

Sunday, April 8th, 2018

Every time Sebastian makes this drive he tries to find the precise moment when one landscape transforms to the next – when the cottonwoods become creosote and the hills turn to mountains. He fixes his gaze through the windshield, past the road. Past the sky. He waits. Soon the radio turns to static, and he can't help but to think about Angelina.

She'd left Sebastian three months earlier. Her reasoning wasn't very clear to him, something about not knowing one another anymore. The long drive conjures up feelings he began having late in their relationship. A kind of restlessness. The car moves but he doesn't. Since she'd left him, he got in the habit of replaying events in his head, scrutinizing scenes and analyzing them for their rationale. Often this yielded entirely made-up realities, but he cared only that he knew something. He can't detect his vacant gaze.

"How can you say that you know me when you don't even know the things that I want?" Angelina asks loudly.

Just before that she asked if he had requested the days off for their trip to St. Louis. He hadn't yet, and she could tell from his hurried exhalation just after the inquiry that he had forgotten. She moves to the other side of the bed and tries to find something to rearrange on the nightstand.

"I have an interview there in two weeks, and you're supposed to go up there with me to look for a new job." She says in a quiet proclamation. Sebastian feels stuck. He watches and listens to her from the other side of their bed. "Do you only care about the things that are important to me when I remind you to? When I get pissed and I'm unpleasant to be around?"

This was one of those Socratic conversations, where she had many questions but Sebastian didn't have answers to them. She sighs and turns away. The distance between them is bigger than the room they're in.

"You've lost interest in the things that matter to me. Do you know my ambitions anymore? Do you even know what I like to do?" She questioned.

"I don't know what there is to say. Don't make this bigger than it actually is" He eventually responds. "I just forgot, that's it. I know who you are."

His gaze is interrupted by a slower car he'd gotten too close to. The white streaks on the highway shrink to tiny dashes as he gains speed and crosses over them, first left then right again.

Last week Sebastian's parents died. In a still unexplained fire, they were caught and then gone in one night. It was the unfortunate case that their business, a small grocery where

the fire began, was attached to their residence. Their home and business existed below mountains, near the center of downtown, where there existed no space in between century-old brick buildings. Understanding the principle that everything has a cause, Sebastian at first demanded to know how the fire started. He was relentless, albeit helpless, in his pursuit. Perhaps wishing to prolong his anger to avoid the empty, insoluble sorrow in which he knew he'd soon find himself, he berated the detectives and fire fighters and coroners he spoke to on the phone. Faulty wiring or an overloaded circuit have so far been the most reasonable explanations, but those kinds of details eventually lost their importance.

Outside of the passenger side window, light gathers behind trees in the distance. A thin, metal staircase rises at least 400 feet into the air, towards nothing, beneath the light. A deer walks past it.

Sebastian flew home for the funeral a few days after the fire. He didn't need to ask for any days off because it was a Saturday morning, and he knew he'd be back the following evening. It was a short service, attended by family and friends and a priest. Reassuring words were offered by the priest, about having faith in things happening for something bigger than what they can understand, and that earthly thoughts are contained in a false time. The walls of the small room where the service was held were a pale yellow hue. The pungent floral odor, of no specificity because of the variety of arrangements, matched the walls.

The road dips slightly then becomes a corridor through an exploded mesa.

More than with the arrangements or the priest's kind words or the embrace of concerned family members, Sebastian was pulled from his grief stricken lull at the service with the realization of his inheritance. His family's business and the property, or what was left of it after the fire, now belong to him. When Stanley, an old family friend and customer of the store, began to ask about the future of the business and offered his support in getting things running, it became apparent to Sebastian then that he would need to move back home to put things in order.

He'd had a foot out the door at work for months and was no longer seeing someone, so he reasoned that a change in his life would be good for him. When Sebastian broke it to his employers that he would be leaving immediately, he was slightly disappointed in their reactions. He was telling himself that the change wasn't such a big deal, but he'd hoped that they would treat his departure as momentous.

A plume of dust detaches from the earth and rises abruptly above the short desert plants. It dances excitedly, as if celebrating its freedom, before disappearing back into the ground. Sebastian realizes he missed the moment he arrived in the desert. The vastness devours him and his small white car. He concentrates on the things he'll need to do when he arrives.

