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MACARTHUR PARK

ANDREW DURBIN

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*For Stewart Uoo*

When Willa Rhodes got a toothache on Christmas day in 1924, her mother consulted two oracles, May Otis Blackburn and her daughter Ruth Wieland Rickenbaugh Rizzio of Bunker Hill, Los Angeles. Inspecting the child, Blackburn and Rizzio told Willa's parents that the girl had to ride out the sickness, which had progressed to a bad fever by the time their advice was sought, for all of this was prophesied in the Book of Revelation and was soon to render her a miracle: the Tree of Life would sprout from Willa's chest. They only needed to stay put. When the girl finally succumbed to the illness a few days later, the oracles and Willa's parents placed her body on ice in a cabin in the desert to wait for the Tree. Her parents remained firm in their belief that their daughter would resurrect. Absent even a sapling for thirteen months, the oracles finally conceded that Willa was not the girl of their miracle after all, and so they buried her in the desert with seven puppies, one for each of the seven tones of the angel Gabriel's horn.

Studying Revelation in 1922, Blackburn and Rizzio convinced themselves that they were the prophets foretold in 11:3 ("And I will grant my two witnesses power to prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days"), mandated personally by the angels Gabriel and Michael to free Angelinos from their lust for money through religion and sex. The angels ordered the mother and daughter to write a book called *The Great Sixth Seal*, which would eventually reveal the location of the world's oil and gold reserves, "the lost measurements," and to found a community of believers to wait for the end of the world. Blackburn met an investor who agreed to build their church in the Simi Valley, where they relocated from Los Angeles with a small group of believers, including Willa Rhodes' parents. Cecilia Rasmussen of the *Los Angeles Times* writes that the cult built a temple with "a massive gilded wood throne weighing 800 pounds, [which sat] upon four hand-carved paws and was adorned with a lion's head." The temple was not open to the public and was to remain closed until Christ's imminent return.

During the evenings, Blackburn, Rizzio, and their followers conducted obscure rituals that included abandoning cars outdoors to rust in honor of God, the sacrifice of mules, and

nude dances under the moon. Blackburn and her daughter specialized in “cures,” including one in which they baked a woman to death in order to end her “blood malady.” By the late 1920s, the Los Angeles Police Department had become curious about Blackburn’s activities after rumors of orgies circulated in city tabloids critical of the organization. They were particularly interested in investments made by the cult’s wealthy benefactors and took Blackburn and Rizzio in for questioning, later charging them with fraud after several former believers came forward about missing savings. Blackburn posted bail, survived a court battle, lost the following that had been hers and her daughter’s, and disappeared into the desert as the Depression wound west. The oil and gold promised to members of the cult were never revealed; believers went their own way. Willa did not resurrect.

In 1853, William Money, a mystic from New York who claimed Jesus had cornered him in a Manhattan alley and told him to cross the West for Los Angeles, arrived in southern California to save the world. A self-proclaimed healer and scientist, Money wrote many books about the medical and scientific fields he claimed to be an expert in, including the first book about LA to be written in English. He made maps: “William Money’s Discovery of the Ocean,” which he completed at the end of his life, revealed that San Francisco—a city he deeply hated after locals rejected his faith healing practices and he was hauled out of town—sat precariously on top of a secret ocean. He moonlighted as an astronomer and a prophet of the weather. He founded the Reformed New Testament Church of the Faith of Jesus Christ and was nicknamed Bishop Money, Doctor Money, and Professor Money. He healed thousands in the city before voluntarily retreating into the desert to found a spiritual commune of octagonal buildings called The Moneyan Institute, where he later died with an image of the Virgin over his head and a skeleton etched into his footboard. In dying he was said to have placed a curse on the city for refusing to publish his map of California’s secret underground ocean and predicted that Los Angeles would meet the same fate as San Francisco and fall into the sea. Neither have yet, but Money’s prophecy sparked an imaginary of disaster that continues to destroy the city anyway: early to recent fiction, films, video games have all traded in on

the moody suspicion that the land is cursed, sourcing the city's geological, climactic, and social precarity—and the anxiety it produces—to provide images of destruction and demolition for the visual discourse of the city's dystopian present and future.

Recast as an amoral city in the early noir of the 1920s, Angelino writers quickly scripted the destruction of LA in their forecasts for its future, notably in Homer Lea's *Valor of Ignorance* (1909), a racist vision of a Japanese invasion of LA; and Myron Brinig's *Flutter of an Eyelid* (1933), a novel about Christian fanatics and an earthquake that destroys the city—apocalyptic tropes that were taken up and expanded in disaster films, including *War of the Worlds* (1953), *Earthquake* (1974), *Escape from LA* (1996), and *San Andreas* (2015), a film that imagines a spectacularly violent earthquake, “The Big One,” that not only annihilates the West Coast, but much of the country. In it, the Rock, one of the stars of the film, rescues as many people as possible while Los Angeles and San Francisco are destroyed around him, the concrete, wood and steel dissolving into piles of dust before the viewers while the continental shelf transforms below into an unstoppable serial killer.

In a survey of fictional and film accounts of the annihilation of LA in the 20th century, Mike Davis enumerates the modes of its demise: by nuclear weapons (49 times), earthquakes (28), hordes/invasion (10), monsters (10), pollution (7), gangs/terrorism (6), floods (6), plagues (6), comets/tsunami (5), cults (3), volcanoes (2), firestorms (2), drought (1), blizzard (1), devil (1), freeway (1), riot (1), fog (1), slide (1), Bermuda grass (1), global warming (1), sandstorm (1), and everything (1). In destroying the city, Hollywood ups literature's speculative ante in additionally imagining the destruction of itself, presenting the fantasy as one of national tragedy—and cathartic fantasy (for the display of male bravery)—while covertly inviting us to imagine a world without the studio system that manufactured this work in the first place. If LA goes, Hollywood goes. Disaster films about LA (all great disaster films are about LA) are the entertainment that imagines a spectacular end to itself, a totalizing destruction of not only a place but of the medium, outsizing the U.S.'s doomsy anxiety about its future in the post-war to include one of its most popular industries.

In Myron Brinig's *Flutter of an Eyelid* (1933), one of the first

novels to imagine the city's obliteration, everything goes to hell, beginning with the arrival of a woman named Angela Flower. Flower opens a church called The Ten Million Dollar Heavenly Temple, a loose disguise for the activities of Christian activist and mystic Aimee Semple McPherson, an evangelist and media personality who founded the Angelus Temple in Echo Park (its actual price tag was 1.5 million, not 10) in 1923 and who radioed to thousands her fiery and stupefying sermons. (Louis Adamic referred to her believers as "the undead.") In Brinig's novel, Angela finds and fucks a blond Jesus, later using him to brainwash the city. Angela invites Jesus' believers to Venice Beach to behold the miracle of him walking on water. He does so, hovering slightly over the ocean before thousands of onlookers, for a few seconds, after which he sinks below the waves and his body disappears (all of LA is structured from a series of disappearances), leading his shocked and now suicidal followers to fling themselves into the water with him, where they too drown at the moment a massive earthquake destroys the city, shaking it off into the Pacific. (William Money's curse returns.) In reality, McPherson staged her own kidnapping on Venice Beach and was later found to be hiding out in Arizona. She returned to LA under pressure from the local press and almost immediately regained the following she'd nearly lost. Angelinos greeted her a hero. A parade in her honor drew 50,000 people. The city wasn't convinced and took her to court for fraud. Trial coverage soured her believers and she became a laughing stock. Off the hook, she left for a new life back east, a laughing stock, though the case was dismissed.

