

National Treasures

Charles McLeod

In which the Seller *commodifies his dissent*, listing for the first time this previously uncollected compendium of National Treasures, the delimited choices most chiefly informed by the Seller's belief that each person is a country unto themselves, and possesses a record of conflict and treaty, has customs and boundaries and scandals and ways—that every small piece of the self is worth something, and too that the Seller is broke, and can no longer afford the small storage unit off the Queens Midtown Expressway, Exit 15, and for nearly two months has been receiving, per voicemail, threats from said storage unit's owner, a Sikh, one Mr. S. Bedi who has promised to heave all of the Seller's belongings out into the street, and so then this cyberboutique *sui generis*, its governing tenets lying ultimately between Organic Nationalism and Dynastic Hegemony, between *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*, a nation that's sought to accommodate too much, and whose ruler now seeks to sell off part and parcel. These items are priced to move.

Lot of Children's Winter Clothes: Two Parkas, Eight Ski Hats, 4 Pair Mittens, Two Pair Sorrel Boots, Child Sizes Ten and Six, Respectively.

Born in Buffalo to middle-class parents, September 1975, my younger brother followed me from my mother's womb some twenty-seven months later. We lived mid-block, between a divorced beat cop and a semi-professional painter, a woman named Janine Bench who was in her fourth decade while I lingered in pre-pubescence. Winters were maelstroms of snow; there were consistent stints of no electricity, and people began buying firewood prior to Labor Day. I can recall watching Miss Bench painting by candlelight; the bedroom that I shared with my brother, James, had a window that looked out at her studio. My neighbor was a gaunt dishwasher blonde with mild features, save for a rather pronounced chin, which made her profile unintentionally comic. She was naturally attractive but put little stock in her physical appearance, spending most of her time around the house in the same cocoa and pink velour robe, a neck-to-feet item that she rubber-banded the left sleeve of when applying paint to canvas. I imagined her rich, even though she lived right next to us and we were most certainly not rich, my mother working clerical at a Federal Building downtown and my father teaching math at Grover Cleveland, the public high school I would later attend. Miss Bench herself worked at Oliver's, one of Buffalo's standout restaurants. I realize now that the reason I thought her wealthy was that her lifestyle was different than most people's, that she was most generally "other", an idea I was fascinated by: that there was always the anti-, the un-, lurking nearby, stockpiling. I spied on her whenever I could.

Nearly all these people have passed from this world: the beat cop got shot, Miss Bench had a stroke, my brother jumped off the roof of a building five blocks from Manhattan's Port Authority Bus Terminal.

My mother, too, is gone; she bought Kents by the carton, vowing always to quit. During one no-power stint in deep winter, I was sent down the block to procure more of these, the corner store, per a generator, open through the worst. Miss Bench was at work and did not lock her door and I had failed to keep my curiosity (innate) quelled sufficiently. That is, I turned the handle and went inside. Miss Bench's front room held no furniture; she utilized the space as an ersatz gallery—paintings hung everywhere, large canvases in grays and blues and browns. Later I would realize these as poor imitations of the "Ab-Ex" tradition: destitute imposters of the work of Kline and Klee, lots of lines and boxes, the hues chosen most certainly influenced by the torpor of Buffalo winters. I took nothing and left, not realizing that my boots (the larger-sized Sorrels listed above) had tracked in snow from Miss Bench's front steps, thereby indicating that a stranger had entered her house. Through high school she offered me only terse waves and sideways glances, acts that left me feeling wholly guilty, despite the fact that I had done nothing, really, wrong.

Starting Bid: \$9.99

VHS Recording of Rogers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma, as Performed by the 1987 Sixth Grade Class of Phelan Academy. 72 Minutes. Shot with a Panasonic Dual-Head Hi-Fi Camera.

Being in education and realizing that the full extent of Reagan's concern, in regard to public schools, hovered somewhere between "fuck" and "you", my father enrolled me at Phelan Academy, a nonsectarian private institution that sat on the east end of Buffalo's west side. I attended Phelan from third through eighth grade. In the fourth grade, a librarian stabbed another teacher upon discovering the tryst between the stabee and the librarian's wife. The following year an ex-Bills linebacker wandered onto campus, high on PCP. (Later, while a sophomore at SUNY-Albany, I would better attempt to understand my brother's own addictions by trying this exact *receptor antagonist* in a friend's dorm room. The effects upon my person were not dissimilar to *swimming in drool*).

There was a second performance of this musical that was not taped, performed at some other school very deep in the ghetto, a place that I cannot remember the name of. I and my classmates, less concerned about performing with any legitimacy sans the attendance of our parents, had located in the men's dressing room a *bright orange inflatable ball*, which was taken by me or one of my cohorts from said dressing room and released onto the stage during a meager rendition of *The Surrey with the Fringe on Top*. To say our chaperones—comprised of three teachers, including the drama teacher, an aged hippy with the first name of Splendor—were indignant would not speak fully of the rage that they held inside them, and had to keep holding inside them for the full of the play, until the production was over, at which point

a half-dozen of us were repaired to a vacant classroom and beaten savagely, boxed around the ears and held over knees and spanked, the latter of these minor tortures both painful and embarrassing, as we were really too old for this particular mode of punishment. I can only imagine how this meting out later affected the sex lives of my cohorts, but in regard to myself I now admit fully a predilection for slapping firmly the bare rear of every single partner of intimacy, of raising my hand and then lowering it, and thereby leaving upon a half-dozen individuals misdirected acts of revenge. Opening and Closing Credits Included. Intermission partially edited out, though as the camera comes back on you can see clearly my brother, age nine, stop, for just a moment, in front of the lens. Slight wear marks in this section of the tape due to repeated pausing. Performance itself is unflawed.

