

*A short story on visual culture,  
consumption, and nourishment.*

# The Back Side of Your Gullet is Decadent & Depraved

*By Frank Chimero*

“Consider that Coke for a moment,” she said.

This all happened, more or less. Something happened here and something happened there, and as life tends to do, it slowly changes you. Time erodes us, but it adds to us too. Take a particle, leave a particle. It shapes us and we change. And then we look back and sort all of that into a story to make sense of why we are the way we are. This is a story about a few things that have happened to me.

We were strangers about an hour ago, but met through circumstance, as usually happens with the single-serving friends you gather when traveling. She was an Australian, me an American, both of us backpackers stranded without accommodation in a tiny coastal town in Italy because of a regional train strike. I was desperately trying to get back to Milan after a failed venture to see the vineyards of Cinque Terre.

A voice came from my left. “Okay. One more time. Ready? Rome, please. For Christ’s sake, I just want to get back to Rome to meet my friends!” I heard her say in an exasperated yelp. I quickly glanced over in fuzzy recognition: “English! Sweet English!” I said to myself. For the first time in a week, I heard it being spoken fluently, albeit in a string of expletives. But, still, English! After a synchronized eye-roll about the sticky inertia we were fighting, we decided to get lunch together and to take refuge in our mother tongue with a stranger, even for just one meal.

“My name’s Rebecca, but everyone calls me Beck.” Beck was taking a semester off before returning to university to finish her degree in nutrition. I asked why the gap, and said how I thought most students did their gap before they went to university. A pause. I could tell she had answered this question so many times in the past few weeks that she had made a canned answer to reduce the tension of the social niceties.

But she was tired. And she could tell that I was tired too. So she sighed and I sighed in complimentary echo, and we told the long truth, if only to hear the words and to say the words in our first language. We told the truth because we knew we’d never see one another again. She blew her hair out of her face.

“The shame of being so occupied by nutrition is that it’s really tempting to just consider food a container of vitamins and nutrients and fatty acids... it’s so tempting to do that because you’re looking through microscopes and seeing everything from millimeters away and zoomed in 400 times what’s normal. You’re breaking everything down into smaller and smaller pieces. That’s part of the reason I took some time off to wander. I couldn’t tell what I was looking at any longer. Things couldn’t just be what they were, and nothing tasted good any more.” It sounded exaggerated, but I could tell it was true.

I nodded and put my weight on my elbows and told her about how I was out looking to refind some magic as well, about how I draw little pictures for magazines, but how I

had become disenchanted with my work, and how I questioned the value of anything that I was making, and thought that maybe it was just part of growing up, but when the thought that maybe growing up involved letting go and losing the fun in the things you used to love, I ran half way across the world and away from the idea because the thought of it scared me so badly. It felt good to finally confess that to someone.

She nodded too. We agreed, we were too close to things to understand them. The distance was good. “Maybe becoming disenchanted with something you love is like the first time you get sick,” I said. “You think you’re going to die because there’s nothing to tell you you’ll get over it.” The waitress came back and put Beck’s sparkling water on the table along with my Coke. Grazie. The wind blew our napkins off the table.

“I screwed up food for myself,” she said. “I started studying nutrition because I thought yams and carrots and oysters were beautiful. I mean, food can be this beautiful, nourishing thing that can make you feel content in more ways than just satisfying hunger. And I lost it by looking through a microscope too often. Italy’s really helped by showing me the opposite of what I was doing. If you put a tomato under a microscope in Italy, they’d ask the point of it.”

“In America, they’d ask you to get a more powerful microscope,” I quipped.

She quickly moved on. “I don’t think I’m interested in nutrition any more, but nourishment instead. I think so much about what is nourishing now.”

“What do you mean?” I could tell she was figuring out something important in front of me.

“Consider that Coke. You’ve looked at the nutritional label on a Coke before, right? You can look at how much sugar is in there or how many calories or however you want to frame it. That’s nutritional stuff on there. But, if you look at it from a nourishment perspective, there’s really only one thing that matters. Are you no longer thirsty after you drink it? Are you content?”

“Well, no. Uh, I mean, yes. Wait, which question am I answering? I don’t think so.” I felt like that question was baited. Maybe rhetorical?

“I love Coke, but the nutritionist in me knows there’s a ton of sugar in that bottle. And that is how you get the deliciousness of Coke. It’s sweet, it’s indulgent, it’s a treat. We’re hard-wired to love it. But that sugar is there for another reason, besides making it taste good. That sugar covers up the taste of all the salt in each bottle. It masks it. Have you ever gotten ocean water in your mouth?”

I looked out past the sheer cliffs and between the buildings to a barely visible patch of the Mediterranean. “Yes.”

“I mean, it tastes awful. But, you know, those survivalist guys say never, ever drink ocean water if you’re stranded on a desert island, because drinking salt water will only make you thirstier and thirstier until it kills you. You think you’re helping your case but you’re actually making it worse. And that’s pretty much what Coke is. A nice little treat,

but it’s ocean water with a lot of sugar added to cover up the taste. It’ll never satisfy you if you’re thirsty.” She was purging herself.

I told her about a guy I used to work with who drank about 2 liters of Coke a day. It was gross and excessive and lacked self-control and I judged him for that, but now I wondered if he was just continually reaching for the bottle because he was genuinely thirsty and looking for something to satisfy him. Now I pitied him and pictured his desk as a deserted island in the middle of our carpeted office, him stranded, lit under fluorescent lights, lapping up ocean water in a desperate search to satiate his thirst.

Drinking is what you do when you’re thirsty, and I bet he never thought that doing so could make him more thirsty. It was sick and wrong, like he found a real, live mirage that he could not only see, but touch: a representation of a sweet fix that he could hold in his hands and suck through a bendy straw. Nothing is more sad than to be looking for some sort of contentment, feel you’ve found it, then realize you’ve been hoodwinked. I took a sip of my drink and felt the salt on my tongue.

It tasted like fool’s gold.

— II —

“Pretzels or peanuts to go with your drink?”

“Peanuts,” I replied. The flight attendant handed me a small, generic pouch blazoned “Super Fancy” and slinked off down the aisle pushing her service cart. I was flying home from my European escapade on a redeye from Frankfurt back to the States with a bit of a sunburn and a hint of clarity as to what I wanted. I was still thinking about lunch with Beck four days later. I don’t think she intended for the conversation to have any application to what I did for a living, but I was gravitating towards any philosophy that seemed like it would quiet my doubts about my usefulness to the world.

I coughed. These peanuts were making me thirsty. If I had ordered the pretzels, I could make a joke about that Seinfeld episode to whomever was sitting next to me. I was pathetically desperate for conversation after weeks of traveling alone, but an hour into my flight, I had my own row of 3 seats.