For Sebastian, the present is always curated. Having practiced this act since he was old enough to speak, he's become quite skilled at it. He does it by first carefully examining a set of events' viability, given contexts and premises, then, if the reasoning for their taking place is valid, he orders them in his head and anticipates their unfolding like a film he's already seen.

A dot on the horizon grows into a mountain in seconds. The sky shifts through hallucinatory colors. Sebastian arrives home at dusk.

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Two weeks earlier when he arrived for the funeral he stayed at a motel just east of the interstate. It was clean enough, and the old man at the front desk was conversational. It distracted him from his grief. Sebastian drives straight there.

"How long you stayin'?" The old man asks.

"For a few days, I think." Sebastian responds. The old man scribbles something on a notepad. This time his name tag doesn't sag into his shirt pocket. Antonio. "You know my parent's place I was telling you about? I came back to move into it. So hopefully I won't need to be here long."

"Alright, you enjoy your stay." Antonio didn't look up. The small room key with 122 etched on the front slides across the peeling laminate counter. Sebastian leaves his packed bag and small boxes in the car, and doesn't turn the light on when he enters his room. He falls asleep waiting for the morning.

A strip of light slips through the offset window shades and strikes Sebastian's face. He wakes up wearing yesterday's clothes. The angled white slant rests on him until he finally walks out the door.

He decides to walk the more than half mile up the road to his family's building, ensuring himself that it's not because he wants to prolong the procession. He crosses under the interstate and listens to the rumbling of cars and semis passing above him. Cracks in the sidewalk grow into fissures protecting small patches of bermuda grass. The April air is thin and barren and carries Sebastian to his destination.

It's smaller than he remembers. Empty now. He stands before it, his nostrils filled with the smell of soaked ash. Bricks and beams and tall wooden shards form a single pyre in the center of what used to be his family's grocery store. There is no roof. The building's glass and porcelain tile façade, supported by two larger adjacent structures, still stands, protecting the

empty interior. Sebastian tries to remember the inside when it was still a store. The void of what used to be can shrink any space.

"No te preocupes, Sebastián."

He turns as a small hand grabs his fingers that dangle below his arms. Judith, his mother's cousin, stares at him with earnest, open eyes. He hadn't been Sebastián in years.

"It'll get sorted out." Judith says.

"They didn't tell me it was completely gone." Sebastian responds. "This is nothing." He turns back swiftly, staring past the emptiness. Behind it stands part of his childhood home, at least half of it missing.

"We didn't know if you'd want to move back in. They managed to save your old bedroom and the kitchen in the back. Insurance can take care of it, and then you can decide what to do with the property." Judith says. "Have you thought about it?"

"I don't know why I came back." Sebastian didn't mean to say this out loud. "I mean – I don't know. What do you thi–"

"Let's go inside and see. You're here now. You take a look and think about it, then I'll tell you about an opportunity that's come up." Judith says, her tone more composed and directive.

They walk through the façade and stand in emptiness. Sebastian avoids looking at the large pile in the center. The air has softened and become stale between the two large, brick walls.

"They gutted it." Judith says. "There was no use trying to save anything. It didn't get all the way through the old house, but it took the roof and all the walls with it." Her voice trails off. They look up at the sky to escape the charred inner walls, and continue walking to the house in the back.

There's no door to walk through. They step in unison over a small heap of wall innards and stand at the center of the house.

"Your room upstairs is mostly there. Eliceo used it for his books, so that's all up there, too. We can get you a bed. I think it'd be good for you." Judith says.

They walk cautiously to the end of the house and begin to climb the stairs.

"We've gone up and down them plenty now. They're fine." Judith says, sensing Sebastian's hesitation.

The second story is cleaner, less damaged. Sebastian spent his first twenty years in the room, but feels indifferent towards it now. A room can't exist outside of a house. He walks to the bookshelves at the far end of the room and examines them. Hundreds of books fill the shelves, each one firmly upright, affixed tightly on either side by other books. The smell of aged paper Sebastian remembers is replaced by scorched lumber.