Starting Bid: \$4.99

Lot of 2 (Front and Rear) State of New York License Plates, 1973-1986 Era. Plates are Gold with Blue Letters: 8675-NMS. Stickerless: Window Validation. Front Plate Creased (See Below).

Unable to afford Phelan for the final stage of compulsory schooling, my parents enrolled me at Grover Cleveland High School, some ten blocks from Lake Erie and the Canadian Border. Occupying a full city lot, the school, erected in 1913, is in the Colonial Revival Style of the period: symmetrical façade, pediment supported by pilasters, voussoirs, etc. Steel-framed, with a stone red-brick and terra cotta exterior, this cupola-with-spire topped hellhole is where I would first make the acquaintance of one Frederick Ames Kemper, cast, like myself, in a non-speaking role in the drama that was Grover Cleveland's junior varsity football team. The misery of the bus rides to away games is, in some ways, indescribable: I was lithe and asthmatic, and tormented with a sort of passion I can only term Roman. Everyone smelled like wet, dirty socks. But there also in that rage-drenched miasma (a sort of double-axle Bosch triptych), Frederick: flax-haired, halcyon, a toiletries bag filled with Top 40 cassettes on the seat beside him, his Walkman headphones over, always, his ears. Frederick had made a name for himself even prior to his arrival at Grover Cleveland per the advanced utilization of his pronounced kleptomania: that is, Frederick Ames was a semi-professional thief. He lived in a creepy Victorian too near the Dewey Thruway, his father a gravedigger for Forest Lawn Cemetery and his mother a nebbish shut-in with a penchant for strays. Frederick's skin was almost diaphanous: he looked like a cave-thing, bleached or otherwise improperly pigmented, and in this way propagated the Gothic bleakness that seemed inherent to his bloodline. I adored him and he knew it and, slowly, let me become his friend. On weekends we travelled by bus to Buffalo's Downtown, robbing most frequently the strange and cluttered "everything" shops that all urban centers seem to possess. We took cameras, silk pocket squares for men's suits, shoe polish, coffee mugs. Frederick often worked with his Walkman on, perhaps to make him look more casual, perhaps to keep some part of himself from analyzing what the other part was doing. My job was to talk, to distract: Frederick and I were cousins, arriving in Buffalo from Pennsylvania to stay with relatives who, it seemed, had forgotten to collect us from the bus depot. With strange men who smelled of booze or smoke or curry, I poured over neighborhood maps in the Yellow Pages while Frederick filled up his bag. I realize now that Frederick made the more severe looting excursions without me; he came to school dressed, for a freshman, to the nines: new Jordans, gold jewelry, a full-length sateen Bills parka. For spending so many weekends together our small talk was minimal, and consisted chiefly of single sentences uttered by Frederick while we waited for the bus: *My dad killed a cat with a shovel last night*, or *my mom thinks the*

moon is an eye. Implied in such statements was the fact that I would never see the inside of Frederick's home, and only once did he see the inside of mine, being invited, by my parents, over to dinner the winter of that freshman year, the five of us eating chicken, green beans and mashed potatoes in silence. Afterward, over a dessert of chocolate pudding, Frederick had commented on how bright our house was. You like the blue, my mom had said. (She had recently painted the kitchen.) No, Frederick had said, I mean you guys turn on a lot of lights.

Our sophomore year Fredrick began to steal cars. Sometime over summer his mother had been moved to a state-run facility, and with her departure went the minimal parenting Frederick received. Absent until lunch, Frederick would drive by the front of Grover Cleveland in a pilfered Skylark or Impala, his wan face glum. On what was to be the last balmy night of October, Frederick showed up at my house past one in the morning, waking me per the throwing of bottle caps at my second-story window. Frederick was drunk, and had a Porsche. I'd clothed and eased down the trellis in silence. We drove around some in the warm night air; the car's leather smelled new, and even at twenty-five miles an hour, it was clear what the Porsche's engine was capable of. At my feet was a half-finished six-pack of Labatt's Blue. Where'd you get the car, I asked. This world's spent meat, Frederick said back. We sped up, taking the neighborhood's turns more sharply, and I understood at that moment that I was okay, and Frederick was not. Three blocks from Grover Cleveland we passed a cop heading in the opposite direction, and shortly thereafter Frederick ceded what was left of his quickly-eroding calm. He upshifted then lost control, the car hopping the curb and hitting a spruce some ten yards from the high school's front doors. Stunned but conscious we sat in the smoking wreck, looking at each other. Frederick's head had connected with the steering wheel; one side of his face was already swelling, and above his eyebrows was wet red blood. He looked like a member of a war fought a long time ago. Then Fredrick told me to run. The Porsche's shotgun door was bent in its frame, and I had to kick at it repeatedly to exit, sprinting down a side street and watching, peripherally, porch lights turn on, the homes' owners awoken by the din of the impact. A mile later I stopped, out of breath and almost losing my night's dinner. I turned to see how far Frederick was behind me. Nothing moved.