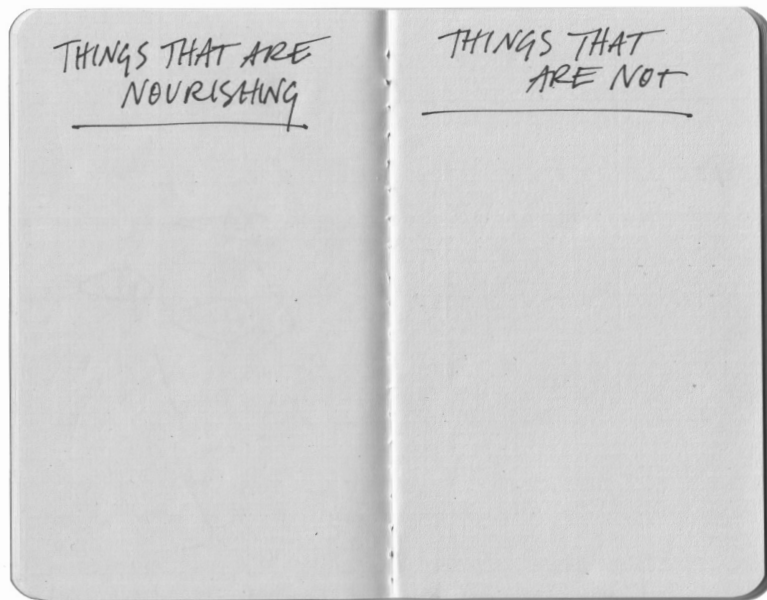
When I boarded there was a nice German girl in the aisle seat. “Hi, nice to meet you. We’ll be neighbors tonight, I suppose. Do you speak much English?” I asked. “Very... howdoyousay... little bit?” Every sentence ended with the up beat.

Regardless, I became excited at the thought of someone else to talk with after weeks of being alone in my own head. I told her about how there are actually two Davids in Florence and one is just an imitation, and how you can bypass the line at the Uffizi Gallery if you make a reservation, and how I had accidentally ordered three fish sandwiches in Frankfurt, but some how all of them were given to me cold, and how Frankfurt actually

kind of looks a bit like Dallas because they had to rebuild the city after the war. But the airport is very nice and yellow and isn't it funny how our gate was in the newest addition to the airport so they had to put us on a bus to get to our plane? I told her how Geneva has the cleanest train stations I have ever seen, and how people buy bread there every day and I wondered if they could eat a full loaf by themselves or if they had help, and how I saw a set of guild members in Zurich jousting in boats on the river and this is a tradition that has been happening for hundreds of years, and and and...

A ding, and the seatbelt light clicked off. I got up to go to the pint-sized lavatory, and, as expected, when I came back she was gone. I pushed the overhead service button and asked for a blanket and stretched out my legs across all three seats. The attendant asked if I'd like anything to drink. I ordered a whiskey. "Whiskey and coke?" she asked? "No, just whiskey." I took a sip, fidgeted in my chair, and looked out the window at the black. I wondered why that tiny hole is always in the window, and got myself ready for a few hours of unsatisfying sleep with my knees in my eye sockets.

"Actually, while I'm thinking of it..." I pulled out my sketchbook and wrote at the top of each facing page:



"Things that are not nourishing... Malnourishing? Unnourishing? Is that even a word? No matter. I might as well start with the obvious," I thought. "Water: nourishing." Yes. "Coke: not nourishing!" I said, like I knew the answer this time. I took another sip of my whiskey.

"Tomatoes: nourishing. Cotton candy: not nourishing. (mostly air)" I wrote. "These peanuts: nourishing (but making me thirsty). Cheetos: not nourishing (cheese is not a dust)."

I was trying to apply Beck's little lesson to my life by stretching the idea of nourishment to creative endeavors and not just food. What was nourishing creative work? "Maybe it does what nourishing food does," I thought. "It fills a void. Fills us up. Maybe makes us stop wanting for just a little, brilliant moment"

Yes, that. I wrote that down and circled it. I was proud of myself.

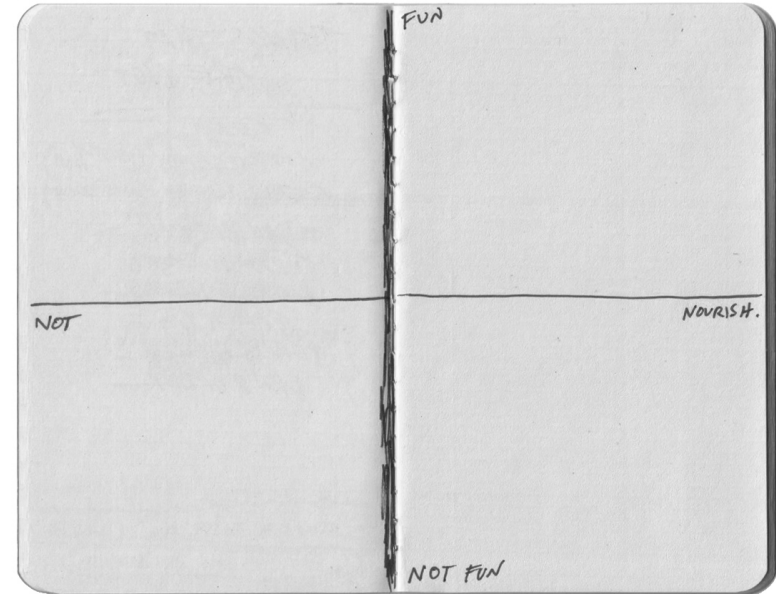
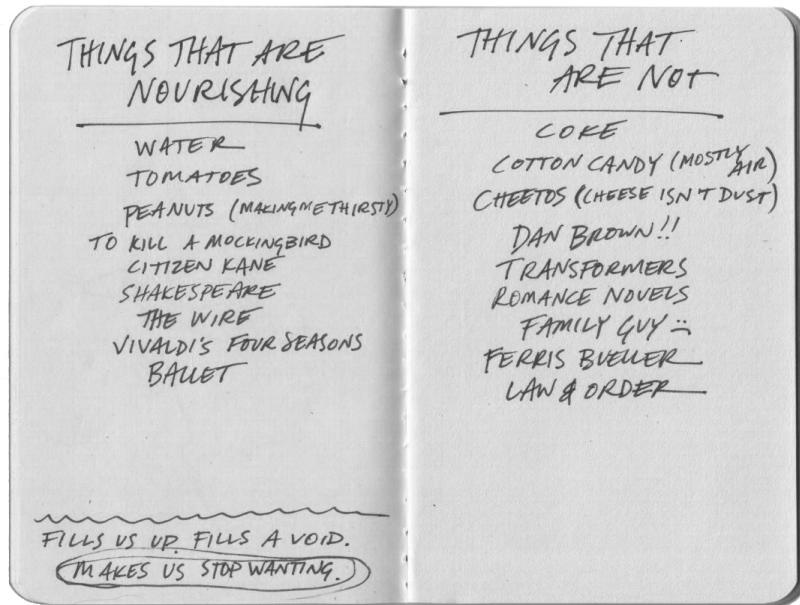
Let's see, nourishing creative work: To Kill a Mockingbird. Citizen Kane. Shakespeare. You know, stuff that speaks to our essential human nature, the canonical creative output of human-kind. They were the works where you would finish, watch the last scene or read the last page. You'd flip over the back cover into the opposite hand and the spine would make that creaky sigh that it does when you finish a book. You'd pause. The work would make you feel a contented warmth inside, and you'd think to yourself a satisfied "Hum." No deep thoughts, no blazing insights, just a "hum," because for the moment you are dwarfed in magnitude, standing in the shadow of something gigantic. You now own a small piece of it.