Brinig initiated a kind of disaster literature that specified Los Angeles as a teetering platform for a city of fanatics, communalized and self-organized into delusional and profiteering cults. Coincidentally, when Brinig's novel went to print, an earthquake struck Long Beach and the southern parts of LA, actualizing the cheap novel's ending and seemingly assuring Money's curse was real. Rumors spread east of the city's destruction; the disaster imaginary had entered national consciousness. LA wasn't safe; everyone knew it. By the 1930s, suicide rates climbed high over the national average and sat there. In his 1931 essay "The Jumping-Off Place," Edmund Wilson ascribed the trend to the region's communalized eccentricities.

stuff up the cracks of their doors and quietly turn on the gas; they go into their back sheds or back kitchens and eat ant-paste or swallow Lysol; they drive their cars into dark alleys, get into the back seat and shoot themselves; they hang themselves in hotel bedrooms, take overdoses of sulphenal or barbital; they slip off to the municipal golf-links and there stab themselves with carving-knives; or they throw themselves into the bay, blue and placid, where gray battleships and cruisers guard the limits of their broad-belted nation[.]

While the early 1900s saw an increase in the number of small cults and eccentric Christian communities, like Blackburn and Rizzio, the first large-scale cult of the atomic era emerged in Los Angeles in 1934, when Guy W. Ballard and Edna Ballard published *Unveiled Mysteries*, a doctrinal treatise on The Mighty I AM Presence. Hiking up Mount Shasta, Ballard was visited by the Ascended Master Saint Germain, who offered him a cup of “electronic essence” and a wafer of “concentrated energy.” After eating both, Ballard was surrounded by “a White Flame which formed a circle about fifty feet in diameter.” Within the circle, Ballard and the new god traveled through the stratosphere and visited the Amazon, France, Karnak, Luxor, the Incas, the Royal Tetons, and Yellowstone National Park. Everywhere, Saint Germain revealed the spoils of the world and its great civilizations, all of which Ballard detailed in *Unveiled Mysteries*. The Mighty I AM Presence described a mystical hierarchy of Ascended Masters who have lived multiple lives throughout history and ordered Ballard to found a religious system based on a direct, personal relationship between the believer and the Mighty I AM Presence. Ballard claimed he was Richard the Lionheart and George Washington reincarnated, and anyone who believed could discover their past lives, possibly famous and historically important lives, too. The book was a commercial success, the Ballards started a radio program (like many other cults at the time), and the I AM spread east, with a recorded peak of 350,000 converts. In 1942, shortly after Ballard died, Ballard’s son and wife were convicted of fraud, though the Supreme

Court overturned the conviction in a landmark decision that held that the question as to whether or not the Ballards believed in their own teachings could not be submitted to the jury. Edna Ballard relocated the church to Santa Fe and its following dwindled.

Despite its obscurity, the Mighty I AM remains active as the Saint Germain Foundation. The group maintains a sparkly website unchanged since the 1990s that includes instructional material on the nature of the True Self, the Electronic Body, and the Mighty I AM. The cult's most recent prophet, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, a homely woman who was fond of flower-printed dresses and often appeared on late night TV shows like *Larry King* and *Nightline*, filmed a lecture series with titles like "Your Sacred Labor," "The Mystery of the I AM Presence of God in the Aquarian Age," "The Sacred Name of God I AM THAT I AM," "Mystery of the Universal Christ," "Your I AM Presence Is God Within," and "I AM Presence, Your Divine Self." The videos are available on YouTube and on the Foundation's website. In them, Clare (now deceased) often speaks from a podium surrounded by pink, glass flowers about the metaphysical world that surrounds us. Resplendent in a white linen gown, Clare explains the nature of the self in relation to a revelatory, omnipresent deity that often emerges from purple fire. Little is currently known about the church's numbers or activities.

Many of Los Angeles' early charismatic religious leaders were women. Following the Christian evangelical immigration to the West (and the mystical rhetoric of promise of Thomas Starr King, one of LA's earliest and most popular preachers), Theosophists emerged in southern California in the early 20th century as a dominant—if eccentric—religious force that boosted the region as a utopian promised land for a new Christendom. Theosophy had originated a few decades prior with the teachings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Russian seamstress who came to New York in 1873. Blavatsky met Henry Steel Olcott, an attorney in the city, and together they founded the Theosophical Society in 1875. Blavatsky taught that the human and the divine deeply intersected by way of the natural world and argued that God was a karmic "universal spirit" in which all of creation was inextricably bound and was not, as the Bible taught, an anthropomorphic being. Blavatsky collected her teachings in *Isis*



*Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) shortly before she died. The religion took hold on the East Coast and spread west.

In 1900, Kathleen Tingley, southern California's first female prophet, arrived from New York and established the Point Loma Theosophical Community outside San Diego as a "practical illustration of the possibility of developing higher-type humanity." Known as The Purple Mother, The Veiled Mahatma, The Promise, and The Light of the Ledge, Tingley built a forty building compound consisting of a mix of Egyptian and Moorish architectural styles where 300 believers took up residence and practiced yoga, the discipline's introduction to California. Tingley was said to be a "witch" whose "spookery" hypnotized believers and she drew the consistent editorial ire of the *Los Angeles Times*. She died in a car accident in the 1920s while still hugely popular, ceding the church to Annie Besant, who served as the leader of the Point Loma Theosophists until her death a decade later. After the loss of their charismatic leader, Besant's Theosophists sold Point Loma to a university that demolished most of the complex. Few of the buildings from the original compound remain.

Tingley's primary rival in Theosophy was Albert Powell Warrington, who received a vision that told him to shun Tingley's teachings and found a community of his own in Hollywood. Warrington purchased 15 acres of land and built Krotona, a Theosophy-based colony that attracted some early movie stars, including Charlie Chaplin and Mary Astor. With an influx of converts, its Moorish complex sprawled. Warrington advocated for spiritual meditation and promised to help his followers realize their true potential, an appealing promise for a region filled with those escaping old lives in order to start over. Warrington offered a belief system "somewhat on the lines of the sodality of Pythagoras," he wrote, "where people of all classes and ages can be taught how to put into daily practice the ideals which ... have advanced beyond high-sounding precepts, and so to demonstrate to the world the practical value of the higher life to the growth and life of a Great Nation." This higher life was focused on the "Third Object" of Theosophy: an "investigation into the latent powers of man," which went mostly undefined. Spanish palms swayed in the devil winds, the houses filled with cheery out-of-towners, and Hollywood transformed with the fledging film industry that surrounded Krotona.

The colony represents one of the first times Hollywood yoked itself to the occult. While Theosophy appealed primarily to progressivists interested in communal living, Krotona offered a kind of club exclusivity, but one in which its members were not required to fully cede their off-screen lives. In 1926, a year before the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer*, Krotona sold off its territory, which was locally rumored to be “impregnated with occult and psychic influences,” and moved to a 115-acre property outside Olaj. The neighborhood became Beachwood Canyon.

