyclist going the other way saw their tandem loaded down and looped back to inquire where they were headed. He had done a trans-Am ride a few years earlier. He rode next to them and shared tips and reflections. He said he was jealous. His own ride was his happiest memory.

They were tickled by the thought that they would not turn around until a plane ride back from Oregon. As they made their way across the Piedmont and up into the mountains, trees were leafing out pale yellow-green in the early spring. Dogwoods were

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blooming. Birds were everywhere. A farmer they chatted with told them they needed help “of the mental health type.” They saw “a fabulous black snake” curled up on a fence—it looked like it was shedding. All throughout, they rescued snakes and turtles that they saw in the road. Kathleen would pose for a picture holding each turtle they saved from the road. Often it was several a day.

They’d ride themselves into peak shape, they hoped, in time for the toughest climbs through the Appalachians. Because Appalachian roads are older than those through the Rockies, they are more steeply graded. It is well known among trans-Am cyclists that the Appalachians are the trip’s most daunting task.

Up into the Blue Ridge Mountains, they were among coal beds from ancient swamps and lakes, and wildflowers were everywhere. “Reticulated iris, wild geranium, phlox and all kinds of yellow and white flowers.”

The roads were steep. By Day 13, they’d made it through Hayter’s Gap, the first major climb. They were in physical pain much of the time. They set out for the tough stretch from Breaks, Virginia, to Hindman, Kentucky, on a Saturday morning, to avoid coal trucks. It was raining. They had 71 miles to go for the day, with 4,600 feet of climbing. Kathleen wrote:

When we finished our second big climb before 10:00 I knew I could do this trip. About a half hour later when we were on a not very nice road and it had started raining and I found myself thinking "I love this, there isn't anything else I'd rather be doing" I knew that I truly WANTED to do this trip.

As they rode through Eastern Kentucky, they saw extreme poverty. Dying towns, abandoned houses. It made them pay close attention and also look inward. “In Eastern Kentucky,” Bill reflected later, “I felt sheepish about this thing we were doing. Here we

are, with the time and the money to cycle across Eastern Kentucky. I thought people there who are really impoverished would be justified in thinking that's a pretty silly thing to do. But instead, to a person, they were interested, supportive, enthusiastic, curious. Some of it, I think, is related to traveling on bicycle." There is something to traveling in the open, he said, not to mention looking so ridiculous in Lycra bicycling clothes that people are curious, and maybe feel embarrassed for you. "It's common for Trans-Am cyclists to have complete strangers invited them into their homes to stay," he said. "That happened to us several times. And it turned out to be one of the great appeals of the trip."

On Day 14, they stopped for the night in Booneville, and stayed at "Linda's Victorian B&B." Linda offered to pick them up from town. "Linda is not very Victorian," wrote Kathleen. "As we were driving out to the house, Linda told us her husband died in 2004. She said she hopes we don't mind, but he's buried in the back yard ('along with 6 cats, they all have their own little gravestones'). Her bumper sticker reads "you can't beat a woman who shoots". Her final kindness was to bring us over a couple of beers. Hit the spot."

They passed 1000 miles on Day 20, their last in Kentucky. They would spend that night, like they did many on the way, in a church hostel. When they got to Sebree, their stop for the night, they got a little bit lost looking for it. A pickup truck pulled beside them, and the driver pointed them on the way to Pastor Bob's First Baptist. "People in the town automatically direct lost-looking cyclists to the church," Kathleen wrote. "But as we arrived at the church our cycle computer read 999.93. I told Bill to go to the end of the block so we could reach 1,000 and take a picture. Before we got 100 feet a man pulled up in a car, blocked traffic, and said 'you missed the church, come back.' It turned out he

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was Pastor Bob on his way to a wedding. He told us who to ask for, said there was a big dinner going on and we should get some food for ourselves.”

The hills had become gentler. They were coming into the heart of the country.



Interviewing Kathleen after the trip, I asked her what she sees as the essence of her scientific work. She answered: “Why so, this diversity of life we see on Earth?” She investigates what causes creatures to evolve the shapes they do, be it functional necessity, historical accident, genetic relationships, or developmental needs.

I put the same question to Bill, though I thought I had a better idea for him. He said his over-riding interest is the relationship between structure and function. Between anatomy and physiology. A favorite quote on the matter, he said, is that anatomy without physiology is a corpse; physiology without anatomy is a ghost. One need look at both.