The next morning, at breakfast, all was explained: the superintendent had made the cursory round of phone calls to high school faculty, and I came downstairs, freshly showered, to find out that Frederick was apprehended at the scene, and awaiting sentence while he lay, casted, on a gurney at Kaleida General. The cop we'd passed the night before had found Frederick behind the steering wheel, his leg broken, the Walkman's play button punched in. I never went to the hospital to visit him, believing such a trip would surely reveal my guilt. Frederick was sent to a detention center north of Syracuse; he did not return to Grover Cleveland and my heart, a coward's heart, was thankful for this. That night my father took us all out for dinner—a rare occurrence, and the coincidence of which was not missed by myself. On the trip home he strayed from the standard route, driving by the scene. The Porsche was still there. Buffalo is a poor city and damage control occurs slowly; the car had been unstuck from the tree, but no wrecker had yet to tow it to impound. It's awful what happened there, my dad said. It sure is, I answered. Are all families' secret thoughts Venn diagrams? Things that overlap but do not? That night I snuck back down the trellis. In my jeans pocket were two screwdrivers, borrowed from my father's garage workbench. Frederick, if you're out there, I have the Porsche's license plates. Convo me and I'll take down this listing. While one is badly damaged, these items belong to you.

Starting Bid: \$20.00

Antique Mahogany Chess Set. Pieces Hand-Carved (Bone). Late 19th Century. Travelling Set: Doors are Double-Hinged (Brass), Opening Up and then Out. Game Board is Inlaid—Alternating Mahogany and Rosewood. Dimensions: Box Closed: 11”x 6”x 3 1/2”; Box Open (Including Doors): 20”x 12”x 2”. All Pieces Intact. Light Scuffing/Burn Marks/Blood Stains along Bottom Left Corner. Made in Sri Lanka (Ceylon).

My brother James evolved to wunderkind the summer between my sophomore and junior years. Held back in kindergarten per the perceived inability to speak, he took the SAT's after middle school (my father's hobby, on top of his career, was education) and scored in the top percentile. This result was enough for him to leapfrog three full grades, making James, at fourteen, a high school senior. I was prepared to spend my days physically defending him but he was never once mistreated, Grover Cleveland's Class of '93 making him a sort of ad hoc mascot for intellectual endeavor. NYU felt the same way, and spring of that year my brother received a 15K renewable fellowship, along with tuition remission, and five months later moved from New York's second-largest city to its first. While uncoordinated to the point of klutzdom, James looked the most athletic in our small clan. He held a hockey player's build: broad shoulders with a narrow waist and chicken legs, his body thinning as one's eye moved down. We had the same hair, stick straight, a shade my mom's dad referred to as "Irish Brown." This same man would bestow upon my brother the aforementioned chess set, acquired by my great grandfather during his years in the Merchant Marine. While not nautically inclined, I will admit a penchant, albeit romanticized, for travelling the seas via steam liner or some other outdated vessel, the world still enormous, wonder a possible thing.

For my family, these months were the happiest of any I can recall. My father, normally martinetish, loosed his proverbial neckwear: there was a trip to a water park, tickets to Bisons' games. From the cheap seats of Dunn Tire we cheered and swatted bugs in the hot white air. Summer ended, and we stuffed the minivan full of boxes and moved my brother to Brittany Residence Hall on East 10th Street, some five minutes from Manhattan's Washington Square. I recall no voice of concern over whether or not it was truly a good idea for a fifteen year old to be living semi-independently in Greenwich Village, any dissent drowned out by the purple and white brochures that were arriving weekly to our Buffalo address. While our parents searched for hot sandwiches in the surrounding blocks, I sat with my brother on his vinyl dorm mattress. What do you think about all this, I asked. I don't think I thought about it at all, James said. The chess set was beside the bed, on his desk. Do you want to play, my brother asked me. I'm not very good, I admitted. The face my brother made next was one of supreme fatigue: he brought his chin down, closing his eyes. His brow furrowed. At fifteen, the skin above my brother's eyes was creased. Okay, James told me, but will you?

I think we fell victim to the ease of familiarity, a malady I imagine common to siblings who consider one another the closest of friends. I played chess with James that day and lost badly and the next day, after a night at a nearby hotel with my parents, returned to the other end of the state. James' roommate was from Taiwan, friendly but far from the things that he knew, and his homesickness kept him near-mute. I suppose the University (an institution my father would later try to sue) considered the best thing to do was pair James with someone wholly non-threatening, a social leper of sorts, who would not introduce my brother to the typical vices sought out by those in their late teens. To say this plan backfired does not, perhaps, go far enough. Fall semester passed without incident, but James returned home for Winter Break half terrified outsider and half angst-ridden quasi-adult. He'd under-

gone a latent growth spurt as well, adding another two inches of height to a frame that was having attention paid to it per the use of NYU's physical plant. Dinners were stern affairs, the thick silence broken only by my brother's obscenity-laced reviews of the food, the house, Buffalo itself. There was brief normalcy for December's last week, but with the Christmas trappings quickly outdated, the gloom, like moat, encircled my brother once more. James left in January; I drove him to the Greyhound, my brother turning down my dad's offer of transport cross-state. In the grey light of the freezing depot, I hugged James goodbye. Visit, he told me, then boarded the bus. I did not. Two months later came a typed notice on school stationary: course work was strong but too often missing; attendance mottled at best. Some time in late March we lost contact, our calls answered only and always by the Taiwanese roommate, who informed us finally, and in mediocre English, *James take the chess set. He gone*.