In 1904, Satanist Aleister Crowley received a vision from the angel Aiwass in Cairo that inspired his *Book of the Law* and the occult philosophy of Thelema. Crowley based Thelema on a central precept—“Do what thou wilt”—that became a hallmark of his Satanism. Later, Crowley joined the Ordo Templi Orientis, an occult fraternity spread across Europe and the United States, and was tenured as the group’s leader after its founder, Karl Kellner, voluntarily gave up his position. The OTO adopted Thelema under Crowley and began to expand until the Second World War, when nearly all of the branches and their members were destroyed or pushed underground after the Nazis imprisoned Kellner. The only OTO branch to survive was the Los Angeles-based Agapé Lodge. The Lodge drew a wide range of Hollywood-based believers and eccentrics, including the rocket engineer Jack Parsons, who joined in the early 1940s and who believed rocketry could be used to realize Crowley’s early writings, especially the law of “Do what thou wilt.” Parsons often recited the “Hymn to Pan” during rocket testing.

Parsons eventually took over the Lodge and moved its operations to his own mansion in Pasadena, where he conducted intimate séances with other wicked servants of the son of dawn, including the young science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, whom Parsons personally educated in Crowley’s teachings. Parsons and Hubbard conducted Babalon Working, a series of rituals intended to call back Thelema to the world. They failed. Parsons continued to develop rockets under the belief they would someday serve (or be served by) Thelema until he was expelled from the Jet Propulsion Lab for his “disreputable activities.” Nearly broke, he founded a company to buy yachts to later sell at a profit with Hubbard and Sara Northrup called Allied Enterprises. He invested everything he had—\$20,970,

his total life savings. Hubbard suggested Parsons purchase three yachts from Miami and sail them through the Panama Canal back to the West Coast, where they could sell them off at a significantly higher price.

Hubbard took the money and ran. Parsons placed an injunction and a restraining order on Hubbard and Northrup and tracked them down to County Causeway in Florida, where they had already purchased the yachts. They fled by boat, but strong winds forced them back to port. Parsons, for his part, believed he called them back through a lesser banishing ritual of the pentagram that contained a geomantic invocation of the spirit of Mars, Bartzabel, and after Hubbard and Northrup were detained Allied Enterprises was ended. Northrup threatened to accuse Parsons of rape were he to sue them for theft, so Parsons let them go; Northrup and Hubbard returned to California to write *Dianetics*, the basis of Hubbard's new religion, Scientology. Foretell doom on someone else's body; begin the long history of taking others' bodies for purposes of control. "Because the fall of Because, that he is not there again." Each neighborhood of LA begins to form under the influence of a culture of boosters who sell the East on LA's weather-therapy, "open shop" economics, circulating outward. Or forward. Altar of glass flowers. Geological engineering, the redistribution of water. Irrigation, *Chinatown*. Palms in the Hills. Hills haloed in neon orange. Krotona in the canyon. Drought-resistant: the gates of Paradise, a white fire, Pasadena. Walking through Silver Lake with Richard, passing the dirt yards where the grass was allowed to die. Strawberry ice cream. The Laurel and Hardy staircase. Sunset. "Abrogate all rituals, all ordeals, all words and signs." Abrogate words and signs, desert flowers, their leaves rotated in purple to a geometric point, pentagram for Mars. Alegria, on Sunset, in hot sauce. Watermelon juice. Rocky road at the Ben and Jerry's. Up the stairs because the fall of Because.

Over dinner at Alegria, Richard tells me about the Brand Bookshop in Glendale, where in the 1990s there was a section for local religious pamphlets, tracts, maps, and books written by southern California cultists, Theosophists, Christian fanatics, evangelical right-wingers, Scientologists. The lights in the mostly empty restaurant are dimmed to their lowest setting, and the one waitress working circles the tables dreamily, refilling napkin containers and greeting the few diners in a whisper as though she were conducting them to bed. I sip watermelon juice and play with my burrito until the tortilla splits and rice and chicken spew onto the plate. Richard carefully cuts through his enchiladas with his plastic knife, maneuvering through the slush of rice and beans for a bite with a practiced elegance I try not to watch. “Check it out,” he says about the Brand, “it’s an important place for your research.” He forks some food into his mouth. “It’s this—or maybe it’s gone—at least it was this great resource for anything you want to know about weirdos around here.”

Richard is an artist and writer from Texas. He speaks softly, with an occasional, drawly uptick in tone for emphasis, the remnant of a twang he mostly lost sometime in the twenty years he’s lived in LA. He smokes Capris, the toothpick-sized cigarettes of pure affect, and makes paintings—often of gay men—that incorporate collage and his own writing. It’s a bit exclusive, all these gay male bodies, but OK. He worked for the Tom of Finland Foundation in the 1990s, which was (and still is) run by a tight-knit motorcycle gang that knew the artist when he lived in the city in the 1970s and 80s. This experience was definitive. When Richard and I met six months ago, at a dinner at a hotel in Hollywood, I thought he didn’t like me. He seemed to keep me at a distance when we spoke, as though he were waiting to see if I’d reveal any immediate and damning flaws. I felt stupid around him every time I talked because I had zero experience in the world and wasn’t like him: none of my close friends were dead, I hadn’t produced any work of note. We were seated next to one another at the end of the table near an artist who had recently opened a show in the city. “I didn’t know you were an artist,” Richard said to him. “I just thought you went to art fairs.” I buried my smile in my napkin. The restaurant was at the

top of a luxury hotel and opened up to a wide view of the city, the selling point it must have thought made up for the middling quality of the food, and I watched the marine layer drift toward us from the distance, a light and misty blue that drowned out the white roofs of the houses below that were still visible through the waning sunlight. The artist laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “Oh well,” he said and excused himself to go to the bathroom. Richard smiled at me. We were friends.

Richard is interested in the mechanics of sexuality, like how sex becomes a machine, a discursive machine of language and symbols, a device through which we desire and become desired. This is something we share. Over dinner we discuss the speculative technology Antonin Artaud drew while he was in the asylum, robots of the libido, big cocks and vaginas swirling on the page that he later shows me examples of from old French art catalogs he’s collected. Richard talks about what the philosopher Sylvère Lotringer talks about with regard to Artaud, which is a rehearsal of a rehearsal of a lecture Lotringer probably gave years ago, and I listen and say, “Uh huh” a lot because it’s great but I don’t want to interrupt.

“Uh, huh,” Richard knows about LA because he’s been here forever. I sense these disappearances in his history, friends, lovers, places, and the frayed structure they provide, like pot holes, fault lines, but I don’t ask much about his past. I think I should, but the questions stick in my throat. He co-curated *Against Nature*—a notorious exhibition of gay art that featured images of unprotected sex—with Dennis Cooper at LACE in the early 1990s and Richard took flak for it, the fury and rage some gay men felt at the inclusion of these images in a time of plague, among other things. The critic and art historian Douglas Crimp criticized it publicly. Dennis Cooper called Douglas Crimp a Stalinist. Richard is *against*, slanted, leaning.

“I guess I’m just trying to understand something about this place ...”

“What about this place?” Richard asks.

“Like.” I speak slowly: “Why people come here to realize these utopian fantasies, to get together like at Krotona, the people I was telling you about, the I AM.”