Bill became fascinated by marine invertebrates on trips he took with his father as a boy. Porter M. Kier was an archaeologist with the Smithsonian, and his specialty was in echinoids: sea urchins, starfish, and the like. In the field of archaeology, he pioneered the idea that you could deduce important things about the fossil record by looking at living descendants of the fossilized organisms, tracking patterns and geographic distributions back through the ages. For his work, he traveled regularly to a research station on the coast of Belize to study urchins at a reef just offshore. Starting about the time that Bill was 12, he let him come along on those trips, and after Bill learned to dive, he let him work as his underwater photographer.

I did a little bit of research on Porter Kier—and I soon found my way to Kier family brick-works in the northern part of Pennsylvania From clay, to fossils, to living

organisms—that was a cool three-generation evolution of the family.

Going back further, I found that Bill's great-great-great-grandfather was Samuel M. Kier, a man whose discoveries would lay the foundation of the very roads that Bill and Kathleen would traverse generations later. His influence would be there, but unseen, just like thousands of invisible evolutionary turns that went into the creatures that Bill and Kathleen studied.



Sebree was their last stop in Kentucky. They crossed into Illinois the next day.

Day 21: Cave-In-Rock, Illinois

The ride was smooth and in the early afternoon we were approaching the Ohio River. I found it extremely exciting. I think that there is something about traveling at the pace we are traveling that made Kentucky as a frontier seem more real. At one time it was "the west". The Ohio River is in tremendous flood right now, and it is easy to imagine the lifeline it and other rivers provided the center of the country during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Bill has spent the evening watching the barge traffic move up and down the river. As we stepped out to look at the stars in the dark sky we heard coyotes from the bluffs. More good weather in the forecast, more good miles on the road.



Born in 1813, equipped with a common-school education based on the *McGuffey Reader*, Samuel M. Kier moved to Pittsburgh when he was 21 years old, getting his first job as a forwarding agent on the Railway Express. He was dutiful, industrious, opportunistic, we must imagine. He soon rose through the ranks of the railroad into ownership, and then he got into the business of running boats on the Pennsylvania canal, which went through the heart of the city.

Pittsburgh, in the first half of the 19th century, was a geographic and historical in-between of frontier and industry, a Gateway to the West, nucleus of wagon roads, plank

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roads, steamship lines, flatboat lines, railroads, and canals. Private railroads won out by the late 1850s, but through the 1840s, an odd, public-funded patchwork of railway and canals was the main freight route in the region.

Samuel Kier called his service the Mechanics' Line, and it carried mainly barges of coal. He reached out to other independent canal operators and proposed that they join in business with him: he soon knit together a united line that ran all the way from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia, called Kier, Royer, & Co. The venture made him very wealthy. It also landed him in prison for rate fixing.

He got out of prison not long after his conviction and went back to the canal business.

Meanwhile, something strange was happening at a salt well that Samuel Kier had purchased for his father to operate north of Pittsburgh up the Allegheny River. In addition to the salt brine that the well was meant to bring up, it also oozed a thick, dark-green, "evil-smelling" substance: rock oil, or, in Latin, petroleum. It had been in the region for a long time. Abandoned, timber lined pits, used by the Seneca Indians to collect it, had trees growing in them more than 200 years old. In Kier's salt well, it was annoying; it was gunking up his brine. This was in the day when whale-oil lamps were the standard for lighting in homes and cities. What, Kier thought to himself, am I going to do with all of this useless petroleum?

His first solution was to dump it all in tributary of the Pennsylvania canal; one day, some unknown boy ignited the slick. The canal burned for days.

Kier got to thinking about the commercial potential of petroleum. He decided that he would sell it as a patent medicine.

At the time, the idea would not have seemed so odd.

Oil from natural seeps had acquired a reputation as an effective salve and tonic—following the Indians, white settlers collected it where they could find it naturally. Marketers bottled the oil, dating from the first decade of the 1800s. “By the middle of the [19th] century,” Ida Tarbell wrote in the *History of the Standard Oil Company*, “[petroleum] was without doubt the great American medicine.”