All right, yes. I was pleased with myself, and warm from the whiskey. I paused. "Hum." And not nourishing? "What's the opposite of Shakespeare? Oh, yes. Dan Brown." Beach reads, romance novels, popcorn flicks, summer albums you forget about by September. Things that are sweet but mostly air, just like cotton candy. My well-lubricated inner-monologue propelled.

"I bet some people don't read many books, so maybe Dan Brown can be nourishing to someone?" I thought. "No. This is my list." Other people can have their own. Maybe like how milk can be nourishing to someone else, but it just sort of makes me queasy.

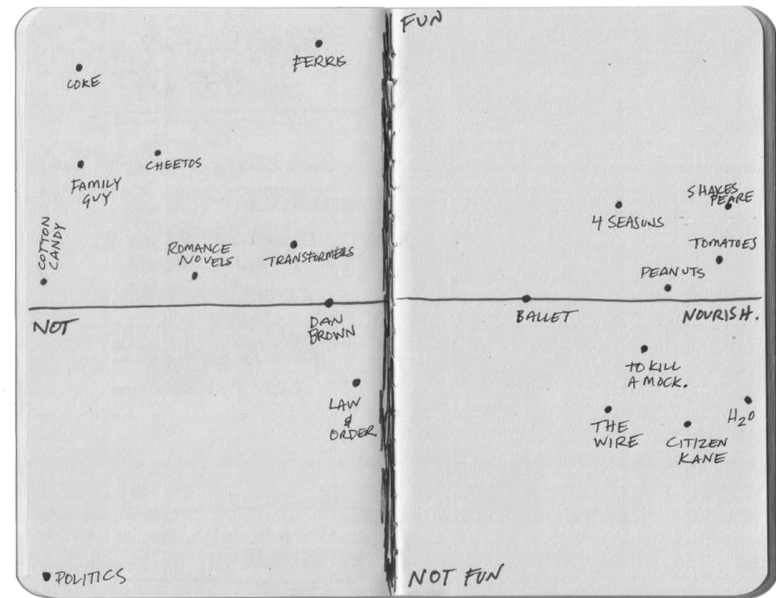
"More nourishment: The Wire. Vivaldi's Four Seasons. Not nourishing, hm, what is the thing I hate most in the world? Yes, Family Guy. Lazy writing. Can't fit their jokes into their story." I penciled that in and started to doze off.

Wait, or was this wrong? Was I just listing things that I liked on the nourishing page and things I did not like on the other? That won't do. "I'm better than that," I hiccuped. I painfully added Ferris Bueller's Day Off and Law and Order to not nourishing to be martyrs for the cause of impartiality. I added ballet to the nourishing page because some people seem to like it and I know nothing about it. I took a glance down my lists.



Why do the ice cubes always taste funny on airplanes? I thought about what an excellent party the not-nourishing list would make. I thought how the nourishing list kind of looked like some sort of homework assignment. "Not good, Frank, not good," I thought to myself. Committing to making nourishing things might be resigning myself to a life of stuffiness, corduroy blazers, NPR pledge drives, and raw food diets. Surely there must be some nourishing things out there that are fun, right?

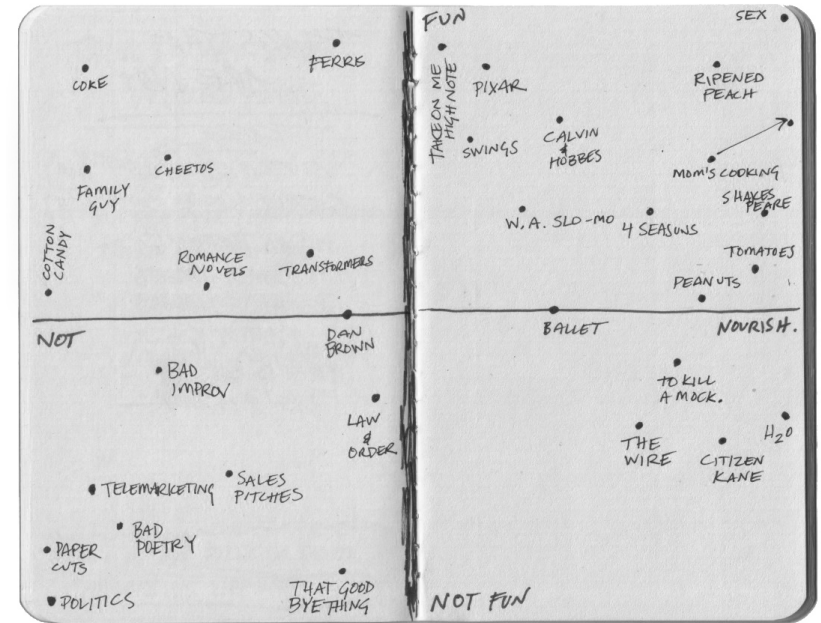
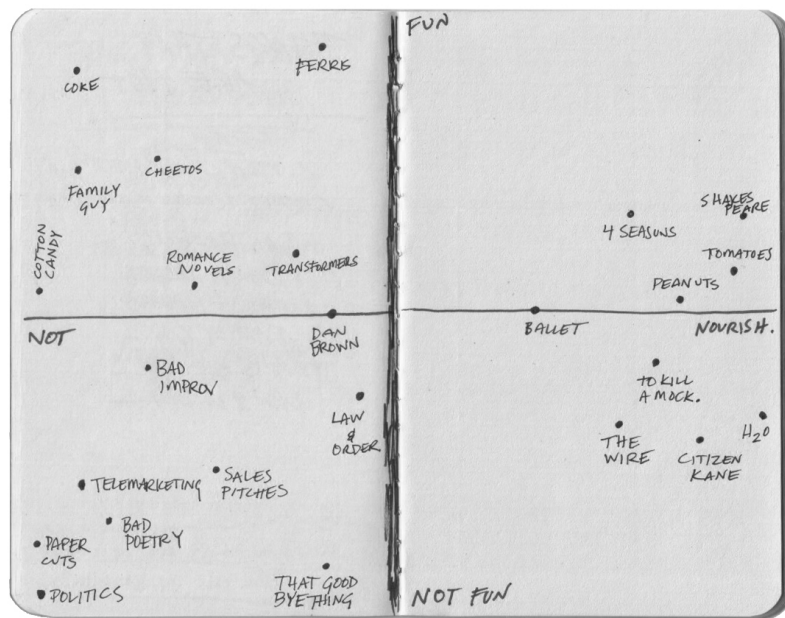
I redrew my list as a graph and plotted the items on it.





“Hm. Shakespeare. More fun than tomatoes. Surprising.” There were some serious holes in the corners of my chart. Those should be filled, right? I started with the bad stuff, because it’s fun to complain. There had to be some unfun, unnourishing things, right?