“Oh, you won’t find that out,” he says, laughing.

“Yes, but I’m still interested in it.” The issue at hand is my

own inarticulate desire to know a place I don't live in, the intimacy I want to produce out of visiting it, specifically in writing. The project I'm working on, which will deal mostly with cults in LA, is nameless and shapeless: an essay? a poem? a novel? I'm not certain I understand the things that have come together to make this place, the things that produced what I'm trying to figure out, whatever that actually is, and the desire to change this only negates the efforts to understand anything I'm talking about, which Richard must have realized and I expect must sympathize with in part, at least the part about working on a project meant to fail. A desiring machine that breaks down. Expectation that I'll figure it out keeps me going, as does my sense that I'll eventually figure out what is going on here (who is up to what), and yet the more I look the more the city only obscures itself from me. All I see are palm trees. Watermelon juice in a dimly-lit restaurant. Clouds. Lists of things. I make mental notes about the three as though they categorically represent life in southern California. Of course they don't. Strike that.

Richard eyes me and sets down his fork and knife. He folds his hands and leans forward like he's going to explain things, *all things*, facts I should have already had in mind in the first place, the Brand Bookshop, for example, what has gone and what remains. This is the moment, I think, where he identifies and communicates all that is wrong with the way I think about his world. He decides against it and sits back, his chair creaking as he briefly looks up at the ceiling. He cuts more enchilada and doesn't say anything, then:

“Well, you'll figure it out.”

California is a terminus, the end of an arc constructed over the dead who resisted it: all dreams, especially the terrible promise of an American one, seek a port, a jumping-off place, palms, ocean, a final stop. I wonder if people really do fall back in earnest on the pop adage that anything is possible here. Come here, disappear. For Richard, every version of the city results from a disappearance.

Later in the evening when we cab to the gay club Akbar, we pass a donut shop and he tells me that, once in the 1990s, he stood outside smoking casually and a friend, a very well-known artist, stopped at the light in a cab but wouldn't get out to say hello because Kaposi's Sarcoma had destroyed his face, which had once been beautiful. It was the last time Richard saw him.

He tells me this flatly, almost like he thought I'd already heard it before. When the light changed the car lingered. Richard wanted to walk over, lean into the window and chat, but the artist wouldn't have it and drove off.

I cab out to Glendale in the afternoon, where there is no Brand Bookshop. Richard wasn't sure if it was still around anyway, and although Yelp indicated that it was closed I decided to go out to see what I could find left. The long streets lead to rows of small houses, all of them whited out in the sunlight. They look the same everywhere, mostly uninhabited, the yards deadish with the drought, though I project upon them an animating shadow life, imagining they conceal other truths behind their repeated facades, all in dark service to purposes other than the domestic. Figures appear in the windows to peer out from behind the white shades. They are faceless.

Jerome Joseph ran the Brand for twenty-nine years before he closed it in 2014 after he fell and badly injured himself. In articles about the store, patrons mourn the Brand and the effect its absence will have on the city's culture. Some tie it to the gentrification of their neighborhood, where national chains have risen up to crowd out smaller stores, family-owned restaurants, and local markets. The *Glendale Press* reported that the Brand once had between 1,200 and 1,500 categories of books, with the "occult as the most sought after topic." I'm seeking that topic and it's gone.

I get out of the car near the intersection I remember the store being at, but can't find it—even the empty building—because my phone dies almost as soon as the cab driver issues the fare. The sun is relentless, a hot, white poker that's punctured through the wide dome of blue sky. A dry heat fills in, breaks apart the air. I walk a few blocks, covering my eyes with my hand, but there's no sign of the former bookstore, and the only person around is an older woman in a Mickey Mouse t-shirt standing under an umbrella, shouting into her phone in Spanish.

"Do you know where the Brand Bookshop is?"

"No, I don't think so," she says before returning to her call. I keep walking.

I imagine the end of the world would begin in Glendale, at a McDonald's where I stop for water because it is the cheapest place I can find that sells food. Inside, I wait behind a man who

orders two Big Macs (with fries), a large soda, and a microwaved apple pie that comes in a paper package. His clothes are ragged, torn in places, and he seems to be homeless. The bleachy, sterile smell of the restaurant is briefly broken by the sweet smell of the pie that wafts past me as he carries his tray to a table. I order a large fries and a bottle of water and take a seat in the back of the restaurant, near a window facing the road, and check my phone to see if I can bring it back to life: nothing. The homeless man eats his Big Macs a few tables away. I get sleepy watching cars go by, and wonder if it'd be possible to get a cab back to Silver Lake for under \$20, the only cash I have in pocket. I imagine the end: dissolve into sunlight, the golden arches melting down, my body blown back as the glass shatters under the force of the bomb. I get up and walk out.

Outside McDonald's, there is a sustained wind that passes through a wavering row of palms planted along the sidewalk. I sit between them and finish the fries. I throw out the water bottle at a trashcan in the parking lot, and turn back to the man finishing his second hamburger in the big front window of the restaurant. His thrill is something I've never known about a Big Mac but I'm envious that he's found something he likes in Glendale.

For a moment, I forget that my phone is dead and try to call Stewart, a friend who came to Los Angeles with me from New York (our rental car is with him), but the glass screen stays dark except a small depleted battery sign that flashes each time I press the on button. I want to throw it in the road. I have no idea how to get back and feel incompetent, all ways to Silver Lake seeming impossibly distant, obscured by the vastness of urban space, cab, subway, phone charger, all gone. I lean against a palm and dig through my bag to find coins for a pay phone should I come by one. I walk around again, passing some of the same streets as before, but don't find a phone. I ask three different gas station attendants for help, high school boys whose faces are marked by an aggressive bout of acne, but each claims to not have a phone I can use. Two women, one walking her dog, pass me as they talk about the movies. The woman with a dog loves the movies. Would you like to go to the movies, Sarah, she asks. Sarah hesitates, checks her phone, and says, yeah, I have time. We should see *San Andreas*, she says.

I go into a convenience store and purchase an iPhone charger and head back to the McDonald's, where I plug it in and call my



friend Stewart to pick me up. "I told you to bring your charger," he says. I buy a Diet Coke. "I'm coming."

The Tom of Finland Foundation is located at the top of a palm-lined hill in Echo Park. Parallel parking nearby, I don't realize how close I am to the curb until the rental car's passenger side grinds into the high sidewalk, shaving off much of the paint of the lower part of the Toyota Corolla. "Oh shit," Stewart says, getting out to eye the damage. "It's pretty bad." I get out and look at it, too. It's bad. I'm a terrible driver and hung over, too; the passenger door is bent such that a kind of grimacing face appears below the handle and stares up at us. "Well," Stewart says, running his hand over the dent, "there's nothing we can do now." I take a photo of the damage and email it to myself. Standing in the shadows of the curbside hedgerows, I feel sick. I'm sure they'll charge me a lot to buffer it out. The smug face in the paint knows it, but he's right, there's nothing we can do now. "Let's just go to the house," I say and lock the doors.