Kier got the idea to bottle his oil as a patent medicine when his wife (in one account, it was the wife of a friend) came down with consumption and her doctor prescribed “American Oil,” which had been bottled at an oozing salt well in Burkesville, Kentucky. She recovered. Kier, in his own bottling and distribution, surpassed all who had come before him. All over the Northeast, he sent elaborately gilt wagons with his wares. Each wagon, on its side, featured a good Samaritan ministering to a writhing Hebrew under a palm tree. Some of Kier’s ad copy survives. It is a feat. He advertised, as Ida Tarbell put it, “in the good patent medicine style of the day,” which, judging by his “florid circulars” seems to have consisted in likening one’s wears to Jesus Christ. From one ad:

“Kier’s Petroleum or Rock Oil, Celebrated for Its Wonderful Curative Powers. A Natural Remedy! Procured from a Well in Allegheny Co., Pa. Four Hundred Feet Below the Earth’s Surface... The Petroleum has been fully tested! It was placed before the public as A Remedy of Wonderful Efficacy. Everyone not acquainted with its virtues doubted its healing qualities. The cry of humbug was raised against it. It had some friends—those who were cured through its wonderful agency. They spoke in its favor. The lame through its instrumentality were made to walk—the blind to see. Those who had suffered for years under the torturing pains of rheumatism, gout, and neuralgia were restored to health and usefulness.”

As his patent medicine business was flourishing, Kier started experimenting with petroleum as a fuel. He put it in a whiskey still and became the first person in the world

to distill petroleum. He installed a one-barrel still in an office in downtown Pittsburgh—the world’s first oil refinery—and he invented a lamp especially to burn his fuel. He started selling the lamps and distilled fuel around Pittsburgh in the early 1850s.

Samuel M. Kier’s fuel distribution was successful but not famous: Kier himself continued to view it as no more than a way to get rid of a byproduct in his salt well. Soon enough, there were others who recognized petroleum’s enormous commercial upside, especially with sperm whales hunted nearly to extinction, and whale oil increasingly scarce and expensive.

Most significant was George Bissell, just returned to his alma mater of Dartmouth after an unsuccessful stint trying to be a teacher and writer in New Orleans, who got wind of the growing interest surrounding petroleum, and in 1854 he formed the world’s first oil company, with the express intent of digging a well for oil. He had no idea what kind of well he needed to dig, though—contemporary geology was a hazy field at best (one early prospector, a neighbor of Kier’s, exhausted several teams of Cornish miners trying to *dig* for petroleum. He thought they would arrive eventually at an underground lake of oil). Bissell was stumped.

He encountered a stroke of outrageous good fortune when, walking in New York City down Broadway one hot summer day in 1856, he paused in the shade of a drugstore awning and had his eye snagged by the drugstore window. It was one of Kier’s patent medicine ads, made to resemble a “four-hundred-dollar bill” with the “400” referring to how many feet into the “bosom of the earth” his salt well bored to retrieve the oil. A detailed illustration of the well was in the middle of the bill. It gave Bissell exactly what he needed to know: what sort of well to dig, and in what region. Bissell’s company went

to Titusville, a town that neighbored Kier's salt well, hired the man who had dug Kier's well and dug its own well for oil. In 1859, their officer, E. L. Drake, struck petroleum. His name is the one that would go down in most historical accounts as the first to strike oil. At least, his discovery was the one that drew attention. Wildcatters started flooding into the region, buying all the land they could. The world's first oil rush was on.



As Bill and Kathleen made their way west, they wondered about how much people they saw could control what was around them. "There have been two industries in Eastern Kentucky for well over a century," Kathleen wrote while they were in the region, "timber cutting and coal. Neither protects the environment and that is a part of the culture. The roadsides are covered with bottles, fast food trash and paper. Every creek has decades worth of junk dumped in it." Where they saw people in small towns most powerless to forces beyond them was with respect to food.

"Everywhere rural, the food was awful," Kathleen reflected later, while we talked about the trip in a Chapel Hill coffee shop. "Now, I suspect that many students at our universities would think that three meals a day of burgers and fries was pretty good food. But I eat maybe three burgers a year. And to have that be the healthiest thing on a menu... Very few fruits and vegetables."

"In most of the little towns," she added, "there's one café, and that one café has the same menu: fried chicken, chicken-fried steak, fried chicken tenders, hamburgers, a couple sandwiches, french-fries. And some had much less than that. Maybe one or two of those.