“Those must be the really unpopular things no one likes.” So, self-indulgent poetry, and politics, and sales pitches, and bad improv comedy, and telemarketing, and paper-cuts, and when you say goodbye to someone and you both walk off in the same direction so you have to say goodbye again. These are the things that feel like they steal a little bit of your soul each time you are exposed. They are toxic. Take a particle.



The top right was the place. It was the challenge. Fun, but not vapid. That’s where I wanted my work to live at all costs: fun and nourishing. I closed my eyes and imagined biting into a ripe peach, large enough to share, but delicious enough to not want to.

“This is what success tastes like,” I drunkenly mumbled to myself as I closed my eyes. The cabin spun. My feet pushed out from under my blanket and my head slid down the wall onto the arm rest. “Are you content?” I heard Beck ask again in a haze.

“Yes...”

And, conversely, the good, nourishing, fun things feel like they add to you, they build on top of what you already are to make you into something better. Add a particle. “The fun, nourishing things must be things everyone likes,” I thought.

This isn’t nearly enough, but: Pixar movies, and Calvin and Hobbes, and Mom’s cooking, and when friends try to sing that one really high note in the chorus of Take on Me, and swings, and those slow-motion scenes in Wes Anderson movies where The Kinks are playing, and a perfectly-ripened peach, and sex.

Yes, that.

## — III —

“Some people just can’t handle honesty, I guess,” Paul shrugged.

He poured me a coffee from his thermos and invited me to take a seat in his office. I looked over my shoulder and got one last guilty glance at the student running out crying. I sat down. “What did you say to her?”

“The usual. About how she wasn’t working hard enough. About how when she shows up unprepared it’s a waste of my time, but worse, it steals time from everyone else in the class. How if she’s having issues loving this craft now when she’s doing it for herself, that it’s only going to get more and more difficult to learn to love once she’s got a job with clients.”

After a brief moment of silence, I said, “I think you said something else. You did the part where you say ‘Assuming you get a job,’ didn’t you?”

“Of course! It’s true! She needs to know she has to work harder. She needs to know the reality of the situation. You can’t sugar-coat everything; her work isn’t good enough to pass.”

Paul was surly, impatient, and lovable, an unadulterated truth-telling machine stuck in a system of nuance, back-patting and grade inflation. Paul could stand to be nicer to some, but if you listened to him, and worked hard, you were one of his kids and on the fast track. If something sucked, he told you, but he also told you how to make it sing. A student just had to suppress their ego long enough to hear that last bit. Most students focused on the wrong half of his sentences and presumed that his approval was some unreachable goal, and that Paul could breathe fire at will. They made the mistake that his approval was based on how few gaffes a student made, and not how significant that student’s effort was. The happiest I’d ever seen Paul was when one student showed up to class with a two-inch stack of sketches, and when he asked what it was, she just answered “The chopping block.” Paul’s wrinkled face cracked into a half-smile. He loved it when his students would recognize the potential in something and be able to tell the good from the bad.

“I’m not sure I know what’s good any more,” I said.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” He offered up a sugar cube. “Stop being so melodramatic. A turd is a turd, and gold is gold, and if you can’t tell one from the other, you should just leave my office right now.” I leaned back and stirred the sugar into my coffee and Paul got up to open the blinds.

“Listen, I had you in class for, what? Four years? Seven classes? God, you were pretty much my shadow for long enough. Did I not do my job?” he asked.

“No no, I think you did a great job. I’m just not confident very much with what I see in my own and other people’s work. It’s not that I don’t like what I’m making, it’s that I don’t like what ANYONE is making. I’ve just been thinking lately...”

“That’s going to kill you.”

Paul spun the blinds’ dowel and light cascaded into the office in ribbons, rising and falling into stripes of light and dark across the stacks of books on his desk. “I don’t know, Paul. I mean, I feel like I’m, what’s the phrase? Drinking from the fire hose? That’s how I feel when I try to look at the work. I’m not getting any water in my mouth. But, it just keeps coming.” I wondered if he purposefully sorted the piles of books by size. They stood largest on bottom and smallest on top, elevating up as ziggurats from his desk.

“That’s stupid, Frank. So stupid. Look, you said you wanted some coffee. I’m not going to give it to you in a bucket. More isn’t better. You know that. Drinking from a fire hose is a line of idiots wanting to get their faces pulverized by water.”

Paul had lost his knack for niceties with age. Maybe age makes you impatient to get to the truth. “Listen. Nobody’s making you drink from the hose. It’s not a necessity to do good work. Some people can handle it. Or maybe no one can? Who the hell knows. But, other people don’t matter. If you feel like you can’t handle it: stop. I hate your work when it looks like other people’s work anyway.”

“But still, there’s some use to looking at other people’s work,” I said, “to know what’s happening, to know who’s doing what, to see what’s popular, even if it’s just to do the exact opposite. I just get disappointed with what I see. It’s not so much the quantity, it’s the quality. I mean, it’s all just work out of context with no descriptions or rationale, and then a bunch of lists,” I said. Looking at work turned from exciting to mundane. It was sparkless. There was no joy there, but some how seemed like a necessity. I told him I especially hated the lists because they were lazy.

“You know, the 10 Commandments was a list,” he said. I leered back at him. Another successful jab from Paul.

Paul opened the large drawer on the left side of his desk and placed the now-empty thermos in a perfect, thermos-shaped gap. “If I hear one more person say ‘it’s not the quantity, it’s the quality,’ I’m going to go nuts. Freakin’ nuts. It’s like all you midwesterners always saying ‘Oh, it’s not the heat, it’s the humidity.’ Rubbish! It’s the same problem. Hot is hot, bad work is bad work, and no one likes 95° no matter what. What’s it your business to get disappointed if someone puts a turd of a design on their site or in their book?”

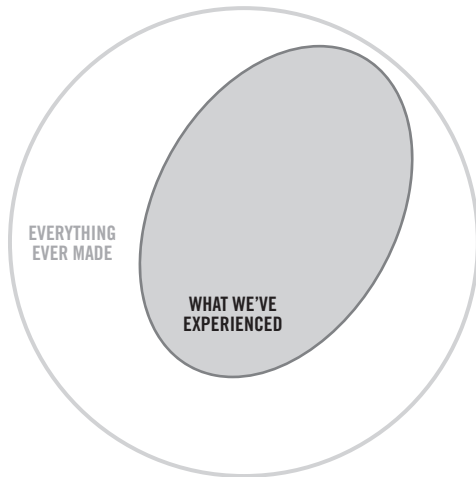
“It’s just saddening. You want to have some beacon of hope, right? I’m supposed to teach this class, teach the kids important things about this stuff, and to get them excited in the potential of graphic design. And I look at everything that’s being made right now and get disheartened, because none of it lives up to the potential of the practice in my mind. So, I go back hoping for something better later. But, the more I go back, the more confusing it gets. It feels like every time I go back to the well to drink, I remember less about what it’s like to experience the good stuff. I get numbed to it. It makes me jaded and bitter. I don’t want to get acclimated to being disappointed. I mean, I can’t even tell

who is a good designer any more. It all seems shallow, and all the work is just so damn slick.”