Durk Dehner and S.R. Sharp were both members of the Dehner Boys biker gang when they befriended (and modeled for) the erotic artist Tom of Finland in the 1970s. Durk and Tom founded the Tom of Finland Foundation first as a company in 1979 before changing its tax status in 1984 to that of a nonprofit foundation, housed in Tom's former home, where Dehner and Sharp now live and manage Tom's estate as well as a massive collection of erotic art and a yearly erotic art competition. Stewart and I meet our friend Karl there, who's arrived early and is sitting on the couch next to Sharp. Karl is a poet from Berlin and has an antsy nervousness about him; he sits with his hands resting between his legs, like he has to pee. "Hiiiiiiii," he says waving to us and drawing out the word when we step onto the porch. Sharp gets up to greet us, taking my hand to shake it as he asks if we'd like coffee. I say yes. He's wearing a Tom of Finland t-shirt and fatigue shorts that extend just past his knees. He puts out a cigarette in a dish and brushes back his long gray hair before he disappears into the house to fetch the coffee, which he serves to us in Tom of Finland mugs.

It's hot outside, a woozy desert heat, but under a fan in the shade the dry summer is therapeutic and relaxing. I stare at the bushes while we smoke cigarettes on the weatherworn couches. We each tell Sharp who we are when he asks our story. Richard

had introduced us all over email earlier in the week, but he didn't say much about who we were, only that we should pilgrimage to the house. Stewart says he's an artist and Sharp takes this in with a smile. He loves artists.

"I'm Andrew," I say, "I'm a writer." He nods. It must be one of the few times someone hasn't followed up with "What do you write?" I never know. Sharp must know that I don't know, so he just nods *sure*. I steal a glance at Karl, who sips his coffee as though he were hiding it, turning his head about to stare at different parts of the cluttered porch. Durk—a gaunt, thin man in blue jeans and a tucked in white t-shirt—comes out and we all go silent. "This is ... " Sharp begins.

"We don't have guests on Sunday," Durk spits out. He looks like he's been practicing his lines for an hour. He almost stands on his tiptoes when he talks, his face quivering from restraint: "We have one day off and it's Sunday. Seeing as it's Sunday we haven't had the chance to clean up but of course you're welcome here, welcome to see our home." He bows and leaves. I ask if we should go, if we're imposing. Sharp shakes his head and waves the idea away. "That's Durk, our founder. You'll meet him later. He's just grumpy. You're staying."

"OK," Karl says. We all look at him.

"Touko Laaksonen gave us a vision," Sharp continues, using Tom's given name, "a utopia, where you could pursue your desires unafraid of what everyone thought." I nod—I like Tom of Finland, but I've never thought of his work as utopian, as being part of any utopia I'd want to live in, though our differences are plotted so far apart on the timeline that binds us I concede that post-Stonewall, post-AIDS crisis my position is rather cushy and I can do whatever I want and no one cares, it's already on TV anyway. Not so for Touko. "Tom gave us this world where you could just fuck ... in the park, in a public park, and no one is ashamed. You see it in the drawings. For us"—the Dehner boys, but I suppose he means gay men everywhere—"it was good to see sex without shame, especially during the 1980s." I pass my empty mug between my hands. One of Tom's beefy, leather-clad bikers stands grinning in Superman-esque pose on it. Sharp and Durk are not only the stewards of Tom's legacy, they are firm believers in its power to change the world, and they carry with them a dream for bodies liberated of sexual and social constraints

imposed by the straight world off the porch. I keep thinking about how their lives are a job, caretakers devoted to a single body of work (one in which *their* bodies are represented), but realize as Sharp speaks that life long ago dissolved the job and their freedom seems exceptional, even enviable. They come to and together form the Church of Tom of Finland, the corporeal god they knew. “Do you want to see the house?” Sharp asks.

“Yes, please,” Stewart says.

In addition to Tom’s work, the Foundation has amassed an enormous (perhaps the largest) collection of erotic art—much of it sent to them voluntarily—that they have archived throughout the years, both in the salon-style rooms of the house and in large storage units catty-corner to the porch. Much of it isn’t any good, even what is on display, what I assume is the best of the best. (Later Richard says the best is hidden, *obviously*.) Many of the works fall into two categories: stylized depictions of the male figure and scenes of cruising. Tom’s work often blends both categories, collapsing the voyeuristic and the participatory into overlapping fields of sensuality. Men peer out from behind trees to watch other men fuck, their expressions coy or filled with knowing satisfaction and both the voyeurs and the participants are given equal attention in the foreground. Backgrounds—the space where men aren’t—tend to be more vague, often simple parks or non-places (my favorites are usually blank spaces save a few trees floating in the white of the paper). One particular drawing of an orgy in an Edenic park that Sharp shows us and uses as an example of Tom’s utopian project, explaining that the men behave sexually in public unashamed of their bodies or their desire, Jan Breughel’s *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden* (1615) comes to mind, a work in which the artist presented an exotic array of animals (peacocks, leopards, monkeys) in the foreground while those he was less familiar with he relegated to a less defined background (elephants, giraffes). Tom seems to have not known much about the world outside of men: references to those categories that define the shape of things outside of the erotic scope of the work—cops, sailors, bikers, even Nazis—are non-specific types, the politics of the uniform side-lined for a reality Tom does not include except as costume, as drag. Inverse to Tom’s vivid men, Breughel included the only humans in his

painting, Adam and Eve, in the background.

Sharp takes us around the house, through the clutter of the rooms, pointing out collection highlights on display. On the second floor, one piece—painted on the ceiling like a Renaissance chapel—shows a man, seen from below, standing over a broken floorboard, revealing his big balls and drooping cock. We stare up and Sharp explains that the commission came about after the ceiling was damaged. “We thought, let’s not just paint it. We can have someone do something with it!” Across the hallway, there’s a door open a crack: a shirtless boy sits motionless on a futon in front of a TV with an error screen. I peek in. He doesn’t turn around to say hello. It’s like he’s been paused.

There are men everywhere. Nearly every inch of wall space is dedicated to a Tom of Finland piece or a work of erotic art acquired by intent or accident, sent by post by anonymous artists, artists who worked under—and because of—the assumption of erotic genius, forgotten artists, works Sharp glances at, points to, nods toward on his tour, occasionally throwing out the artists’ names, the highlights of their career, all of it so brief I either forget the artist’s name immediately or write it down wrong, misattributing pieces in my notes. The images range in size and content, from small portraits of naked men done by an unknown Japanese man who, for years, sent them the postcard-sized works until he abruptly stopped, to large paintings from well-known erotic artists. We pass a painting of a bar, pre-Stonewall so the types of men represented have this repressed feel to me, businessmen eying one another and just a few discreet twinks, perhaps sex workers, a somber scene without much light, the figures obscured by shadows, an off rhyme with Paul Cadmus’s *Bar Italia* (1953–55) with its big, flamboyant color palette. I keep thinking a utopia of men is no utopia, and as we follow Sharp’s tour I internalize a chant: *a utopia of men is no utopia, a utopia of men is no utopia.*

Sharp takes us into a room where the Foundation organizes its archive of erotic books and magazines, much of them piled up on a large table in the middle of the room. “We’ll never finish,” he says and shows us some examples of recently acquired material that the Foundation still needs to file: jerk-off zines, issues of *Straight to Hell*, a few post cards of vintage porn, one anachronistic glossy with a sailor undressing on the cover, his fat

hard-on visible through his white pants. The degree to which everything about their work is left incomplete seems less of a challenge than a point of pride. Each room is somehow tied to work that will never be finished, work that will always go on, and when Sharp stresses there's still more to do he smiles and pauses for effect, waiting for us to let it sink in: this will never end, every one of us in the room, in the house, will eventually die, fade out, but Tom and the art accrued by his foundation will not, someone will be here to collect and organize for more visitors, for more poets and artists and writers to come see.