As for groceries, she said, "there's a proliferation of these Dollar General and Family Dollar stores. I didn't realize the origin of them. They're horrible stores: it's all

packaged food, they'll have a couple bottle of milk and that's it, nothing else fresh. No fruits or vegetables at all. Just cans. But we met someone who said, well, they are a savior of these small towns, because people don't have much money, and they're cheap. Which they are. But what they do is take the overstock and the leftovers of places like Wal-Mart and the big superstores. It's the food that hasn't sold in other stores. They keep the prices down by having nothing that can spoil. And if it is the savior of these small towns, its condemning them to a terrible, terrible diet."

They saw obesity at alarming rates. Everywhere, in small towns, there were dead spaces, shops closed. Kathleen wrote she could understand how someone there could look around and see that everything was getting worse or disappearing with no clear reason why.

On Day 25, they came to Chester, Illinois. Kathleen wrote:

We had a lunch snack by the banks of the Mississippi and then rode on to Chester. As we did we went by some very large coal moving equipment. Southern Illinois too is coal country and a tremendous amount is moved by barges. We turned onto Highway 3 for the last 10 miles or so into Chester and our peaceful ride was interrupted by a constant stream of huge coal (and other shipping) trucks. The advantage of the tandem is that I have a rear view mirror and can concentrate on what is behind me and warn Bill, but even with that it was bad.

We were very thirsty when we got to Chester but immediately saw a shaved ice stand and devoured two each. As we sat there we realized that this little town is essentially ruined by this constant truck traffic that passes through the town. I later spoke to a mail carrier who confirmed that it was like this all the time and there was nothing they could do about it.

On Day 26, they crossed the Mississippi and, when they stopped for the night, encountered a different-feeling town: Farmington, Missouri. It had, first of all, a renowned bike hostel, Al's Place, inside what used to be the town jail, established in honor of a town resident who had loved biking and died of cancer. There were many

newly renovated buildings downtown. A new public library was in the works. While they were in the hostel, the city manager came by and chatted with them. The next morning, they had breakfast at a diner in a converted old factory. “Farmington has a population of about 16,000 and I have no idea about its economic base,” Kathleen wrote, “but we’ve been through so many towns that are dead or dying that it is uplifting to be in a community that seems so vital and positive.” She wondered, almost sheepishly, if a place really could change its fate with the hard work of a few people.

Into the Ozarks, across the Mark Twin National Forest, they rode on. “One thing we are seeing in Missouri is a lot of armadillo road kill,” Kathleen wrote. “This makes me very sad as I have a fondness for primitive mammals and one of my favorite papers is one I wrote on armadillos with a subtitle ‘anatomy is not destiny.’”

They pedaled on to Kansas. The hills flattened. They tracked storms coming across the plains and cheated the wind and heat, setting out around 5 a.m. on some days. There were strange symbols around them. Coming out of Pittsburgh, Kansas, they rescued an overheated turtle on the road. A few miles on, they found six sliders dead in the road. It looked as though they had been in a temporary pool that had dried up before they could get out. A few miles on, they saw a barbed wire fence with catfish heads stuck on top of its posts. Outside of Chanute, Kansas, they saw a crayfish by the side of the road. They had no idea what it was doing there.

In the flint hills of Kansas, there were wild horses and old oil derricks. Into Colorado, they felt the slight, constant incline as they rode. More dying towns. People all throughout were friendly, though. They were in red parts of red states—Kathleen told me after the trip that the hospitality and generosity they experienced was humbling, even as

they saw people sometimes say “horrible things” amongst themselves. There was only so far one could stereotype, she said. They lingered over breakfasts at McDonalds and chatted with those who were curious about their trip. Kathleen smiled more in pictures as the trip went on. Coming into Ness City, Kansas, she wrote:

During the trip I've spent a lot of time thinking about my father who passed away last December. He was entirely self educated but knew an incredible amount about American History. He was also innately interested in people, while I am more introverted. I am trying to channel his spirit on this trip as we meet so many diverse and interesting people. There is nothing we see or do during our days that would not have interested him and I long to be able to share it with him.