Maw. A month of trips to Manhattan, our father taking leave from Grover Cleveland, a substitute filling in. There were meetings with Provosts, waits at police stations. There was a trip to the morgue, the John Does slid from their metal toms, white sheets pulled down to show blue, still faces. Also: the minivan's ashtray, packed with tan butts; street performers in Washington Square, on stilts. My parents' meager savings, garnished by a second mortgage, went to the hiring of first one and then two private detectives, their firms' workers scouring the boroughs, Hoboken, points north. NYU put my parents up, when it could, in housing used for visiting faculty: there were long hours in leather armchairs, down pillows that did little to drown out the street noise below. I went with some weekends but was still in school myself; I did no homework, sat stunned in my desk, and received straight A's. College admissions notices arrived in the mail; I was a good student but a poor tester, with little interest in the extracurricular. Two SUNY's made offers but NYU turned me down, the thin envelope a dark cloud portending storm. My parents spoke little and grew gaunt. For a full week freezing rain slicked the roads, the world crystalline. And then news: a sighting in Newark, a grainy snapshot of someone in rags. It barely mattered if it was my brother or not: here was hope's wellspring, the nightmare's long end. We canvassed as though running for office, The Brick City's telephone poles clothed in our xeroxed flyers. Door after door was answered, it seemed, by the same enormous black woman, her meaty arms spread for consolatory embrace as we gave thanks then descended the thirtieth, the fortieth, the eightieth porch. A third mortgage, the bank said, was out of the question. Winter turned to spring.

Chess, of course, often ends with no winner: there is the draw, the resignation, the fifty-move rule. My parents didn't give up so much as cede to logic: there were no tactics left to employ. They came back to Buffalo; I graduated in May; James jumped from the roof of a building in June. He'd been holding the chessboard when he went airborne, landing headfirst. Toxicology found traces of phencyclidine. James' last meal was bread. In a mortuary not far from Symphony Circle, I asked the Funeral Director how they'd put my brother's face back together. My mother was in a separate room, perusing caskets. Light baroque played from speakers in the walls. Well, the man said, looking to my father for intervention but finding none, in cases like your brother's, we insert a plate. He shifted from one foot to the other and I smiled; discomfort meant life, and it was a joyful thing to see. And this plate, I said, how will it look like my brother's face? Well, incisions are made at the temples, and here, the man said, pointing under the chin. So you peel back my brother's face and put the plate in, I said. That's right, the man said, as though he'd solved something. And what about the stuff that's in the way, I asked, the bone and such. My father was reading an unfolded brochure about flower arrangements, engrossed. The bone is sanded down or removed, the man said, his

consternation growing. And how about his eyes, I asked. The eyes are untouched, the man said. AND HOW ABOUT HIS SOUL, I said. Okay, my dad said. Okay, that's enough.

I put in two years at SUNY-Albany, fucked on drugs and not part of the world but not ever, really, wanting to die—as I mentioned already I have the heart of a coward, an organ so puny and useless it can subsist on next to nothing at all. I walked the campus at night dressed in a long wool coat, drunk on gin, setting small fires in the bathroom sinks of empty school buildings. I trailed coeds until they jogged from fear. Tossed out, I packed up and struck west, sending a postcard to my parents bought at a gift shop in Dayton. A Unique Possession from a Bygone Era. Board's Hinges may need Oil.

Starting Bid: \$89.99

13” Tulipwood and Teflon Stiletto. Italian-Made (SKM). Single-Action OTF; Blade Retracts Manually. Length of Closed Knife is 7 Inches. Used Once.

Bad times in Decatur. The Midway Inn let you pay by the week and I developed a dangerous friendship with the night clerk, a trailer-bred gun nut twice my age who sometimes kept minutes for the local chapter of a hate group called Lone Wolf. I was drunk always, beyond grace, and Wynn Jost saw in me a lamb, someone whose psyche held all the worth of a torn kite, and was thereby open to suggestion via the newfound fraternity and acceptance provided by himself and other members of his ethnocentric cell. I worked at a meatpacking plant; I literally packed meat, wrapping t-bones in wax paper and boxing them, sixty-five per. The drone of industrial machinery was womblike, the white conveyer belt splotched, in patches, to pink. Some of Lone Wolf's goons worked here as well; a hulk named Jack Milk handed me, weekly, half-full cartons of cigarettes, the paper container's free space filled with hate literature meant to be distributed in the dark hours of morning to mailboxes within walking distance of my motel. In this man's stone basement I sat on a metal folding chair, surrounded by a dozen of Central Time's Aryan zealots. The aforementioned Mr. Jost, intellectual ringleader of this poor circus, forced these men (most of whom had not finished high school) *to give reports* on Nazi memorabilia Jost had purchased at trade shows in the greater Illinois area. Falters in reading words off the page were covered up by loud cries of White Power. An urn for coffee sat tabled under a German flag.