“You’re a freakin’ sad kid, aren’t you?” The oscillating fan in the corner clicked before it retracted to swing the opposite direction. It created a palpable rhythm to everything and things naturally adjusted to match the beat. Paul’s foot-tapping slowed down. My fidgeting sped up. Classical music whimpered out of the radio, also oddly in step.

“OK, listen up. Maybe I can help to calm your fragile, delicate little thoughts. I think you’re just looking for something profound and getting tired when you can’t find it. But, to be profound is rare! Here, I’ll show you.” He pulled out a sheet of paper, took a deep breath, and began to draw.

“Imagine this represents everything ever made. My work, your work, film, literature, dance, Michael Bay’s biggest piece of crap and DaVinci’s masterpiece, and even the work of that girl that just ran out. Obviously, we can’t experience everything, so our perspectives are limited. I’ll draw a line to represent what we’ve experienced.”



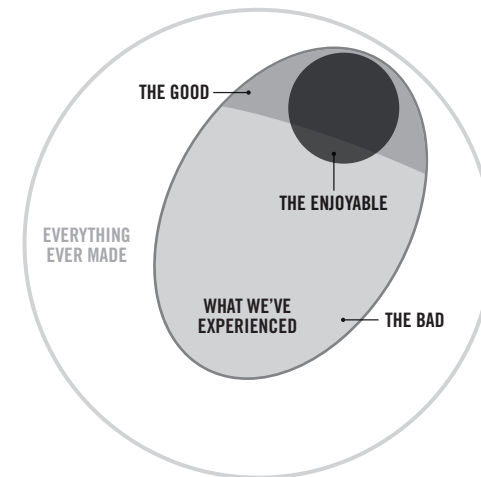
“That’s a bit generous, but we’re going to need the room. Now, go with me here. Imagine that we’re the ultimate judge of quality, which you sometimes unfortunately are as a teacher, and it is our job to classify everything as good or bad. Just bucket sort it all. No gray in this fantasy world, even though there is quite a bit here in the real world. So, if this is the case, there will obviously be much more bad than good, so this bit will represent bad, and this little bit here will represent good.”



Also, let’s say that we need to classify the work that we’ve enjoyed. I think it’s possible to enjoy some bad things...”

“Right! Some times it’s really fun to watch a bad horror movie.” I was getting excited. A unified theory of everything from Paul!

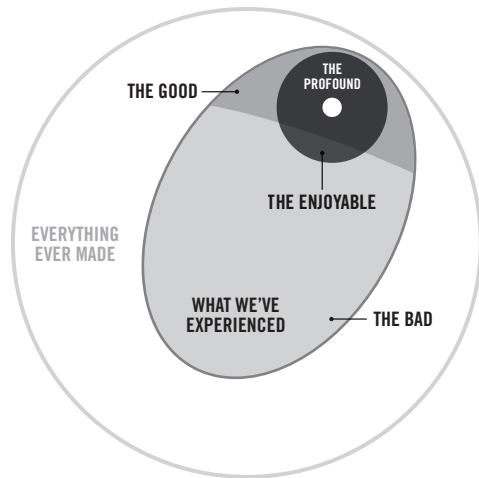
“Yes, I’ve seen some total disasters of a movie in my day and loved the hell out of them. So, we’ll say if it’s good we’ve enjoyed it, and there is a little sliver bad things that we like. And you could probably say that there are probably a small sliver of things that you know are good, but aren’t quite your thing. So, it’d all sit on our graph like this:”



“And inside of all of this lies the profound. It’s the stuff that you’re searching for. And I long for it too, Frank. But it is rare. It is so small, and so many things need to line up for something to be profound. It must be made, we must experience it, and it must be good and enjoyable. And there needs to be something on top of all of that. It needs to change us a little bit.”

“Give a particle,” I thought.

“It’d sit right here, and I’ll draw this circle, but part of me wonders if even drawing it this big is too large.”



I asked to keep the paper. “I mean, I feel encouraged by this,” I said, “but the thought of there being so much garbage out there! So much waste! And to try to make something that isn’t garbage? To make something profound seems so difficult.”

“It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try, Frank. Here, I’ll let you in on something that might make you feel better. I’ve been around a long time, and most of the work has always been bad. Half of it is always below average: that’s how math works. Don’t think things are special now. They’re just different. The thing with the past is that you forget about all the bad stuff. It fades, disappears, because it’s not memorable. It’s just mundane, forgettable garbage.” Forgetting all the bad stuff seemed sublime. Why remember the forgettable? And yet, computers can’t forget, and that kind of editing made the past idealized and misleading. I wasn’t sure how to feel, but I couldn’t change it. Paul moved on.

“Look at it this way, if you’re so suspicious of slickness: slick is easy, right? It’s being rough that’s hard.” He smiled because he knew he was just speaking in opposites. “With slick, you don’t have to say anything. You can get away with pretty all day and most of

the goons out there will lap it up. You don’t have to tell the truth, you don’t have to be meaningful, you can just have people revel in how slick that thing is and have them ooh and ahh ‘til kingdom come. But that’s dumb as hell, because you can only go so far with slick, right? It doesn’t lead anywhere good. Once it gets so slick and cool it stops feeling like a person made it, and that essentially eliminates any kind of strong, emotive message. It just does, no question. Cool people can’t say meaningful things because to be cool you need to censor your strong emotions.”

I read some where that the easiest way to seem cool is to look at the edge of the table when you’re speaking to someone. No eye-contact: cool people are disengaged. I don’t understand cool people. They’re so... unenthusiastic. The Greeks said that to be enthusiastic was to be filled with God. I suppose that must mean that being cool is like damning yourself to hell. It’s not the heat, it’s the humidity. “You ever had a good friend in love, Frank?” he asked. I nodded.

“It’s freaking unbearable, isn’t it? The bastards just gush all day about this and that, and how the light was hitting her hair just so, and how she has the breath of angels, yadda yadda. Shakespeare did all that stuff hundreds of years ago. He must have been the worst friend in the world while he was writing those sonnets. Anyway, you just look at that girl and you’re not in love with her, you know? And you just think ‘But she’s chewing with her mouth open!’ But it doesn’t matter, because you know what? Your friend... she’s radiant to him. That’s what it’s like to care about something. That’s what it’s like to love, and you can’t be cool and love something at the same time, whether it’s a girl or a place or a message or an idea. You love it because you see the infinite potential in it. And that’s what it takes to make something really wonderful. You need to gush and love. Nobody likes just-okay love songs where that guy was kinda into that girl. No! Head over heels, otherwise the song sucks! Life is too short to only feel half way!”

This was, well, surprising. I thought Paul had a stone-cased heart, and here he was, telling me I needed to love?

“Everything needs more love. You know how I always hound students about their craft? Craft is love manifest. It’s that love that makes you reject hundreds of bad ideas in the hope that you can come up with something worthy of your subject. It’s that attention to detail that makes you want every little piece to be perfect. It’s what makes you kern body copy and justify text by hand and buy surgeon’s tools for your comps and what makes you stay up until God knows when wondering if green is better than yellow, and then doing both anyway, damn it.”