Ness City's train station is long abandoned. In the middle of the town is a four-story granite building, “The Skyscraper of the Plains,” one of the tallest buildings in the west when it was erected in 1888. “Imagine the optimism,” Kathleen wrote. “The country was recovering economically and psychologically from the civil war. The railroads were uniting the continent. Unlimited growth seemed inevitable.” Now the building does not fit in. It looms over everything around.

The whole region was suffering acute drought when they passed through. In diners, they would be asked how high the wheat in the fields was when they passed, and told that it ought to be twice that high by then. They thought about doing a “century” the morning that they left Ness City: 100 miles in a day. They needed the weather to cooperate with the forecast, which was for a cool morning with an east wind. They shared their hope with the cashier at the restaurant where they ate dinner. He smiled, wished them luck, and said “I'm not too optimistic, but I live here.”



By the late 1860s, the Pennsylvania oil rush subsided. Standard Oil controlled everything by then—its forbearers had been on the scene from the beginning of the oil

rush and had worked from the beginning to vertically integrate and shut out independent competitors. (They also established the first international oil trade. In fact, oil exports to Europe as early as 1861 were a primary factor in establishing the Union's economic dominance over the Confederacy, helping turn the tide of the war.)

Thinking about the hope of the Skyscraper of the Plains, I thought about how, as with the Standard Oil Company, the new structures of control, those that would pattern the country after the war, were already risen by the middle of the 19th century's latter half. The industrial trust, the labor bust, the lynching mob, the corporate farm, the mill village, the minstrel show. Some systems worked on the economy, others on the imagination. Of the latter kind, for instance: the prevalence of minstrel humor in the period is difficult to overstate. Even Twain and Lincoln were fans. One encounters it everywhere in documents from the time: in newspapers, popular fiction—I found it even in accounts of petroleum history. From John McLaurin's *Sketches in Crude Oil*:

“De Lawd thinks heabs ob Pennsylvany,” said a colored exhorter in Pittsburgh, “fur jes’ ez whales iz getting’ sca’ce he pints outen de way fur Kunnel Drake ter ‘scoveh petroleum!” A solemn preacher in Crawford county held a different opinion. One day he tramped into Titusville to relieve his burdened mind. He cornered Drake on the street and warned him to quit taking oil from the ground. “Do you know” he hissed, “that you’re interfering with the Almighty Creator of the universe? God put that oil in the bowels of the earth to burn the world at the last day and you, poor worm of the dust, are trying to thwart His plans!”

Blackface performance in the U.S. originated, much like petroleum production, along canals in the early 19th century. It was a gesture of solidarity among the worst-treated builders of the Erie canal, the blacks and the Irish. It was plagued with stereotype, but audiences were black and white. It was our first mass culture. As its popularity spread with the first minstrel troupes, wealthy whites were terrified. Here was something they did not understand, was not theirs. It was so far from a perfect

workers' solidarity, but the portent of one, still. It was soon staged in ways that twisted and amplified the racism. It became the imaginary unifier of the poor white and rich white. Like oil production did in economic terms, it shaped the country in imaginary terms, at great boon to the rich. By 1900, 60% of the wealth of the U.S. was in the East End neighborhood of Pittsburgh, where Kier's family lived. If in hyperbole, patterns of the 20th century and onward were crystalizing.

Samuel M. Kier never patented the distillation process, didn't patent his petroleum-burning lamp, didn't buy up land in the region near his salt well—and, in fact, sold his refinery in 1873, the year before his death. He died with a small fortune, not the untold riches he was in a position to achieve. He unleashed petroleum in his time and place, and, in an obscure way, gave birth to the world's oil industry, which fluctuated until the wide prominence of the gas-burning automobile, which came with Henry Ford's Model T. The car, in turn, made the system of highways that span the country. It is hard, now to imagine it otherwise.



Bill and Kathleen crossed into Colorado. The night that they reached Pueblo, the Rockies loomed. It was their 30th wedding anniversary. “We have ridden a tandem for about 24 of those years,” Kathleen wrote, “and our current tandem was bought in honor of our 20th anniversary. Not to be sappy but the things that have made this trip such a success: teamwork, positive attitude, care for each other, laughter, flexibility and shared responsibility have also been part of what has made the last 30 years great (plus a lot of love)!”

In a few more days they came to Guffey, a town of 14 people, and the night they were there, Bill came down with a fever and what seemed like a horrible stomach bug.