He chooses a book at random, just above eye level, and carefully slips it from the others. Flipping slowly through the pages, reading nothing, his eyes shift back to the shelf. The thin gap left by the book he now becomes a deep chasm. The other books don't lean in its absence. He puts the book back to fill the space.

"Your father loved his books. Didn't even let people borrow them. He thought that if you really wanted someone to read a book you ought to just give it to them." Judith says, filling the silence. "'Books should be revered as much as their contents', he would say."

Sebastian and Judith pace the small room. They think separately about loss. Different kinds.

"You mentioned an opportunity?" Sebastian says.

"Oh. Yes. This young man, Diego – he sees potential in this place. He asked about buying it and turning it into a bar. Says all it needs is some benches and a bar in the back, and the customers will come." Judith says. "He thinks it's a legitimate opportunity. Says 'there's too many dark places to get drunk here – people would love a bar under the sun'."

Their pacing leads back to the stairs and they descend. Sebastian empathizes with the stairs' slow groans at each step. Judith braces herself on the wall and turns slightly to Sebastian above her.

"It'd be cheap and easy." She says. "Diego said if you're not looking to sell he could open it and run it for you. It might be an opportunity to make some money while you sort things out."

They are back outside between the two large brick walls, and a cool gust fills the space. "Please let Diego know that I'm interested in being partners with him. I'm not ready to sell. A bar sounds fine – it's easy, little money needs to go into it." Sebastian says.

Judith leaves, unsure if she should stay longer to comfort Sebastian. He tells her he's fine.

Sebastian stays behind and begins to add scraps to the pile at the center. There is no breeze now, and the space feels numb. He drops a large piece of wood onto the pile. The

crash echoes, bouncing between the two walls until rising up and disseminating into the city. The mountains turn to amethyst as the sun lowers.

Sebastian continues to add to the pile and tries remembering the old grocery store again. When the sun and its light disappear entirely he walks past the façade back onto the sidewalk to leave. He looks to the mountains and feels trapped. Things lose their features in the dark. The foothills and the mountains become one tall, jagged wall keeping the city in. Solitude crawls into Sebastian's head, rearranging his vision, leaving him motionless. He occupies only the thoughts that the solitude affords, and the world disappears around him.

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The bar opens by summer. Sebastian's small home in the back is repaired, and he lives there, leaving only when he needs to, and he hardly sees daylight anymore. His father's books have collected dust and the kitchen and living room below the bedroom have shiny new furnishings. The pile of rubble has been replaced by tables and benches in what is now a bar.

Sebastian wakes up and walks down to the kitchen. He's begun to make coffee for himself every day. Sunlight comes in from behind the kitchen sink, its soft glimmer interrupted only where it strikes the stainless steel appliances.

Eight letters, 63 down, "Denizens in Goya's yard" - a knock at the door interferes with his crossword puzzle.

"Hey, Bass." Diego says.

Sebastian turns around slowly and walks back to the table.

"Just finished restocking. 'Bout to open up. There's a band tonight, if you're interested. I just wanted to let you know so you're not surprised by the noise." Diego continues.

"Thanks, Diego." Sebastian responds. "Can you close the door on your way out." His inflection didn't suggest a question.

Sebastian, for a second, thinks about helping out tonight. Live music always brings a crowd - he could serve some drinks so Diego isn't overwhelmed. But he reasons that people wouldn't have a good time if he served them. Best to stay at home.

A month passes slowly with empty hopes for change. He'd grown tired of coffee and reading and crossword puzzles. Sebastian anticipates and believes some kind of change will occur that will get him unstuck. The world is always in motion, after all. But his ability to curate

the present had declined steadily since locking himself in his home. He'd never needed to account for the kind of emptiness where events don't occur.

In August, Diego knocks at the door again.

"Bass, I've got to ask you for some help this afternoon." Diego declares.

Sebastian couldn't anticipate this.

"We've got a crowd coming tonight. We got a new distributor and the guy doesn't do Thursday deliveries, so I need to get the kegs from another place." Diego says. "Can you keep an eye on the place for about an hour? There's already a few customers out there. They're easy, you won't have to do much."

Sebastian stares for a moment before looking down to see how he looks. Worn athletic shorts and a wrinkled, off-white t-shirt with a pocket cover him.

"Can I change?" Sebastian responds. "I already showered." He answers as if needing to show that he's capable of doing the job. He's convincing himself.