I was scared and lost and Jost was letting me live in the Midway for free, the owners absentee and oblivious. I bought the above switchblade at a pawn shop for protection, and three nights later Jost found it stashed beneath my mattress, tossing my room while I was out delivering pamphlets that explained why Jews would lead the human race to Apocalypse. I should emphasize here, for clarity, that I really was starting to digest what was being fed to me: that White Christian Protestants were being treated unfairly in the media, the workplace, the cities; that the continued crosspollination of the races would lead to the demise of Christian Virtues; that it was kill or be killed, and the war, begun long ago, was roiling around us, more acid and thicker than ever before. Trauma (James) both debts and affords, the results often scary. Jost, along with Milk and three others, were waiting for me in my room when I returned that night. They drove me via Milk's Buick to an all-night gas station, where we waited for the next person of color to pull in. Forty minutes passed, the six of us crammed inside, listening to hate metal on low volume. Near dawn, an elderly black man shut off his Chrysler and entered the Conoco. He beelined for the bathroom; Jost handed me the knife. White Power, he said. White Power, I

said, and got out. What happened next was miracle, so unearned I am sure that I cannot pay for it, ever, in this life. The black man stood at the sink, rinsing. He turned his head when he saw me come in. White Power, I said. What Power, he asked. I pulled the knife and sprung the blade. I saw all of you in that car, the man said. He had on a navy blue baseball cap, the name of a naval destroyer spelled out in gold. So, I told him. The man unbuttoned then rolled up one sleeve of his dress shirt. Cut me, he told me. Here, on the arm. What the fuck, I said. Do it, the man said. They won't come check on you. Do it. Right now. He moved his arm, bent at the elbow, out toward me. He wore glasses; he had pleated khakis on. Come on, man, come on, you don't have the time. He bobbed his arm up and down, his bare arm. I strode over to him and sliced. The blade sunk under the skin. He made a sound that was something very near a yawn, a morning sound, a first sound of the day, then stumbled backward into the hand dryer. I dropped the knife and picked it up and turned and ran out of the store.

Back in the Buick I threw up on myself, the men of Lone Wolf cooing like bemused middle schoolers, which I suppose in some ways they were. My accommodations gratis, I had a small nest egg stored, and once Jost's pickup departed from the Midway's lot that morning, I ran, at full speed, to the bus depot, buying a ticket for the next coach out. I wrapped the switchblade in my work shirt and mailed the whole thing back home to Buffalo. Maybe you don't believe the story I've just told. I can only reply: Lucky you.

Buy It Now: \$10, Firm

Brown Mesh Trucker's Hat, "Custer Gas Service, Custer, South Dakota" Printed on Front of Hat. Good Condition. Bill Rounded (Broken In). Ready to Wear.

A long engagement to one Katherine Anne Svenlund that consumed over three years of my late 20's. Sioux Falls is a pleasant place and were I a different person, more even or stalwart, I might have managed an existence in that large village, continuing my work as Night Manager of Country Buffet #3847 and spending much of my free time browsing the ample selection of goods offered at the Salvation Army out near the airport. The Svendlund family is of fine Nordic stock, if genealogically naive, as their ancestors arrived to this country via *propagandistic literature*, specifically brochures and/or pamphlets that outlined the unequivocal agricultural promise of the Great Plains (I should mention here, out of fairness, that these false promises were not limited to peoples of Norwegian descent nor just the acres comprising South Dakota; rather, America's new Robber Barons hired a great number of men to promote falsely that most of Middle America was a Farmer's Utopia—that places of near-apocalyptic aridity and barrenness were ripe wombs of earth, an agrarian delight, and that much of the middle part of the country was populated via the exacting of high levels of bullshit).

Lone Wolf sent no minions to find me and I settled in, having saved enough to afford a one bedroom above a paint shop near the train tracks. I worked six days a week, seven, the staff at Country Buffet my surrogate family. One of my foster siblings was a short kind punk rocker named Tyler Banks. Tyler was five-five and washed dishes and sported a mohawk that changed colors every two weeks, per each new paycheck received. He was always smiling and did no drugs and brought with him, each shift, a small battery-powered boombox, which he set on a shelf above the sink, the Germs or Anti-Flag slamming it out while Tyler sprayed dishes clean. Nighttimes in Sioux Falls were slow affairs, our clientele mainly truckers and conspiracy theorists, the two

demographics often overlapping. I'd started out bussing tables days but the turnover was constant, and within months had worked my way up to running overnights, the franchise's owner finding my demeanor supererogatory (in truth, it didn't take much). Through Tyler I found a small group of close friends, punkers and book nuts and antiestablishment crocheters, all of good heart and sound mind. Here were the intellectuals of the prairie, too poor for the fridge to be full consistently but able to knit cardigans and talk Gide. Dilettantes, it seems, keep to the coasts, Chicago. The prairie kids were all about worth.

In autumn of '97, while I spoke with a trenchcoated man about the hoax that was the '69 Apollo moon landing, Katherine Anne Svenlund walked into Country Buffet for the first time. To say the restaurant's teal-carpeted environ was in direct contrast to the glamour that Katherine possessed would not do her aesthetic true justice. Beneath my nametag, my heart leapt. She was five-ten, in tight indigo Levi's. Red heels held perfect, thin feet. From a side pocket of her black leather biker's jacket Katherine removed a silver cigarette case. Her lipstick matched the shade of her footwear exactly. But betrayal: a brightening of Katherine's eyes, the good values instilled upon her in her youth usurping the glam vamp she was trying, so hard, to be. She smiled, and it was a smile of church Sundays and ribbons received at 4H events. It was a smile of wheat. Is Tyler here, Katherine asked. I'll get him, I said, but everything that was going to happen just had.

She moved in with me, the two of us watching Fellini's full oeuvre and reading Dickinson aloud. Katherine ran the phones and did filing for a tow place; we lived modestly but never went without. Her parents, Meade County residents, generally approved of me; they worked cattle west of river, and had a small cabin in the Black Hills to which Katherine and I sometimes escaped, the mountain air at the west end of the state like no other air I have smelled. I saved in secret, telling no one other than Tyler of my plans. A year later, I walked into Raymond's on South Phillips (part of Sioux Falls' historic Downtown) and purchased a gold band with inlaid Idaho opal. Katherine's big eyes leaked, her full smiling lips making her cheeks dimpled: we would wed.