The town's residents were a combination of New Age survivalists and old hippies. Kathleen shared pictures of sculptures in the hostel where they stayed, promising they were not delusions of his fever-addled brain. There was a skeleton in a hardhat and a red bandana, holding a thunderbolt aloft and riding a bomb. A six-foot-long octopus with bunched, twisted tentacles hung from the ceiling. Delerium obtained. The owners of a café in town let them inside to use the only shower in the town. They overheard them taking about how when martial law was declared, and Obama suspended the constitution, they would be safe there, in their town in the hills. And they tended after everything Bill needed. It was strange to see the monstrous and the humane coincide.

The next day, Bill and Kathleen tried to make it to Fairplay, Colorado, their front wheel cracked. Bill still hadn't fully recovered from his food poisoning. A blizzard started. They had no choice but to order another one via UPS and wait it out. They passed the time in South Park City, a tribute to the vanished municipal ancestor of Fairplay—a sort of imaginary town of the Old West, where, starting in the 1950's, more than 40 original buildings from local mining towns were relocated. There was a masonry monument to burros, which were vital in the mining industry. Part of the monument reads:

Prunes
A Burro
1867 1930

Glassed compartments held her yoke, plow tines, shoes.



With the rise of the automobile in the early 20th century, modernist poets lamented the dead spaces that the automobile, the roads were making of towns and cities. In *The Symbol of the Archaic*, the writer and scholar Guy Davenport wrote: "Eliot's

Waste Land, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Pound's *Cantos*, Rely's *Petersburg*, all epics of the city, appear at the same time as the automobile, the machine that stole the city's rationale for being, and made us all gypsies and barbarians camping in the ruins of the one unit of civilization which man had thus far evolved."

Even considering the bent of his erudition, Davenport had a peculiar prejudice against cars. He called them bionic roaches. He came from a small town in South Carolina. His father, like Samuel Kier, worked as a Railway Express agent. He studied literature at Duke (and made an F in botany while he was there). He articulated the modernist vision of a long continuum of nature, whose majesty, mysterious permanence, "belittles the diminutive empires of man—man, whose bulk is one twelve hundred and fiftieth of that of a whale, whose lifespan is a third of that of a goose, and whose advantages over his fellow creatures are all mechanical..."

If the first wide effect of petroleum's profligation—the metastization, via roads and automobiles, of man's diminutive empire on nature's long continuum—is in the mode of the modern, now we are dealing with the second effect of burning fossil fuels: climate change, whose action is patently post-modern. By forces unseen and still scarcely comprehended, our diminutive empire *throws off* nature's continuum, bringing effects back to us that we caused but cannot entirely predict. The feedback loops are ponderous. The reach is beyond our comprehension. Creatures are going extinct en masse. The currents of the oceans turn differently. And it happens more slowly, more soporifically, than we could ever hope: every time we are predicted to run out, a new technology can squeeze out still more hydrocarbons. Now it is fracking—Pennsylvania, thought to be depleted in the 19th century, is under an oil rush yet again. This reality, wrought by the

imagination of capitalists more than a century ago, effects how we imagine today. Over the summer, while I followed Bill and Kathleen's progress and fell into the story of Samuel Kier, I also edited an essay about a wildlife photographer who is traveling the world's zoos and aquariums, taking a portrait of every species of animal we have in captivity, trying to catalogue them all in a "Photo Ark" before it's too late. His portraits are meant to inspire conservation—they are beautifully rendered and play up animals' anthropomorphic traits. Before we might have called this the pathetic fallacy: trying to make a natural thing stand for what it is not. But what is being argued for? Only the literal existence of the animals themselves. There is somehow purity to that. These are strange teleological loops.

We will never untangle reality from imagination, nor the tool from its purpose, not structure from function. We'd be left with ghosts and corpses if we did. Our culture, Guy Davenport said, is living invention; it is our consummate fiction. The geography of imagination is real as of a map—a place is not a place until we give a name. Jim Crow of the minstrel show makes Jim Crow law. Exploiting nature's offering throws the climate out of equilibrium—now scientists, the secular humanists, must bear the Biblical message that our wanton ways will bring on cataclysm, that we must change course, it is probably too late already. The Old West exists in our minds as a single frontier village, and now, in South Park, it does in reality. If we thought that swallowing a spoonful of petroleum would make us get well, maybe it would. Even if we know, as scientists, that octopuses are no mere monsters, they would not appear in our fever dreams, we might still encounter them in a feverish reality. The distillation of oil took both imagination and capital—it was the global petroleum industry's germ.