“That’s why that girl ran out of here crying. Not enough love. But I have hope for her. I think she can do it. I really think she can. She’s smarter than all my other students. Up until now, she’s just been flat. That’s the first emotion I’ve been able to get out of her. And next week in class I’m going to tell her that it was good that she expressed herself, and that I’m sorry that I had to push that hard for it to come out. But, I think it will be good



for her, because she'll understand that if there's something important to say, she'll know what I mean when I tell her she'd better be funny as hell or insightful or honest or even angry. Or all of them at once. Cry, if you need to. Just be human. Vulnerable. As difficult as that sounds, it's your only choice if you want to do anything worthwhile."

I thought I was going to show up and Paul and I were going to talk about the syllabus for the class we'd be teaching together in the fall. But, now I didn't even care about our class. I was in class.

"God, this sounds like the first new thing I've heard in so long. Why didn't you tell me all this while I was in school?"

"I saw your work. I figured you already knew."

"Well, no, but, thanks, I suppose. Everything just seems to be falling flat for me lately. I'm not looking for a lightning bolt of inspiration and I don't expect things can be new forever, but I'm just wanting it to not be so mundane when I look at the work. I wish I had that spark back." We took synchronized sips of our coffee. I told him how I was scared that the search for substance in a bottomless well might make me fickle. About how I'd go to one site to look for things, then to a second and a third and fourth, and then after the circuit was finished, I'd go back to the first site just to see if anything was new. I told him about how whole mornings disappeared that way.

I pictured a guy looking for his keys so he could get his day started, but he searched by lifting up every item he owned to look under it. "Not under the rug. Not under the fridge. Not under the laundry, or the paperclip on my desk. Not under the silverware tray in the top drawer on the left in the kitchen. Maybe I should check the rug again?" It was a different, special kind of neurosis.

I told him about how I behaved on the sites. I'd move down, glancing, skimming, my scrollbar ever careening downward, endlessly scrolling. Then, picture after picture, on and on for infinity, witnessing flashes of color and form, my mind moving like a rock skipping across an edgeless ocean, never quite sure of what's under the surface. Maybe nothing. Or water all the way down.

"It reminds me of those psychology experiments that they used to do to monkeys." Paul always knew how to make me feel good. "Hit the buzzer, get a cookie."

I thought about my Pavlovian response to this dry matter. I pictured myself at my screen, cross-eyed, and drooling. I thought about the unclean appetite I had developed, and how it was never really satiated. There was a difference between being ravenously curious and gluttonously so. Maybe my desk was sitting on a desert island just like my friend who drank all the Coke. Maybe it wasn't pity I felt for him, maybe it was an unlabeled sympathy for what we had in common.

Dogs will create weird rituals if they get fed on irregular schedules, because they somehow start to believe that what they do has some sort of influence on whether the food appears or not. It's a canine rain dance. You can see the same behavior in the obsessives that

play slot machines and their rituals before pulling the lever. Three thumps on the right side of the machine to get a seven in the last slot. Or baseball players when they go up to bat. Hand to nose, hand to mouth, kiss, hand to chest, plant left foot by kicking the dirt three times, wag bat over right shoulder four times. I'd do that with sites too, projecting patterns where there were none, thinking they would summon better stuff to see.

"No, no. There's better stuff in there if I check it after lunch. They always save the better stuff for the afternoons." I'd launch my browser, do my dance, and hope for rain. Research wasn't research, it was flailing for something good, something meaningful, something nourishing; a quest for substance with no logical end. It was getting stuck in a revolving door and thinking that you were going some where because you had taken so many steps.

Paul was warming up and becoming softer. I liked him like this. He said he liked the idea of a dog doing a rain dance, even though it represented a sad, faulty understanding of the world. It was cute with dogs and pitiful with people, and we wondered what else people do that makes them believe they have a hint of control in situations where they don't. Paul proposed the idea that maybe all control was just an illusion. I didn't respond because the thought of it scared me.

I quickly changed the subject and I told Paul about the new idea of making work that was fun and nourishing, because there isn't much design work like that, and how if you drink too much sea water you will die, and how that is kind of like drinking Coke. And how all of these crazy ideas I was having about what I wanted to do with my talents started fitting together like a constellation whenever I decided I wanted to make good things that lasted, that everyone would like, like peaches or The Kinks or sex. I drew for him that little four quadrant diagram right next to his diagram, and he said that he liked it. That meant a lot, and made me feel like I was more right than I thought I was before. I told Paul about the fat man who drank two liters of Coke a day and how everything was fitting together in regards to what I was trying to make, but I couldn't figure out if that guy was drinking because he was thirsty, or if he was thirsty because he was drinking.

Paul took another sip from his coffee and looked back from gazing out the window. "You're not a very balanced person, are you Frank?" He gave me a grandfatherly smile, because he already knew the answer was no, and that was what he liked about me. We ordered lunch, talked about the class and what the students needed to know, and decided on the proper order to present things. We reminisced about old times, and laughed about how little had changed since I had gone to school there. He said I'd make a great teacher, and the fact that I was worried about all this showed that things were going to be fine with the class.

Later that afternoon, he told me he was retiring and moving back to Europe, and that I would have to handle the class we had planned on teaching together in the fall by myself.

I left Paul's office crying too.

## — IV —

When I was 10 my father fell off the roof.

We had all heard a scream, so we ran outside, terrified. He was fine, and we helped him to his feet. He draped his arm around my shoulder, and I drug him inside to a seat at the kitchen table.

My family had just moved from New York to Missouri. We had lost a coast, but had gained a bit of financial flexibility by moving to a place where it cost less to live. That wellspring of cash was being funneled towards my father building a barn on the third acre of the property. The barn would be the space he had always wanted: a spot to build the cars he dreamed of building since he was my age. He was making himself a laboratory.

“I just want you to be more careful up there,” my mother said as she smashed the ice tray on the ledge of the counter, then shoved the ice into a Ziploc bag. My father winced in pain at the cold of the ice against his lower back and said “That’s bullshit. I can’t do anything different up there. Half of balance is just believing you have it.” My mother shot a glance back at him that said “Watch your mouth around the kids.” My father fired back with an “I can say whatever the hell I want, I just fell off of a roof” look.

My father is not a poetic man. He smells more of motor oil than of musty Ezra Pound compilations. I love him like that. But, here was my stiff, annoyed father speaking truth and beauty in free verse after falling one story from the trusses.

*I can't do anything different  
up there.  
Half of balance  
is just believing  
you  
have  
it.*

I only remember my father giving me advice twice when I was a kid. This one, though inadvertent, and another a few years after he fell off the roof. He sat down next to me on my bed: “Frank, we need to have a talk. This is very important.” I shuddered at the thought of what was to come, but my father just sat there rigid. We both stared out the window at the dogs running around in the yard. He finally said: “Frank, girls need attention.” And then he looked at me, nodded like he needed to remember that more than I did, and walked out. I looked back out the window at the dogs growling at one another.

He was right about girls and he was right about balance. If you wanted balance, what more could you do than to believe you had it and shift your weight around? What kind

of warning was “Don’t do that thing that you did on accident ever again?” The barn needed to be built. A man needs a playground, otherwise he’ll wither away. So, my father groaned, took six aspirin after dinner, and tossed in bed all night on a microwavable heating pad. He was up on the trusses the next day.

