

from CONVERSATIONS
OVER STOLEN FOOD

JON COTNER & ANDY FITCH

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Conversation 1
7:43 p.m. Friday, December 30
Union Square W.F. (a natural grocery store)

[*First minute garbled*]

A: ...scone and a bagel, told her I'd already purchased them. I paid for a turkey burger (three dollars ninety-six cents). I held in my gloved hand a kiwi, and as I peeled off the glove I wrapped the kiwi in the glove. I put the gloves in my hat and put that in the cart, and then I had a bowl of spinach, baby spinach—organic of course. That was a dollar five. So I ended up spending more than I'd hoped: \$5.01 altogether.

J: But getting a considerable...

A: Yeah. A full meal.

J: And allowing us to have this conversation.

A: Correct, which at eight dollars would seem extravagant. It would mean the night was over immediately. When I bought the turkey burger, or when I selected the turkey burger, the cashier, I mean the deli guy, said he could sense I'm going to party tonight.

J: And this is your idea of a party right?

A: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. We've seen already people we know. There's the man I have a crush on. There's another woman I saw. I also...it was hard to go about my sneaky business. A former student stepped into the aisle. Her name's Fong.

J: Fawn, is that right?

A: Fong. F-o-n-g. Like fang.

J: Oh Fong.

A: Fang with an O.

J: I think I read an e-mail she once sent you.

A: Very polite.

J: And as as I remember, you said a great student.

A: One of my best.

J: A hard worker and talented.

A: It frightened me in the bread aisle. Fong craved discipline and I pictured her disciplining me tonight. So are you adjusted to being back, back back in New York?

J: Well it's tough, I'll tell you: it's an expensive city. I could never have returned if you hadn't arranged...

A: Happy to do so. Can I interrupt one sec? Is there saffron in this, or curry or something?

J: I'm not sure what's all...

A: [*Muffled*] that out later.

J: in Royal Ginseng tea. Though I have the box...

A: It's aromatic.

J: right here. Here's the list of ingredients.

A: Maybe some cinnamon bark?

J: Cinnamon bark you're tasting.

A: Honeybush. Licorice.

J: Black pepper.

A: Possible. So sorry: I didn't mean to interrupt, it's an expensive city...

J: It's an expensive city; I couldn't have moved back from Providence if you hadn't arranged this cat-sitting gig. Still it's going to be work. I I didn't get enough sleep. The cat would jump from the floor to a windowsill, rattling the shade, and then leap down again rattling the shade, and I

woke so often, and the apartment's close to the B.Q.E. I was told it stood in the heart of Clinton Hill but it turns out it's on the the edge of Fort Greene. Obviously there's a huge...

A: Yeah.

J: difference. Traffic roars by. It's non-stop. When trucks speed past it sometimes sounds as if they're tearing through the room. The studio's at best one hundred square-feet, and the market price is 910 a month—which is incomprehensible considering it's nowhere near subway stations, much too close to highways and has a cat active all hours of night. Though I guess the landlord...

A: Oh is that something you have to maintain, the secrecy?

J: No I was making a joke: implying the landlord should charge less considering there's a cat who is active all hours. But clearly the cat belongs to Sharon not the...

A: Now I'm sorry this cat is actually touching you?

J: I'd wake to the cat clawing my toes, and I'd try to kick it away thinking It won't come back; it's gotten the message; survival of the species depends upon learning when it's not welcome. But the cat kept coming. However this morning, after several hours of running around and sensing I wasn't the slightest bit interested, the the cat took not just a cat nap but rather a substantial nap, and I felt some peace and could recuperate...

A: Now what about...

J: from the trip.

A: is there a fan in the apartment? I would think if you blew the fan...

J: I looked all over for a fan. I didn't see one.

A: Do you want one of mine?

J: That would be great if I could borrow a fan and drown out some traffic.

A: Drown out traffic—also if you blow the fan near you (but not in your

face) it might deter the cat from approaching the bed.

J: Cats don't like breezes.

A: Yeah they dislike the sound, and hate the breezes, so that's one...