And what about Samuel Kier? Do we say he is responsible? That seems naïve. The greatest portent of his discovery seems to lie not sheer determinism—not the notion that once unleashed, oil’s course would be inevitable—but in essentially the opposite of that: the course of anything depends immensely on the culture into which it is born, on the imagination that surrounds it. In Pittsburgh, in the early 1840s, men saw themselves titanic—every industrial explorer was Prometheus in soul; invention and capital would light the world entire. We have capitalized more than we have invented. The Seneca Indians had a petroleum torch—they strained oil through blankets and distilled it over open flame. Kier made that principle into industry in a whiskey still. In years later, in upstate New York, the Seneca were made to drink whiskey before signing contracts to forfeit their oil-rich lands.

It is hard to imagine that Samuel M. Kier wouldn’t have been on board with Standard Oil, had he been given the chance. He just never thought to patent his discovery. But the business tactics were his too—he employed many of them in his collusion on the canals, and he was arrested for it. He had undeniably a genius for invention, which is easy to admire, but it seems like he just *happened* to be on the outside of what is ugly about petroleum’s legacy. Do we hold him accountable for what he happened to cause? For what he might have done?

One wonders if there is any use, weighing the actions of ancestors. It seems pathetic to do so. But violent not to. Samuel M. Kier’s actions, in the spirit of business that he had and that did surround him, are of great portent. But there are quieter, greater evils.

A part of my family, my mother's mother's side, was in Alabama in the time of Samuel M. Kier. They owned slaves. My grandmother's earliest memories are of stories her grandfather told her. He was a country dentist—people came to his porch from all around to have their teeth pulled, drinking themselves out before he did. (At one point, he started practicing hypnosis as a substitute anesthesia. He got good at it; people started coming to him to be hypnotized even when they did not need a tooth pulled. He feared it was ungodly, so he stopped.) He was born in the middle of the Civil War, on a farm his father owned. When he was a boy, it was burned by Sherman's troops. His family, the Beans, hid some of their livestock in the caves in the bluffs of the Tennessee River near their farm. Still, those are known as the Bean Caves. But their apple orchards were burned. They lost almost everything. His mother died of typhoid fever, his father died of a broken heart. His uncle came and took him and his brother and raised them.

As my grandmother recalls it, when Uncle Billy came and got the two boys, the family of slaves they had, who the called Mammy and Uncle Jim and Buck were crying. "And they left them crying," she said. "Because, they had also lost, you know, everything. They were slaves, and I will interject parenthetically that I do not approve of slavery, never have, but I think there was some love and dependency among southern families and their black people. They always called them our people. We have the deed that my great grandfather left, and he did have some black people. I don't know how many. The only ones that I ever heard Papa talk about were Mammy and Uncle Jim and Buck."

The same impulse that birthed minstrelsy drapes my grandmother's memories. The story of love and dependency among owners and slaves assumes a servile, lesser

humanity for black people. And still things turn. Imagination becomes real in unbearable ways. Guy Davenport wrote about a time when he was searching for arrowheads with his family in the woods of South Carolina, and they met a black sharecropping family with their same last name. They pieced together that the white Davenport family had at one point owned the black one. Guy Davenport recalled, embarrassed, that his family was greeted as royalty. This was the 1930s. “Oh Mars Guy,” an old man said, tearfully embracing Guy’s father as they were about to depart, “Don’t you wish it was still the good old slavery times?”

(Could the fact that oil helped turn the tide of the Civil War make it worth all else?)



After researching Samuel M. Kier, and I was not sure how much Bill knew about him, or what he thought about him if he did know. Surely he had to know something. Would he be ashamed of the havoc that his ancestor indirectly wrought on earth and seas? Or proud of his ingenuity? Would he wish only that Samuel had thought to patent his discoveries? Or would he be most thankful for that?

I visited him in his office in the fall. We talked about his trip, and about the work he had been doing since. Just before I was about to leave, I asked him what he knew about Samuel Kier. He laughed. Yeah, he said, my wife teases me sometimes about that. The family joke is, You know, if only he had filed that patent...