"Sure, Bass. I need to head out in twenty – meet you out there?" Diego says before turning around and leaving quickly. He taps the door frame twice on his way out, some kind of sign of support.

Sebastian changes and then walks outside to the bar. He feels himself occupying the space differently, in a new role. Diego leans against the thick concrete bar top, smoking a cigarette. One group of two and another with four drink their beers beneath the relucant sky.

"I'll be back in a little over an hour. Let me know if you need me to get anything else." Diego says.

He walks swiftly through the picnic table lined corridor through the center of the bar. Music continues to play through the speakers behind the bar. Some upbeat, indie Prince cover.

Sebastian walks behind the bar and lays his elbows down onto the counter. His chin falls into his cupped left hand. He looks for something to stare at. Maybe these people won't need another drink before he comes back, he thinks.

He looks up when a few thin, grey clouds cover the sun. His right foot taps compulsively to the song playing. Smells from a food truck outside penetrate the bar. Sebastian, for the first time in a while, appreciates the menagerie of sensations that surround him.

A man approaches the bar. He's holding an empty glass lined with skinny rings of suds, tracings of the beer's depletion.

"Can I get two more?" The man says.

Sebastian says nothing and grabs two ringless pint glasses from behind the bar. He walks back to the taps and stares at the colorful levers on the wall.

"What'd you have?" Sebastian asks without turning around.

"Lonestar." The man replies.

Beer splashes into the empty vessel. In seconds the glass overfills with yellowish-gold, and Sebastian hands it back to the man.

"And the other one?" The man asks.

"Oh. Right." Sebastian says quickly. He pours another one.

The man takes his beers and leaves a creased five dollar bill in a wet spot on the bar.

Sebastian goes back into his spot behind the bar and waits. He looks around, surveying the bottles of liquor on the shelf to the right of the beer taps. Bright white illuminates beer bottles inside a clear refrigerator on the other side.

Next to a nearly full bottle of a licorice-red liqueur there is a tiny television. The TV, old enough so that its thick convex screen protrudes slightly beyond the cheap black plastic that surrounds it, lets out muffled noises that are drowned out in the music. He recognizes it. His parents had it next to the cash register in the grocery store, where whole afternoons would be spent staring into the fuzzy pixels on the screen.

"Sebastián! Turn that off and help us out over here." Eliceo says. "Irene, tell your boy he needs to do something productive. We've got boxes to unload, floors to sweep, counters to scrub. Take your pick, but you're turning that off."

"O.K., O.K. dad." Sebastián yells back. He stands up without moving his eyes and walks slowly to the TV. He goes as far as touching the knob, still staring.

"Now, Sebastián!" Eliceo yells from the other side of the store.

Sebastian turns the TV off frantically and slides under the counter on his knees. Leaning against a large crate of pears is a bundle of frayed straw, wrapped and attached to a wooden rod. Sebastian grabs it and begins to sweep dust out of the front door.

Above him are long strips of white fluorescent lights, hanging from a tall ceiling. Six rows run from one end to the other, illuminating eight narrow aisles of products. Sebastián is twelve years old and can almost already see over the short shelves that divide the space into aisles.

The broom is dragged into aisle four, where there are neatly organized cereals and sodas. Sebastián suddenly notices a steady cadence of flickers reflecting off of the plastic bottles. He looks up to a significantly dimmer light source, flashing on and off rapidly. It helps form a faint shadow around him in the center of two shelves filled with non-perishables.

Sebastián follows the flickering light, looking up the entire time. As he walks down aisle four, the greyish fluorescent tube eventually ends and is replaced by a bright, white bulb, buzzing with vitality and light. At the end of the aisle is an open space filled with big cases of fruit. Boxes with pineapples, apricots, and grapefruits form a grid. Bright pomegranates with various red gradients are stacked in one box, reflecting the ceiling's lights onto one another.

Artificial lights animate plastics and fruits and candy wrappers. During the night, bluish white lights behind frozen pizzas and ice cream offer subtle glows to the otherwise dark grocery store.

The tangerine sky suddenly disappears behind dark, water soaked clouds. Deep billows move swiftly across the city.