Sometimes you paint yourself into a corner. Other times, life does it for you. I was registering for classes at university and needed a literature course to fulfill a “liberal arts requirement.” There was only one left to choose: “Hero & Quest: The Grail Story.”

“You know, I did want to be an archaeologist when I was younger. This sounds related, maybe... some how?” When I was twelve I realized the life of an archaeologist was nothing at all like what I saw in the Indiana Jones movies. Dreams crushed. No great treasures, no whips or explosives, no running away from natives as they shot arrows at you. But still, there had to be a seed of something I liked in the field, right? Learning about the past through the lens of a story could be perfect. I imagined a tweed-clad Sean Connery teaching the class in his thick brogue, charming us all with his wit and surly demeanor as he told us tales of knights and maidens. I scrawled the course code into the registration form.

The good classes feel like they teach you the opposite of what they promised. I don’t remember the plots of the grail stories and many of the specifics. But, I remember that chain mail is heavy, and that if you armor yourself too much, it weighs you down. You forget what it’s like to be light, nimble, and open, and those qualities are important for someone on a quest, even if they leave you vulnerable.

I remember that the original grail quest stories were French and German, and not English like you would think. I preferred the German version of the grail story because the grail is not a cup, but is instead said to be a rock that fell from heaven. I thought it was nice to imagine the object of the quest as something that was not precious, and maybe not even identifiable as something valuable unless it were clearly labeled. I pictured someone unknowingly trying to skip the Holy Grail across a riverbed in a contest with a friend, and then it sinking to the bottom, lost forever, when it didn’t reach the other bank.

I remember, in a glittering moment of honesty, someone in the class confessed that they were not very impressed with the idea of eternal life. At first we thought this was snobbish, but then the notion swept over the class as we realized that someone had labeled the reason for our lack of interest in the stories. The pay-off wasn’t good enough. Immortality is a prize that is next to worthless to a kid in their early twenties. All the pains of being young come from having an excess of life and not knowing what to do with it. You don’t really know who you are yet. The pain comes at the beginning of life

from having too much life and at the end from having too little of it. Life is a palindrome like that: you cry at both ends. A girl suggested that being 26 was the perfect age. It was even, and you were closer to thirty than twenty, but still well shy of it, whatever awful thing being thirty signified to her. Hopefully, at that point you would feel invigorated with your clarity of direction and purpose, and skilled enough to execute. It was almost like you had done enough to feel like you were well on your way to fulfilling whatever you were supposed to do with this tiny life of yours. We all nodded in agreement. Little did we know that 26 would come, the world would change around us faster than we could change ourselves, and we would still feel like babes.

Someone said that the best thing the grail could give you was not all the lives one could ever want, but rather one, pristine, bright, shining, balanced life. The rock should act as a weight or a counterweight and balance everything out for you. That's really what we wanted for ourselves. That's what we were trying to build: a life with not too much time or too little, not an abundance or a shortage of love or honor or respect, but just enough. A satisfied life with just the right amount of desire, because a life without desire would be unusual, sort of like how cookies taste odd if you forget to add salt to them. Yes, we wanted balance.

And then we realized our desire was foolish and unrealistic. I saw the stone sink to the bottom of the river again. The class put its chain mail back on, and I thought that if half of balance was believing you had it, I wasn't too sure what made up the other part.

I leave in the mornings to go for a walk, to fetch a cup of coffee, and to breathe some outside air. There are days that it smells like pine here in Portland, and I try not to get acclimated to it. I can remember what it was like to smell that for the first time when I stepped out of the plane and onto the tarmac. It's so strong you can even smell it at the airport, even over the exhausts and the Cinnabon.

As spring faded into summer, I'd see a group of workers on my walk replacing the roof of one of the houses for sale on 28th Street. One week, I walked by and saw them standing in a circle around the foreman in some sort of ceremony. I hadn't realized it before, but it seemed this is how most of their days started: they'd gather together and the foreman would shake a few Advil out of the medicine bottle into their cupped hands. "Give a particle," I thought. Each of them took their consecrated pills so they could dull the aches and slink up the ladders and start their work. I thought of their pain and I wondered if they slept on microwavable heating pads like my dad did when he was working on the roof of his barn.

As the barn was slowly being erected, my father would sit at night at the kitchen table to soak his hands in a cup of bleach. The soak was to cut the chemicals away, to clean the wounds, to soften the callouses, and to remove the stains to make his hands seem not so worn. He'd always flinch as his hands hit the bleach in the cup. He said it was to get the fumes of the chemicals out from his nostrils, and to make it so he wouldn't feel bad

when he held my mother's hands. He did it so he could be soft again. He said, "I hope you never have to do this when you're older." I put my hands on the kitchen table and I hoped the same for myself.

"Every kind of work must disfigure you in some way," I said looking up at the roof. I held up my hands in front of me and walked past the house to the sound of swinging hammers.

I ordered my coffee and I wondered how my work changed me. I rubbed my wrists and remembered how they flare up every few weeks when things get especially busy. I wondered what my poor posture was doing to me. Was my spine curving? I rubbed my back. Would I eat better if I weren't so busy?

What if it was worse than physical disfigurement? What of this overarching hyper-criticalness? Why can't I just enjoy things any more? Did I let critical thinking creep out beyond its intended scope? Is that why I feel so jaded?

Why can't I just enjoy a movie every now and then where things just blow up? There is nothing wrong with fireworks. Does criticism come from the opposite place that teaches you how to enjoy life? No, surely not. Well, maybe. But, then, why do I complain and bicker about typefaces on signs as I walk down the street? Does everything need to be dissected? Doesn't dissecting kill things that used to be alive? Shouldn't I be looking at the trees and reminding myself of that pine smell instead? Why so critical? And what of these inner monologues? And God, why do I write essays? Who am I to judge?

"This coffee tastes like shit," I thought to myself.

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Holly suggested I run away for a little bit. She would come with me. Her parents owned 20 acres of wilderness, and we could hike out as far as we wanted, set up camp, and disconnect for a little bit. She was my oldest friend, and old friends are like medicine. "Let's go on holiday," she said.

She told me all I probably needed was a bit of distance, at least enough to make me miss "it."

"What's it?" I asked. And she said "I don't know. Anything you're sick of. You know, how parents take vacations away from their kids sometimes so they don't kill everyone..."

"Let's go now," I said. There was an urgency to escaping. It wasn't a vacation. It felt like a prison break.

"Now? It's 4PM. We're not going to get there until..."

"Let's just go do it."

"You're serious? You're not impulsive. Wow. You're serious."

And so we drove across the state through the summer afternoon to her parent's house and arrived just before dark. Her parents were out of town, so we parked in the garage and unloaded the trunk. "Which way do you want to go?" she asked.

“It doesn’t matter. Nowhere is everywhere here, right?” I said.

“I’ve got a spot in mind,” she said, and we set off mostly rightish.

“Why are we doing this again?” she asked. Twigs cracked under our feet. I hoped I could some day do something I didn’t understand for someone I loved, just like Holly was doing for me now.