Setbacks—Mr. Svenlund sustained a broken hip per being kicked by a heifer during calving; the Country Buffet, from asbestos, was temporarily shut down. We pushed the date back a year; I had had meager and infrequent communication with my own parents though they did know my whereabouts and activities, and a month before the makeup date for the wedding, a call came from my father: it was time to come home. Cancer had eroded my mother's lungs; the chemo worked and then didn't. I flew on an airplane for the very first time. The hospice aide was a Catholic ghost, so pious she seemed to float down the ward's halls. She spoke in soft tones, aroused by the misery her workplace lent. The lobby's vending machines became close friends; I can still recall that c4 held Twix bars, H8 Junior Mints. My mom was tubes and skin on a gurney. I told her of Katherine; I told her I was sorry. Also: cold hands held with no words said; crows on telephones poles. Collapse. After purchasing a second lot at Forest Lawn Cemetery, after the insurance money had come in, after my dad quit Grover Cleveland per early retirement and sold off my childhood home...except I don't know. There were things done in those four months that needed to be but no end in sight, no resolution. At an all-night donut shop, my father wept over coffee. What do you want me to do, I said. Better, he told me, putting his Merit out on his bear claw. I flew back to Dakota but the bottom had dropped out of things there. Tyler had moved to LA to pursue commercial acting, and ownership at the Country Buffet had switched hands. Katherine, too, had vanished, disappearing into Proust's seven volumes just as autumn set in. The choice to terminate the union was democratic and affable as

such a decision can be, but I wonder still what my life might have been like had things gone differently: the Midwest is this country's best wonder, and to know again the pastoral life, where small things mattered, where big clouds moved like ships across wide blue skies, the fields windswept, the post-and-wire clocklike, its taut lengths measuring the course of each day—to return again ever would bring about a sort of devastating grace I'm not prepared for. Talcum applied to Hat's Interior Lining, to get out the smell.

Starting Bid: \$3.99

Mason Jar of Eighteen Rattlesnake Tails. Vacuum-Sealed. Glass is Aqua, Reads "Mason's Patent, October 31st, 1864". Tails Guaranteed Authentic; Still Rattle.

For me our country's true west is not its coast but rather that odd strip that comprises the western part of Mountain Time, and the eastern part of Pacific—here are your Elkos, your Provos, your Yumas, Pocatello and Pueblo and Butte. Here the word hardscrabble seems not sentimental but correct, the mesa erasing everything, the Rockies and Tetons stern reminders that humans are but minor pox or canker, a virus that with time will be flushed out. (This truth is easy to lose track of while seated in an E car on the Blue Line, hurtling through disease.) I spent six months in the first city mentioned above, working third shift at a gas station tucked to one side of I-80. My rented doublewide stood just across the interstate, and each dawn I crossed the blacktop on foot, this trek emblematic of the fact that I was not living the life that most people were, that here one had a road that ran from Oakland all the way to New York, that millions each year crossed east to west or west to east and I, other, without car or bank account, without obligation to spouse, child or family, without mortgage or any other mile marker common to status quo American existence, could get across in under thirty seconds, and be home.

My coworker was a middle-aged Chicana named Aura. Her daughter, jailed for possession with intent, had left her in charge of two grandsons, who more often than not slept on the white beveled linoleum behind the register, under twin fleece Wal-Mart Cookie Monster blankets. My first month I bought a computer from a "travelling salesman," a Mormon-turned-meth-head who had stolen an automobile in Boise and was willing to sell me the Compaq desktop unit for one-quarter of the going price. I bought in, an installer coming to my trailer the next day. Here was the world, shrunk to pixels. I couldn't figure out why anyone cared. Weren't we brought up to not talk to strangers? I unplugged the device, spending those winter days watching snow bloat the desert. But vice thrives on intrigue and with time I plugged back in, locating individuals (see below post) who viewed this new medium in a manner not dissimilar to how Thoreau viewed the railroads: that what was being built was also taking away; that the tech boom was not trend but monster, a dark thing with sharp edges that preyed upon the more cravenly tendencies of human society; that sought to destroy connection through mimicry of connection, private industry now making the rules for the very ways in which we, as a species, would interact. Or something like that. For a while the banter was static catharsis, fun if a little bit odd, but with time the irony of such persiflages produced in me deep melancholy: we had to pay in to the very thing we sought to critique. Spring came and I set the device by the highway, and a day later it was gone.

Aura's grandsons, Rodolfo and Rogelio, presented me with the snake tails on my last night of work. The gas station mandated that two employees always be present, the ideology being that this low but mul-

tiple number of persons would somehow stave off any felonious acts from being rendered upon their establishment. And they may have been right: my half-year in Elko passed without incident. But it was too much seeing those children sleep under cheap and highly flammable blankets night after night, and more often than not I told Aura to come in late or leave early, her time card doctored accordingly by myself. The boys fought as they handed over my gift, each one wanting to be the chief presenter. And where did you get these, I asked, bending down. Out there, said Rodolfo, pointing past the pumps, the jar almost dropping. I took a bus out of town, skimming California's coastline before settling, homeless, in Santa Cruz, the cool sand under the Boardwalk's planks home to a coven of vagabonds from, it seemed, all ends of the earth.