The six customers sense the weather and finish their drinks just as the clouds burst. Rain falls onto the desert soil, soaking creosote and filling the city with a mellow, golden scent. Sebastian clears the tables of empty glassware and takes refuge alone behind the bar.

Soon, the space fills with the sound of a billion raindrops slapping concrete. Seconds pass slower than the weather's auditory cadence. Every so often Sebastian sticks his hand out from beneath the covering to let the cold water precipitate time.

From nowhere, a shadow approaches him at the bar. Sebastian turns and finds a figure sitting next to him in all black, completely dry.

"Fiction." Sebastian hears.

"Excuse me?" Sebastian responds.

"I said 'bad addiction', I know." The man replies. A cigarette is placed in his mouth. He checks all four pockets in his pants before realizing the lighter is in his jacket. His voice is low and gradual.

"Um. Can I get you a drink?" Sebastian asks.

"That's o.k. I just came to pass the time." The man mumbles behind cuffed hands and clicks of the lighter. "I saw you sitting over here." He turns and exhales through lips shifted to the side of his face.

Sebastian sits silently, listening to the man's measured voice and the backdrop of rain falling.

The man looks out at the sky as it pours.

"It's funny. This rain. When we're young we think it comes from somewhere else. The sky we see from down here goes up forever – 'maybe it traveled from there', we tell ourselves." The man says. "It's when we get older that we understand what rain really is. That it doesn't, in fact, travel from somewhere else. It's only water from our atmosphere sent to the ground and then back again. A cycle. It comes from the earth and stays here, sometimes going up, and sometimes going down. Rain has never been anywhere else. And here it is, splashing back to where it originated. Or maybe it started in the clouds. It's loud." The man continues.

Sebastian thinks about this process as the man explains it. He pictures rivers in the sky and clouds in the seas.

"Sputnik – the first time earth got outside of itself. Man's creation. For nearly a month it spoke to us, reporting back to us the things it was seeing in space." The man says. "Information about our atmosphere. About meteorites."

There is a long pause.

"But it's the silence that I think about." The man continues, taking a long drag. "When its means of communication died, for almost two months it sat up there in space. Alone. Outside of earth, inside of itself. In darkness."

Sebastian's thoughts about clouds and rivers become something else. He and the man sit at the bar, listening to the rain, imagining the silence.

"Then it, too, fell back to the earth." He continues.

"What do you think that silence is like?" Sebastian asks. "To be in a dark void like outer space, alone?" He sees no presence, impossible to curate.

"I can't say I know." The man responds.

"I think it's not so different from the way you and I are talking now." Sebastian says. "We're speaking, but we might as well be miles apart. I can't know what you're really meaning to tell me about rain and sputnik."

"You're saying that not knowing is being alone?" The man asks, trying to understand Sebastian's reasoning.

"Maybe." Sebastian responds. "I think it's the illusion of poets to believe we can know another person."

"You could never know what it is a poet is truly meaning to say. But would it be poetry if you knew?" The man asks.

Sebastian recalls the poetry of Angelina's hair. Curled, gentle bundles glistening a perfect amber, draped in front of her collarbone. He thought he knew her.

"I just can't anymore." Says Angelina "You've forgotten how to care about me and it's unfair." She folds clothes on the bed. A large box lies next to her on the floor, filled with her things.

"I haven't forgotten. Work has me busy. What do you want me to do?" Sebastian responds. He follows her wherever she goes, staring to see if she'll make eye contact. The walls are barren without her paintings.

"What do you think is going to happen, Sebastian?" She says, dropping a half-folded t-shirt. Her eyes meet Sebastian's. "It's gotten to the point where I don't even know how to make myself happy. So how could I tell you what to do?"

Their words are colliding and their irritation and resentment rise in unison, yet they remain separate. They continue to exchange words, miles apart, their vocabularies becoming increasingly formal, their reasoning more emotional.

"So, what? I'm supposed to believe that you're leaving because I've been busy at work?" Sebastian says. "What am I supposed to do?"

Angelina has no response. They'd had variations of this exchange for weeks now. The entire world was between them. Time and space lie outside of their conversation. She picks up the box and takes it to a large pile of things in the center of the living room. It is a mountain of her belongings. Memories poke out of the rubble like tree branches in a blizzard.