I told her about how the work just didn’t feel good any more. The things that used to inspire me just didn’t any longer. “Maybe you just out grew them?” she asked. I had never thought of it that way. “What do you want your work to be like?” she asked. “What do you want to say?”

It had been three years since Beck taught me about Coke, since I got drunk on the flight home, since I walked out of Paul’s office for the last time. I had forgotten all of that, but some how, on our walk, when directly asked what I wanted to say, it all came back to me. “I thought I didn’t know. But, maybe I knew and just forgot.” I told her about my new-old goal of trying to make work that was nourishing.

“I think that’s great. But doesn’t it seem sort of silly to try to make design that’s nourishing? I thought the purpose of design was to make someone want.”

And I had never thought of it like that either. I felt dirty, but validated. I knew that that was most of the picture, but not all of it. Can you bend something that is typically used to generate desire into something that can satiate it? Is that trying to make it do something it’s not supposed to do, or could you say that it’s evolving it? I wasn’t sure. We heard a rustling to our right. “Don’t worry about it. Probably just a skunk or something.”

We continued talking about what it meant to be nourished, and about all the things that fill us up. I said that I always thought that the little moments are the best ones, the most nourishing ones, and I asked her which was her favorite little moment.

She thought for a moment, then said that when she was younger and sick and having to make regular trips to the hospital, her mother would sleep with her, scrunching herself into Holly’s twin-sized bed just to bring a bit of comfort. Her mom always woke up before Holly did, and as she got out of bed, her mother would always smooth the sheets. “That sound,” she said. “That sound that her hands made when she was smoothing out the sheets. She’d wake me up as she got out because the bed was so tiny, but I always just pretended like I was still asleep. I didn’t want her to feel bad. And then she’d smooth out the sheets. I’d hear that sound and it made me smile. I’d just lay there for another few minutes with my eyes closed and a smile on my face.”

I could never make anything as good as that.

I wondered if Holly’s mom saw her smiling after she got out of bed every morning. Maybe she just let Holly believe her sleeping act was successful. I thought about how maybe both of them were stretching the truth a little bit, just so they could tell the truth about how they felt to one another. There was a beauty to that: lying to be wholly honest.

I told her about my father falling off the roof and him soaking his hands. “I love short

little memories like that,” I said. “They’re kind of like how it’s good to write a short song or a story that isn’t too long. The nice thing is that you don’t run out of things to say. You can tell the whole truth, and not tell one lie.”

“Yeah,” she said. I could tell she was still thinking about her mom and how she was a little upset we had made the trip and she wouldn’t be able to see her.

The trees cleared and Holly set down her backpack. “This is probably going to be the best spot for us to set up the tent. We usually camp out here. It’s flat, private, and the ground is pretty soft. It’ll smell great in the morning from the dew and all the wildflowers too.”

I nodded in agreement. It was getting dark, so I offered to set up the tent if she held the flashlight. I crushed a patch dandelions under the weight of my backpack and rejoiced that the tent was one that almost assembled itself. We unpacked everything and had peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for dinner. Holly made a small fire in the fire pit.

“Who’s to say that being satisfied is a good thing?” she said, stacking kindling into a teepee shape. “I have to want something, otherwise I’d just sit around and watch Bravo all day. It’s good to see things you want to change or improve, right? At least, that’s what keeps me away from the TV or any of that stuff that eats up everyone’s time. Isn’t it good to be a little dissatisfied? Who would ever do anything if they believed everything was already good enough? Doesn’t having things to do keep you from going insane?”

“Sure. The world isn’t done, and all that. I just can’t pick my fights. There just feels like so much is wrong right now. I don’t have answers for all of it, or even any of it, I just know that it’s wrong and I don’t know what to do about it. It feels so big and wrong.”

“Like, work?”

“No. All of it. Everything. I’m tired of the bad news. It feels like the good guys are losing.”

“It feels like everything’s turning acidic,” she said. Holly made sparks by rubbing flint up against steel, and yesterday’s newspaper flamed up and the fire spread.

“Thank you for this.”

We looked into the fire and time vanished like it does when you know you’re doing exactly what you should be doing. And we sat there quiet for I don’t know how long and watched the fire die. We were perfectly comfortable with the silence in a the way you can only feel with a handful of people in your life. I felt the jadedness start to slough off in the campfire smoke. “We shouldn’t try to fill every empty second,” I said to myself. “This is so nice.” I looked over at Holly.

“I have something I want to show you,” she said and headed off into the woods again.

We walked for a few minutes and then she stopped. “Okay. This is it. Turn your flashlight off”

“What is it?”

“Our family calls it Confirmation Point. You can’t tell because it’s dark out, but if you





listen, you can hear the river running below, right? We're standing up on a bluff right now, and there's a bluff on the other side of the river too. If you stand right here and yell, whatever you say is echoed back to you."

"Oh, so confirmation."

"Right! You can yell whatever you want into the darkness. So, like this," and then she cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled "I WANT TO SLEEP!" And the sound bounced off the opposite bluff and came back to us a second later. "I WANT TO SLEEP!"

"My dad comes out here a lot," she said. "Usually when he needs to vent. He says he yells out here like a madman because he knows no one can hear him. He just yells what he thinks and the bluff agrees with him."

"So, I can say anything and no one will hear?"

"Well, anything you feel okay saying around me."

"Anything," I thought about what I wanted to say. I looked down into the darkness and dug my feet into the soil a bit and decided on something. "Okay. Here we go. Do your best, bluff." I took my hands out of my pockets and cupped them around my mouth.

"THE WORLD IS A MESS!"

And we waited a moment, and sure enough, the bluff returned with a complimentary "THE WORLD IS A MESS!" It was odd, but I felt validated.

"I think you're right, Frank, but I have some hope," Holly said.

"I feel a bit better too."

We kept our flashlights off, and I grabbed her hand. We turned around and started walking back towards the thin glint of the fire. Then, a voice yelled out of the darkness from the opposite bluff: "IT'S NOT SO BAD!"

I woke up later that night hot as hell in a tent that smelled like campfire. We had forgotten to open the windows. I wasn't sure how long we had been sleeping, but I was certain we were mostly breathing recycled air at that point. I reached up to unzip the window to let some air in.

I wanted to go for a walk. I opened the door of the tent and stepped out. I started to zip it closed, but I changed my mind. There was something I needed to do. I needed to say thank you. For the bluff. For the fire. For all of it. I dropped to my knees and smoothed out my sleeping bag with my hands. Holly smiled with her eyes closed and everything seemed right.

I turned on my flashlight and walked as far and as deep into the woods as I could. With each step the beam of light would bob up and down, revealing a column of luminance just long enough to keep walking: ten feet of light at a time, all spliced together into a full trip. A low wind blew, and I could see the feathered parachutes of the dandelions, too innumerable to count, float through the air dancing and casting shadows on one another. "Take a particle, give a particle," I said to myself.

I thought how if you shine a light bright enough, maybe the world wouldn't stop be-

ing a mess, but at least maybe you could be lucky enough see a small, glittering, beautiful little piece of it. I stopped and pointed my flashlight at the sky and wondered if anyone else could see it. The moths started to swarm.

"It's not so bad," I whispered to myself. 🦋