I look at Stewart and Karl. They both nod a lot whenever Sharp says something. Sharp takes us up to a room where some photographs of Tom's models are presented next to his drawings. He points to one: "The thing you notice is how faithful he was to the people he drew. He accentuates features, of course, but they look like themselves."

I lean in and say, "Uh huh," surprised to find that Sharp is right. The men in the photographs look very similar to Tom's drawing of them. He straightened the jawlines, beefed them up a bit, but to a far lesser degree than I had imagined he would. These drawings are *realistic*, it occurs to me. We go through more photo and drawing comparisons. In each case, the men look like Tom's version of them. The obvious strikes me immediately and I'm dumbfounded to realize how much these works result from love, not utopia. He loves them, adores them, wants to set them on the page to keep them there forever, exempt from human aging and death and disease. The drawings are a form of friendship. Stewart nods and takes a photo of them.

Durk never comes back but I wonder where he is. He modeled for Tom, was his lover, and founded the company with Tom in hopes of advancing Tom's work through exhibitions and merchandise. Durk first came across Tom's work when he was twenty-six and living in New York. He'd gone to a leather bar and saw a small drawing by Tom tacked to a wall that he stared at for a long time after he recognized himself in it. For him, the drawing represented who he was—or who he wanted to be—in a way no other art ever had. He kept the reproduction and showed it to a friend who told him that it was by Tom of Finland. Durk wrote Tom a letter and went out to LA to meet him, later becoming his "muse," as Durk says, and his confidante when

they started the business and Durk became a Dehner. Bruce Weber photographed Durk in the 1970s. In the photo, his face is smooth and muscular, his shirtless torso slim and chiseled, though not as much as the figures in the drawings Tom made using him as a model, but still the resemblance is uncanny, Tom's cop and Bruce's Durk, establishing a feedback loop where it is difficult to tell whether or not he transformed himself into a work by Tom of Finland or Tom of Finland transformed his men into Durk. In later photos I find online, Durk wears the police uniforms that Tom liked to draw: tight leather, the breeches protruding slightly in the fascist style. He'd become the art he cherished, remaking himself into a flat type in the photographs, a cop without the law, deputized by sexual immanence.

I heard there was a dungeon in the basement of the house, but that it's currently under renovation and unavailable to see on public tours. I don't ask Sharp about it, but as we walk around the house I think about the ropes and equipment below. Perhaps Durk is down there meditating or working out, away from us, the public. I don't feel well anymore, my stomach tightens at the thought that I am the public, or that I am not the public, that I don't even know what the public is, and I realize that I'm hungry.

"Where's the bathroom?" I ask. I'm slightly dizzy, so at first I think I got the words wrong. Stewart and Karl look at me with some concern. "The bathroom," I start again, "is it, um, where..."

"Just down the hall," Sharp says.

Inside, I pace a bit. I open the window to get some air, my chest tightening a little. I take a seat on the toilet and bury my face in my hands. Do I need more coffee? Am I hungover? Am I having a panic attack? Am I a desiring machine? The bathroom is big and cold. Behind the toilet is a sculpture of a penis that urinates into a bowl after you flush. I get up to splash water on my face. In the mirror I look like myself, my eyes are still green, my complexion's a bit red and tanned but nevertheless mine: I had hoped I wouldn't find myself recognizable, different from the person I was when I entered the house, changed in the blip of a panicky moment in the face of so many cocks. Earlier in the day, we'd stopped at David Kordansky Gallery for a show of Tom's early drawings, mostly from the 1940s. It was the first time I'd seen real works by Tom and not reproductions. They were beautiful: portraits of idealized men sucking one another

off, cuddling. Some of the drawings, mostly his earliest works, were more like sketches. When I look at Tom of Finland I don't feel like Durk in the leather bar, I don't see myself, I don't see my friends, I don't see Stewart or Karl, I don't even see Sharp or Durk, both of whom see themselves in the work, instead I see these bodies sealed within a realm of ideals I am otherwise meant to dream of, hope to realize at the gym, but of course that isn't the point at all and yes, I am a desiring machine, a robot assembling and disassembling itself at the whim of others. We went to the gallery with a friend who is trans and she said fuck Tom of Finland. There are moments, all of which are brief but nevertheless powerful, where I feel like art carries me away from myself, from my body, temporarily relegating me to an alien subject position in the back of the room, from where I observe a representation that feels impossibly far from my experience of the world. Am I a prude? it occurs to me and I look in the mirror again. No. I try to imagine Richard working here in his early twenties, collecting and organizing and figuring himself out through the process of doing so, honing the collagist's sensibility of the possible relations between unlike things or things only tenuously related to one another, related because of how hot or cool or cute or good they look when they are brought together for the first time, cleaved from one context in order to energize another, combined and recombined into tiny machines. The window in the bathroom is still open and a faint breeze comes through. Go out, I tell myself. I wipe my face with a towel and return to the magazine room. Stewart looks at me and mouths, *Are you OK?* I nod, *Yes*.

Sharp takes us downstairs to a room filled with Tom of Finland memorabilia. Much of his work is dedicated to raising awareness of Tom's work in the artist's home country of Finland. Ignored for most of his life by the bashful Finnish cultural authorities (whoever that may be—Sharp is never very clear about who in Finland should be recognizing him), Tom recently received some renewed attention there for his work. The country issued a popular Tom of Finland stamp, for one, and for the Foundation this is a very big deal. A towel and clothing line featuring Tom's work was a bestseller: "You could see stores with it in the windows all over Helsinki," Sharp says handing me one. The Foundation prints facsimiles of his zines, t-shirts, most



of it for sale here though he doesn't ask us if we want to buy anything. Other items, rare or discontinued, are kept under glass in a cabinet. Sharp holds up the Finnish stamp and shows it to us. "Slowly," he tells us, "Finland is recognizing their favorite son."

Outside the house, Sharp shows us the Foundation's old El Camino, which they'd once covered in decals of Tom of Finland drawings for a Gay Pride Parade years ago. The decals have since faded or were scraped off and only the faint outline of the drawings remains. The car must have sat in the sun for a decade and it doesn't look like it will ever run again. From the outside the house isn't organized or pretty like the other homes on the street. Who are these neighbors generous enough to not phone in complaints to some city agency about the giant storage unit or the odd, junk-cluttered yard and garden, an El Camino stripped by the desert of its paint? Good neighbors. "Maybe one day we'll get it done permanently," Sharp says.

"I think I like it this way," I say. Karl agrees. Stewart stands there quietly. He runs his hand across the back of the car where a few stickers were still mostly visible.

"You could get this done in vinyl," he says. "It'd be more permanent."

"That's what we want to do," Sharp says.