To this day I have no idea how that trio of people ultimately came to possess one and a half dozen tails of venomous reptiles, but I have, as stated above, verified the items' authenticity, taking the jar to a taxidermist in the Bronx, who in turn referred me to a herpetologist at Rutgers-New Brunswick. Tails are divided between Two Varieties: Great Basin (*Crotalus viridis lutosus*) and Panamint (*Crotalus mitchelli stephensi*). While neither species is considered particularly antagonistic, if cornered either will stand its ground.

Starting Bid: \$16.99

Black Low-Top Chuck Taylors (Pre-Nike Era!!!!). Heavily Used. Hole in Rubber Sole of Right Shoe approx. 3/5 inch in Diameter. (Hole Has Been Filled With Wad of Paper Napkins Taken From a Churros Stand at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk). Color Faded. One (1) Eyelet missing metal ring. Size 11 1/2.

Denouncing all manner of helotry, I bought a bus ticket from Santa Cruz to Seattle, arriving the week before the WTO conference and locating, amidst the impending rioters, a half-dozen *online acquaintances*, not quite socialists but something closer, perhaps, to secular nihilists, rich kids, products of divorce, real MENSA types with chips on their shoulders, who by their mid 20s had been bailed out of jails all over the country by lawyers retained by their parents; kids who had grown up on the Upper West Side and gone to St. George's or Andover, and had formed a small tribe of like-minded individuals hellbent on vandalism (I had learned all this through repeated excursions to the Santa Cruz Public Library, a place sympathetic to ideologies like mine, an institution that had resisted wholly the sensational hegemony of the Patriot Act, *that would rather read Orwell than live it*, a place that fully endorsed the idea of someone who had been sleeping on the beach for a week, unshowered, sitting down and using a computer to exchange messages with a group planning violence, as long as the violence spoke out against larger violence, which the violence in Seattle really meant to), and with the vapors of tear gas roiling about us, providing a berserk sort of vestment, I, along with this crew of a half-dozen, removed a public trash can from its foundation, rocked and then ripped the can free from where it was bolted to the concrete, and while I cannot take credit for actually launching said can through the plate glass storefront of NikeTown, I most certainly did enter the spacious, high-ceilinged shop and wrecked everything I could before an agent of law forcibly detained me; which is to say these very shoes, made by a company subsequently bought out by Nike, destroyed a multitude of shelves, boxes, clothing racks and other props within the previously mentioned establishment. It remains a sad thing for me to see the uneducated hipster masses still wearing these shoes obviously, wholly unaware that they are supporting a corporate monster. As I had no rich parents to bail me out of jail, I watched

my beleaguered cohorts exit the King County holding cell we had shared for the past seventy-two hours, each vowing that they would make sure that their legal representation found a way to afford me a similar freedom. These promises turned out to be empty, and I in turn was held for nearly a month before my day in court, wherein a female judge wore the same terse frown for a full twenty minutes before assigning me a very heavy fine, which I haven't paid a cent of.

Starting Bid: \$8.99

Lot of Mets Paraphernalia, Years 2003-08. Ten Pennants, Three T-Shirts, Two "Bobbleheads" (Piazza and Martinez). Keychain. Inflatable Bat.

And there were more travels, too, trips worn like coats, heavy journeys, all by bus; things that now seem at once fictive and real, not lived but experienced, as I stalled, balked and temporized, trying hard to never commit, to never settle. In Denton, Texas, there was a fist-fight during the Fry Street Fair. In Tulsa, I had an affair with a topless dancer, her husband a tornado chaser and retired seismologist. We were discovered after an r4 didn't pan out, the man walking in while we kissed in the kitchen and subsequently weeping, screaming I was doom's chattel, the paw of Satan himself. There was a year spent in Cleveland, running bags at a fancy hotel. But with time these jumps summed to maw, their purpose epicene, if possessing form at all. That is, I (sort of) went home. My father, with whom I had been in touch intermittently, had moved to Long Island City, his pension and part-time math tutoring just enough. I arrived on his doorstep windblown, eight people at once. Time had taken; his hair had turned white. We sat in twin recliners in his small living room. I'm ready to stick around now, I told him. I've dreamed that, that you said that, my father said back.

The New York Transit Authority is always looking for a few good men, and I got a job as a CSR in Grand Central, the pay rate 25 per. I'm still here, sitting while so many move. My father and I have season bleacher seats at Shea, the Metties, each year, standing, almost, up. The ramp to Grand Central's lower concourse possesses improbable acoustical properties; in those rare moments when things are slow a single person will descend its length and, passing under the archway, the sound of their footfalls will dance up to the ceiling, and it's all I can do to keep myself seated, to not rise from my faux leather desk chair and scream at them take me with you, I will pay any amount. Is there a trick to this that I'm missing? Some clue, unfound? At the ballpark are beef franks, soft pretzels, hot mustard. My commute in from Queens is easy, off-hours. But I can't quite convince myself to buy in completely, and my dad, since a fall, now has a fake hip, and the bills are like virus, dormant then outbreak, and I can't house this stuff because I can't keep it near me, can't see it each day and know more stuff is out there, while I wait here, an anchor, the son now returned, as epics are written and objects constructed and buses, at nighttime, rush over blacktops, always going somewhere better, somewhere else.

Starting Bid: \$9.99

Original Copy of Toast from the Banks-Skyzwick Wedding Reception, Orange County Country Club, July 16th, 2006. Paper is Slightly Yellowed (Time) and has Large Merlot Stain in right bottom corner. Legibility of text remains unaffected.