It was a joke. Something Kathleen teased him about. He knew some about his ancestor but not a ton—he said he thought he might have a vial of his patent medicine somewhere at home.

I looked at what was around his desk, where he spends most of his day. There

were shelves of books on his subject. There was a small painting of a man in a beard and old-fashioned-looking dress in a corner. I asked him who it was. His father's stepfather, he said. A man named McKee.

Bill's middle initial, M, is not for Martin, like Samuel M. Kier's was, like his father's is. It's for McKee. He said the man was like a grandfather to him. He did not say how his father had come to live with him.

I thought about my grandmother, who remembered slavery apologetically. I call her Gran. My mom worked when I was little. I grew up with Gran and I love her a lot. She just found out that she has breast cancer. I am thankful for everyone who works to treat and cure it. Each generation, we adopt as we find it.

Under his computer monitor, there were three pictures of Kathleen. One was of the two of them, on their trip, by their bike, under a tree. Two are just of her—in one she is scuba diving, in the other she is holding a baby armadillo in her palm. I thought about what it was like at the end of my interview with the two of them, at the café, with rain thrumming on the awning above us and dripping through the leaves of the trees around us, tumbling from one to the next and plunking to the ground in big drops. They were describing the end of their trip. Bill recovered by the day their replacement wheel shipped. The next day, they made it over the Hoosier Pass. They passed a Sinclair Oil refinery, and remarked on its hulking sootiness. They proceeded into the most beautiful country yet—the high Rockies, through the Grand Tetons shrouded in mist, through Yellowstone, through Montana's Bitterroot Valley, where they spent the Fourth of July, through the Lolo pass in Idaho, into the fields of jagged lava rock in the Cascades, and

John Cruickshank

then their final descent, down the Cascades' western slope, where the desert inland gives way to a rainforest.

Two days before the end of their ride, they made camp in a campground named "Paradise" in old growth forest on the McKenzie River. They slept in the trees to the sound of the river. It was perfect there. They were sad. Sadness had been growing for the past several days of their ride—they were upset at the idea that their ride was almost over, too upset to enjoy what was left of it. They wanted to keep doing this, they said. They didn't want to go back. But that night in the campground, they dealt with the sadness enough that they could finish their ride appreciative and in piece. A night a day and a night later, they left at dawn and reached the Pacific Ocean before noon, taking their bike down on the beach in Eugene and dipping their front tire in the water.

Sitting in the Chapel Hill cafe, they said they had been much more melancholy than they expected in the weeks since they flew back home. They didn't want to go back to work. They didn't know what to do with themselves. They thought about the trip all of the time. There were arcs to be retraced, pockets of good and bad, the predictable and the unpredictable, the seen and the unseen.

They paused at the cafe. Rain was falling. A gloomy, quiet settled. They sat and looked at each other for a while, didn't say anything, like they had forgotten I was there. It was clear that they were in love.



I ended up, after Bill's class, working in a lab downstairs from his, with a professor in the same field. I work there on a model of a mathematical model of the zebrafish heart with a graduate student, a body builder, who next to Dr. Kier is maybe the other nicest person I know, who comforted me when my old dog died, my dog whose

little head was the shape of comfort in the geography of my imagination. It is strange, where we end up. Zebrafish hearts a lot like ours. They have fewer chambers, but they grow and develop according to patterns and principles much the same.

Our model is a simplified version of the zebrafish heart, and we run simulations of how blood flows through it, looking for differences in the flow pattern as the heart grows, as its geometry incrementally changes. Sometimes you see surprising things: one chamber expands slightly, and a vortex forms within it, or the vortex in the other chamber switches direction. Fluids are notoriously hard to predict; there's a reason that these are simulations rather than calculations.

Why we're doing this, what we're trying to understand, in some minute way, is how the heart can judge its own shape based on the patterns of flow through it. The cells that line its vessels have sensors that can read what the flow is like. If the flow in one chamber has reversed its direction, because a vortex has formed, the heart takes that as a signal that it has grown a little bit, that a checkpoint has been reached, that it can send the chemical signals to proceed to its next stage of development.

Before this, I'd assumed that the heart grows through signals from the brain, at direction of something beyond itself. But that's not true. We are of designs but not designed. The heart builds itself.