I try to imagine the parade in which Durk and Sharp drove this car. I want to place it in the 1990s, but it was probably more recent, early to mid-2000s. Sharp says everyone cheered. Tom is famous, especially in LA, where older men still remember knowing him personally, seeing him at bars, and so they must have lined up the street in the sun to cheer as the Foundation's car passed them by, Durk and Sharp sitting in the back like a president and first lady's motorcade, waving back to the crowd with men dressed in leather and sailor outfits smiling around them. The parade is huge and mostly for Tom, all for Tom, actually, and everyone in Los Angeles is celebrating him, his triumph over death through the popularity of his drawings, the El Camino is newish, there is no plague, or there is plague but there is no plague stigmatized by theirs or any other community, community sounding kind of dumb to everyone at the moment as they drunkenly scream Tom's name because who? what? why? where?, it's Tom, that's all, Tom, Tom, Tom, they cheer louder as the car moves on under the sun.

Headed to LACMA with Stewart and Karl, I confess I'm a terrible driver. I explain that I lack both adequate experience behind the wheel and the desire to learn, or care, about the local etiquette of the road. This admission doesn't endear me to them, but we go with it as a conversation piece. "Maybe I should drive?" Stewart says. I say no. I want to try. Growing up, I took the bus to school and never owned a car. In New York, I take the train. In addition to the traffic, LA's crisscrossed with construction, accidents, and often confusing side roads, all of it policed by signs and lights I struggle to interpret in the time needed to follow Google Maps' instructions. When we hit Echo Park (I mistake it for MacArthur Park, telling Stewart and Karl that Donna Summer has a song about it), my iPhone directs me to turn right on Echo Park Avenue, onto Bellevue Avenue, then left onto Glendale. I fuck up, distract myself while changing the song to "MacArthur Park," Stewart says let me do it, and I miss the right turn onto Glendale as I resist his help. "You went the wrong way," he says.

"I know." Frustrated, I head down Glendale, turn left onto a small street and circle back on Park Avenue, reconnect with the iPhone's suggested route, screw up again and take a right onto Montrose.

Stewart sighs. Karl is silent in the back and doesn't seem to mind the prolonged detour. The windows are down, and the California summer has neutralized any feeling except that happiness compliant with the sunshine, the feeling of not-being-back-east, not being in New York, not being in Berlin, and we're all mostly indifferent to the straightforward logic of the road because of it. I do it all again, circle the park, then take the right way on Glendale, and head to LACMA, where the Pierre Huyghe retrospective promises the French poetry of the 2000s, glassed apart in the artist's famous aquaria.

We arrive, park, head up from the underground garage to the open campus of the museum. I get everyone's tickets as mea culpa for the drive. "Thanks," Karl says.

In the first room, an aquarium holds a hermit crab with a Brancusi sculpture for its shell. I watch it inch cautiously up a steep coral ravine in the mauve light that bathes the scene.

Occasionally, the cube darkens to obscure its contents and my face swims up in the dark, reflective glass, a shadow image of myself, until the lights flip on again and the crab returns in its lowly world. The retrospective, which has traveled for the last year, has made its final stop in LA, where Huyghe added the film *Human Mask* (2014), his lyrical portrait of the fallout of radioactive Fukushima. In it, a monkey in a dress with a porcelain girl's mask and wig explores an empty home. As it scuttles about the house, the monkey seeks life in rooms, overturned bottles, and cupboards, a life that has disappeared into the world after us, but no one, only its own reflection is left, the last human a mask. The apocalypse is blue, cold, lonely, a surface upon which things, houses, household goods, float. I think about the hypothermal, almost psychedelic images of the veins of the reactor fluid draining into the Pacific that have circulated online as warnings of a doomed ocean. This image, while not in the film, haunts *Human Mask* for me, which doesn't actually show any direct evidence of Fukushima's destroyed power plant but rather presents the colorless emptiness of the town that surrounds it. In the shadows, objects sit motionless, missing those who would use them—to pour tea, to make food, to lie upon. The monkey, whom Huyghe hired from a man who forces it to play a human child on the streets, moves its hands through its hair, contemplating its wig.

It is cold in the museum, but the three of us watch the film twice. When it stops, the interactive exhibition space brightens and the ceiling becomes a game of Pong for museumgoers to play. This feels like a stupid choice to me—and when a few kids begin to take up the game, Karl laughs. I'm exhausted by the experience of art and want to leave. Hungry, I step out to buy chips at a little stand near the museum's restaurant after Karl and Stewart split off. When I come back, the retrospective is quiet and seemingly empty. I sit in front of another film of Huyghe's in which a forest teems with insects. A dog with a pink leg passes by, as does a man with a mask made of lights. Both of them are works of art. Clouds, palm trees.

I get up and look for Stewart and Karl, but can't find them anywhere. The back of the exhibition leads outdoors, to Huyghe's *Untilled (Liegender Frauenakt)*, 2012, a statue of a woman with a beehive for a head. Alone in the courtyard, the sculpture

of bees swarms behind a sign warning those who are allergic to the insects to keep back. They buzz in the sunshine against Michael Heizer's *Levitated Mass* (2012), which floats in the distance behind them. I text Stewart, but I don't get a response. I wander, then sit down and check Twitter.

Things occur out of order. I scroll through the users I follow. The poet Anne Boyer tweets about Lynryd Skynryd and uses the phrase "the soft aesthetics of terror" to describe the band's guitar solos. I read this a few times and think about soft terror, executed softly, upon soft bodies by other soft bodies, on the behalf of people and the systems that organize those people. It's a shame the only actions available to me are favorite, retweet, or reply, none of which I want to do. Stewart and Karl show up while I'm rereading Boyer's tweet. "Let's go," Stewart says, and we head out.

Leaving the museum, we listen to "MacArthur Park" in the car without talking. Later in my hotel room, I write the lyrics to the song down in my notebook after listening to it again on my iPhone. It's an exercise in poetry that I do every so often. I wait a few minutes after hearing the song before I try to see how the words will change when I try to recall them, and I can't get very far from

Spring was never waiting  
For us dear  
It's fled  
Into the depths  
MacArthur Park is melting  
In the rain  
I don't think that I can take it

This isn't right. She can't stand to lose the cake, the recipe for which she's already misplaced, and it's the cake, the final cake, that's melted in the rain, not the park. Or the park has melted—into the depths, which might mean the rain, the implied storm clouds, but the cake has dissolved with it, too. I cross the lines out and try to remember where the cake fits in, how the song leads into "I'll never have that recipe again," when Summer queers the whole thing—a cover of Richard Harris's somber, self-serious ballad—into camp, like this camp where the everyday suddenly

takes on its own voice of coded in-knowledge, like you're hearing something for the first time and it's saying one thing but you understand it to mean another thing, that other thing being that you like to go out dancing, to get fucked in the backroom surrounded while other men watch. I don't think that I can take it. What kind of cake could it have been and

I don't think that I can bake it  
I don't think that I can take it again.

With that I agree that I don't think that I can take it, the claustrophobic metaphor that presents the cake as something more than it otherwise would appear to you were it to form the basis of an event, my birthday, your birthday, the prism of cake that absorbs the objects not designated cake in the room because sugar is beautiful and necessary and pulls you toward it. I'll never have that recipe again, of course. This makes it matter all the more, losing the recipe or the cake or the afternoon to the rain, which is otherwise a welcome respite from ubiquitous California drought at the moment, so I want to write happy birthday a few times in my notebook, happy birthday to Donna Summer, happy birthday to California, happy birthday to myself. Are lyrics of any kind recoverable? I can't hear anything when the music is that loud. Circling in the dark the crowd at the club looks the same.