I should state here that it wasn't just me that was against the Banks-Skyzwick union, but rather that the group of friends that I had known

from my time in the Midwest found this merger so unsavory that many of them actually *boycotted* the event, and that in accepting my role of Best Man there were two starkly different demographics pressuring me with their agendas, the first of these being the aforementioned friends, and the second the Bride and Groom. While I did and do admit to a predilection for spirits, the latter party's selfishly exaggerated concern in regard to this issue translated ultimately to me being forced to sleep at the foot of Kyla Skyzwick's childhood bed, the Bride and Groom inches away, snoring in tandem on the spring-coiled Serta twin. But let me back up: Tyler Banks, once punk rock dishwasher, was now a porn mogul, having landed in Chatsworth at just the right time to be a part of smut's jump into cyberspace. Everything wrong with America is dreamed up first in LA.

Tyler found me through my place of employment, my name listed on some page of the MTA's website. I tell myself I flew west out of loyalty, though I know it has much more to do with a dysfunctional lust after things long passed. Arriving at John Wayne, I found my former friend and his bride-to-be in baggage claim, tanned and dead inside. The subsequent days only brought proof of this claim, the wedding party dining at a Cheesecake Factory in Brentwood, where Kyla, an employ of Tyler's Tens (in addition to a multitude of other pay sites), flashed her enormous fake breasts to a group of Japanese tourists, who in turn held up their end of this tasteless cliché by taking copious pictures with their digital cameras. Tyler's own parents sat smiling, Midwestern and horrified. Kyla's family was Armenian and devoid of moral pretense, caring less about what their daughter did than making sure she in no way could be viewed as lumpen: that the millions would keep coming, never mind the source. The last straw was the procurement, by Tyler, of an entourage of mid-tier adult stars, from which I could pick as many or as few as I wanted to have my way with. This wretched attempt at gift occurred in a private lounge in a West Hollywood nightclub, Tyler producing a key to a suite at a nearby hotel. I chose a single female, had the taxi drop her off a block away, and went to the room alone, where I wrote the below speech in full:

A toast then, while we can, while youth graces us, while our faces shine, while our hair is coiffed in a manner that inspires true envy, while our fingernails possess no chips, nothing hanging, while our organs are determined and hearty, while our good teeth remain intact in their gums, need not root canals, need not extraction, need not to be worked on while we sit in a chair that has been reclined mechanically, trying to think of something better to think about, the birds lighting past the window, the dental saw whirring; while we wake without tingling in one of our limbs, before our blouses and cap toes and cuts of our jeans plunge inevitably toward obsolescence, prior to the consideration of vitamin supplements, prior to repeat excursions to outlet wholesalers because *the thatched Javan magazine rack is backordered*; while there's a tap in our toes, a cut to our jib, while vibrancy still speckles the iris, while beds go unmade and floors function as hampers and we know all the songs on the radio, and our skin

is not squamous from the aging of cells, and we do not lurch down the hallways of rest homes, before ducks in neat rows and the long gloam of August, before the cold front, the squall line, *the wind shift*, a lifting of glasses, a jubilant hoisting, because we have made it this far mainly intact, because no act has crushed us to palsied, because it's 6:32 on a June night in Tustin and the back room of this hall is ours for the full of the evening, and for a short time we will not be hurtled toward loss, toward our own peculiar miseries, will sit here with wine and not age and not die for we possess *immortal capacity*, something better than hope, because hope is for the weak, is for the needy, is for middle-aged dads six months past divorce, is for the octogenarian who prays before bedtime that her SST checks will outlast her, will not expire before she does—these people need hope, that gold, hollow thing, and we, while here, while dining, need nothing, need only for our drinks to be freshened up, need only to have the food keep coming.

Because we had been promised that the food *would* keep coming, were assured by a bevy of antediluvians (whom we did or did not cast our votes for), that the shelves would be full, that the taps would run clean, that there would be *unending smorgasbord*, as this country, while we were still glints in the eye, still tears in the condom, had chosen McDonald's, not McGovern, had fueled oiled and lubed the corporate machine, *had cared more about product than service*, and so then new odes: to the plasma TV, to the next batch of modified food additives, to pay sites devoted to horny young teens, to the sites' content, updated daily; to bugs in the code and thus data corruption, to Diebold's firm grasp on Ohio, to the image, long passed, of Saddam in beret, grasping the hilt of a saber, gauging the weight of the gold-handled sword per a series of terse chopping motions—Saddam is testing a weapon—to a long list of lies that we'll be left to explain to our children and then to our grandchildren, should we not die on the roads, in the air, from disease—to tunnel-vision, because as long as we can keep both eyes on the road, we do not need to look at the landscape, and as long as there's gas and asphalt and rubber trees, we can keep driving without *destination*, a word we know not what to do with, a word and idea, we're really pretty sure, that somebody else was supposed to take care of, while we made sure that there were still SUV's we could lease, while we gained thorough knowledge of Wall Street's big gainers, and since we know nothing, since the directions were lost, since all manner of order was tossed out the window, as we enter this century grasping at straws and pointing with fingers, I urge, while you can, listen less and see more, before what lies ahead turns to dots in the rearview, before life is a marker long passed and well gone—steal these candlesticks, fill your coat up with forks, and hurry along into the night; do not let this world catch up with you, ever, and if it does knock, do not let it in.

Speech was read once in its entirety. A second reading was halted by the disc jockey, a for-hire guy by the name of Lenny Tarveck who, as it turns out, was also from Buffalo, and grew up not all that far from me.

Starting Bid: \$1