"Just tell me." He asks earnestly. "I'm having trouble understanding. Just tell me the truth, what am I missing?"

Angelina's gaze and brows are fixed, mirrors of her unwillingness to feed anymore emotion into the relationship.

"I'm not sure I want to know, actually." Sebastian says.

"What's that?" The man at the bar asks. The red glow at the end of his cigarette brightens slowly then vanishes behind grey swirls.

Sebastian doesn't respond. He realizes he doesn't know who he's talking to, this figure in black. He stares out to the street beyond the façade, where cars drive slow on the wet road. He sits, confused, thinking about silent darkness.

"Bury your voids, and find that time fills emptiness." The man says. He disappears.

It was 6:00 p.m. Soon the raindrops become rays from the sun, striking the bricks and concrete silently. The bricks' color match the receding sun.

Pink hues deepen to red hues, then to purple then black. The carvaggio moon hangs above Sebastian, and he sits silently.

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That night, Sebastian dreams about a lake. He is walking down the old wooden steps that lie between the bar and his house into the basement. The moist air he remembers from sneaking downstairs as a child remains.

At the bottom of the stairs is a wooden door. He walks through it and feels a hanging string connected to a single light bulb on the low ceiling brush against his head. A pull illuminates a small region of the room. Sebastian closes the door behind him and walks to the far end of the basement, in the direction of the busy downtown street, below the benches and the bar.

He wields a mattock. Back and forth between ends of the tool he strikes the ground. Debris scatters from the points of impact. The echoes are tempered by the thick earth he is in. For all the force he uses to swing, Sebastian knows the noise is contained within the basement.

After twelve laborious hits he grabs the shovel to remove the rubble of compiled floor. He moves it to the side and returns to the hole he's begun to make.

For close to an hour Sebastian subtracts from the ground, developing a steady pattern of demolition and removal, adding to the pile on the side. The area of labor has become circular, mirroring his methodical approach to destruction.

Exhausted, Sebastian raises the tool one more time. His hands, gripped tightly, left over right, travel above and behind him until they nearly graze his back. Eyes closed, he

bends his legs and jumps slightly before hitting the ground. His eyes are blinded when they reopen. A powerful surge of bright, blinding light pours onto his face. The intensity is loud and penetrating, as his senses and body try to regain balance. He ducks to escape the force. He looks up and sees a beam of light, the exact size of his last, penetrating strike gushing into the ceiling, splashes of residue going into surrounding seams.

Sebastian decides to keep digging. He crouches to avoid the light, and continues, this time with short bursting swings. The dirt has become softer this deep. He throws the mattock, grabs the shovel, and begins removing the earth in heaps. With every thrust of the shovel light pierces through the dirt and illuminates the concave steel tool. It reflects sharply off of the handle and into Sebastian's chest. The power is overwhelming, even as he avoids it directly. How deep does it go, how wide, he asks. When the new depth reaches the edges of his circle he stops digging.

In the morning, Sebastian wakes up and begins to collect his thoughts. He remembers the man at the bar, dry in the rain, wearing all black. Then he remembers the digging. He hurries downstairs to see if anyone is at the bar. It's empty. He padlocks the entrance and sticks a note to the door telling Diego that he'll call later. He runs to the basement stairs and descends further. After 12 steps, skipping every other narrow plank, he reaches the wooden door at the bottom.

Sebastian reaches out to the knob and touches it slightly. He takes a deep breath before quickly turning his wrist to open it. The door tears open and Sebastian is swept into the lake. Light pours into the staircase and dissolves the thin corridor's corners. Drenched in light and entirely consumed, Sebastian swims through the basement door, deeper, to where he was digging. The flood turns him in multiple directions.

As he gets further into the basement the rhythm of the waves push him back towards the basement door. He lets it take him momentarily, until he sees a wooden table floating near the center of the room. He begins making his way over to it. Paddling rapidly, he eventually reaches it and holds onto the table's edge. Sebastian first stretches his right leg up and over the top of the table, then his right. With both knees secured on the wooden surface, he grabs hold of the opposite end of the table and tries to balance himself on the swaying light.

He stands up carefully. Time inverts to infinity as he revels in the light, watching himself dance in the walls.