I close my notebook. A friend used to play "MacArthur Park" in high school every time we drove at night to a nearby lake, which we did often in the summer. We would typically leave my house in the suburbs around 2am, just after my parents had gone to sleep. Amanda would pick me up, signaling she'd arrived with a quick beep of her car's horn from across the street, and we'd put in a CD for the hour-long drive, almost always a disco and house mix that began with "MacArthur Park" and concluded with Diana Ross' "The Boss." Disco is like driving. It is a system that distends information, prolonging—via the remix—sounds, lyrics, and vocals into a flattened field wherein the point is not a specific message, as in a political song or a three minute pop ode to teen love, I guess, but rather to participate in it as a medium, as an experience, as a fluid space into which emotions flow under the somatic-romantic regime of drugs and dance. You keep going. Disco continues and continues, repeating itself in order to sustain

an event—the night, less a period of time (the clock lurches forward or winds itself back) than a space within the interior of the club—and perpetuate the circulation of its adherents, who go for hours, often until 6 or 7am. Often later. Don't stop. You can't stop. Is it all over my face? Is it all over yours?

I go for hours. We drove in the long, hot night with the windows rolled down since her A/C was broken and sang along to Donna Summer, sometimes playing the song several times in a row to keep up the dizzying levity it gave us. Whatever that feeling was: we couldn't figure out. We didn't watch the road. We slept in the song. In "Disco as Operating System," Tan Lin writes that disco is a feeling of elsewhere:

Disco exposes even as it camouflages desire as programmable function. Or to put it more simply, in disco, noise is reprocessed against a background of minimal information or exclusions. This is understood by the general vacuity of disco lyrics. And so the social world of language production and meaningful utterances is rendered obsolete and automated. Social realism is antithetical to melodrama and its subspecies funk and should be the first category of the social to be dismantled, along with an unbroken social scene: marriage, straight sex, the recession, suburbia, a drug-free world, blue jeans, liquid modes of intoxication, clear vision. In its place: the all-night disco with lit up dance floors, tight trousers, mirror balls, polyester, faded industrial infrastructure, inner-city blight, an hour hand that throbs, and amyl nitrate.

I don't think lyrics are vacuous but an important component of that liquid mode. Disco lyrics are one of several important access points into a song: repeated over and over again, they become a chant, one that lulls the dancer who sings them, who whispers them to herself as she moves, into the dreamy meditative state the music solicits. Via disco, Summer plays the song's seriousness against itself, cribbing a strings arrangement from part of Harris' original in order to set-up a sentimental expectation she halts when she screams and the beat jumps up. This gesture is so gay, really. She opens: "Spring was never waiting

for us dear. It ran one step ahead as we follow in the depths,” whereas the depths lead to somewhere you can dance, far from wherever Richard Harris thought they were. I have never been to the real MacArthur Park, though I’ve driven past it many times, and each time it’s seemed bright and open. Her depths must be somewhere else.

Amanda pulled the car over and we sat in a parking lot overlooking the lake. There were no clouds overhead, the scene not quite Southern gothic, a lake folded into a cypress tree-framed landscape, the moss clinging to the low branches and trailing down toward the onion-grass below. No dented trailers, wrapped up in fields or squatting in the dirt, in the distance. Rather the lake was a lake. Garbage piled up in the parking lot, probably two weeks’ worth, and in July the stink hung low over much of the area, blanketing the air with pungent sweetness. I smelled apples. Also fast food. Rotting meat. The moon seemed smaller than usual, and there wasn’t as much light on the water. Amanda turned the car off. “What should we do?”

“We could go swimming. It’s so hot out.” It was humid, and my clothes were soaked with sweat. I got out of the car, pulled off my shirt, and walked down to the water’s edge. I didn’t like swimming in lakes all that much, how the bottom muck (and the rot of its sharp, eggy smell) tends to cling even after you’ve wiped it off. Amanda got out and sat on the hood of the car, watching me without saying anything.

“You coming?” I asked.

“Why don’t you go first.”

“Do you have a towel or anything?”

“Yeah, in the trunk.” I unbuttoned my shorts and stripped down. She pulled out her camera and took a photo of me. I turned to avoid her when the flash went off, but I was too late. I looked at her and yelled stop. I did not love my body—my muscles never seemed to tighten, no matter how little I ate or how much I exercised, into the skinny bodies of my peers, lacrosse players, soccer players, swimmers, and runners. I tended to wear a lot of clothes to hide this about myself. Amanda knew what I was doing: “Oh stop,” she said. “You look fine.”

I waded in, slowly, sinking my feet into the lukewarm mud until I couldn’t stand its touch anymore and I dove in, pushing my head through the water and the plants that gutted the lake

near its shore. I swam out to the center and pushed down to see if I could touch the bottom, but I couldn't; when I opened my eyes, it was pitch black, and instead of emptiness I felt I'd stumbled into something's lair, an obscene consciousness in the dark. I rose up to the surface and turned back. Amanda took another photo and the flash went off.

"Stop!" I yelled. "Are you sure you don't want to come in? I hate swimming alone."

"Nope! How is it?"

"Warm," I said. "Can you play music?" She went into her car and turned on the tape player and upped the volume. Frankie Knuckles' "Your Love" echoed out from the car. The song's spare synthesizer clicked through its opening arpeggio: I can't let go, he sings, I can't let go. I paddled about the lake. The moon was round and full. In high school, we read southern novels and those novelists described this kind of place in terms of its religious character and the spectacularity of its violent insistence on conformity to a twangy, unwritten social code, mostly enforced by "social conservatives," tucked away in profligate kudzu. The Southern novel does not prefer disco. "Well, I need your love," Frankie sings. "Don't make me wait too long." I understood this, but at sixteen I couldn't say how as I had never been to Chicago or New York. I'd never left the South, really, and didn't have any plans to. Disco performed travel for me. With "Your Love" and "MacArthur Park," I left wherever I was, the lake or my bedroom or even my body, a powerful if sheepish feeling that nevertheless sustained me. I floated on my back. Amanda turned the music louder. "I can't let go," Frankie sings.

Strike this out, too. The lake is melting / I don't think that I can take it. Strike this again. Garbage collects. Time is fleeting! Donna Summer sings. This is not true: we are fleeting; time remains the same. I keep trying to write out the song but can't find the words as they had come to me in my earphones, I don't think that I can bake it or take it, MacArthur Park is melting and I can't remember anything at all, back with Amanda at the lake, or any time for that matter. The lyrics otherwise dissolve into sentences that structure this period: Spring was never waiting for us, dear, the time to bake it has passed, of course, and likely never existed except in the studio production of the drama of its loss, loss even not being very convincing in the end. I'll



never have that recipe nor the time that produced the day that brought about the cake in the first place, again. The cake is a cube that spins on the plate she's placed on the picnic table. As a soft architecture it isn't built to last, rain comes through, the party forgets it as they flee for shelter. It begins to break apart in the storm. Slices fall off in clumps of vanilla debris while the chocolate cream disintegrates and flows onto the grass, the entire structure lost to dirt. The cake is a theory for cake that proves cake doesn't last.

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