J: Don't get me wrong. I can't complain about this place. I mean of course there's a cat and there's nowhere to do my grocery shopping (which explains why I bought groceries to take back with me—liquid aminos and fruit for morning. I tried purchasing quinoa but it's much too expensive. In New York there aren't bulk-bins because I guess that's not sanitary. See I'm used to shopping in the Wild West, where I went to school, or New England where I often live, or St. Louis visiting my parents. There you find bulk-bins. Here they basically don't...

A: [*Cough*] picture at least ten options. But but are you at all concerned about bringing produce to MOMA? In the past I've found checking food difficult.

J: You mean they look through bags?

A: They sometimes ask: camera, wallet, also food. If you have more than...

J: Oh. Well my phone will be in the bag as usual, and tonight I'll have an orange and a banana and deny they're there. I don't want anything to stand between me and "Upside-Down Ada" by Katz. I've been reading...

A: Wait, is the Katz show on now? There is...

J: Is that right? I've fallen out of touch.

A: I don't know his work well but he's obviously friends with people we like. I've only seen reproductions. I'm curious about the show. I think we should include it in our time together, along with tremendous walks.

J: Absolutely.

A: Maybe strange excursions to a beach in winter.

J: I brought my dad's old car after all. We'll have to fire it up and make use of it. That might deter my neighbors from breaking into it. They'll see it's cared for and not abandoned.

A: If we can get to a greenhouse—I especially love greenhouses in winter.

J: Right. I'm sure there's a nice one for us, maybe Westchester...

A: I've nev...

J: on a private estate.

A: Now what's the plan for when your time runs, your free apartment runs out in Brooklyn?

J: Well what I'm thinking of doing, once recovering from this past week in Providence—I applied to SUNY Buffalo and said farewell, at least for now, to this sweet girl I started seeing, and said goodbye to some pleasant walks I'd grown accustomed to—anyway all that exhausted me and then I had the drive, not to mention packing the apartment (I should have said, rather, I had to pack up my apartment, not to mention the drive). It was draining, and last night I needed good sleep I didn't get, but I expect once my strength returns I'll start looking at rooms and prolong my stay here, probably around Columbia. The neighborhood has everything I need: quiet hours reading in Labyrinth Books, rustic trails down Riverside Park. There are plenty of places to buy fruit and quinoa.

A: I'm also coming off terrible sleep.

J: What happened at Kristin's?

A: My flight got in around 11, or I got back to Kristin's around 11.

J: Was your flight delayed?

A: Several hours.

J: For what?

A: I don't know—blizzards or something. But I decided to risk...I felt tired already, and decided to drink valerian-root tea.

J: Ooh.

A: If I do this at the exact right moment it's like I'm sprinting downhill all night. Sleep's tremendously plesaurable and...

J: Is...

A: [*Cough*] pure gravity. It didn't work last...

J: What happened?

A: I woke at erratic intervals. I was also dreaming about being in bed thinking.

J: Which doesn't amount to restful sleep.

A: I finished, I felt...

J: You had a restless dream.

A: puffy after I woke up. There was a song about stealing in one of the dreams, which I took as a good omen.

J: Is that right?

A: "No longer wheeling, but but stealing."

J: No longer wheeling but now stealing (as though wheeling were in contrast to stealing)?

A: As though we've settled into life, and it's to some extent a sedentary life, but one that includes its own adventures.

J: Right and wheeling suggests moving without much thought, and obviously deliberation goes into choices we make: the fact that we're sitting side-by-side on this bench in the upstairs W.F. cafeteria as a hundred people enjoy meals and conversations, and as janitors sweep crumbs from the floor.

A: You know, as I scan the the crowd I see families here and intellectual children. I see adults who live busy lives but can still respond delicately to kids. It makes me feel part of the community as much as any place in New York does.

J: That's a major reason I enjoy eating here. Even though I may exist at the margins in this store, ripping off broccoli and shredded carrots and brown rice (which has been unnecessarily salted), even though I may not

buy everything I eat, still I am a part of the scene and it's pleasing. It beats eating alone at a desk most nights.

A: Did that happen for a while?

J: It happened in Providence. Most of the time I'd eat alone in fact. I'd read and think during dinner, which was fine. Those are important experiences for character.

A: I lifted a Harper's, just to try out...

J: We know some of the staff so that should be ok.

A: I did wonder if he, if Harper's itself loses money on the theft. Do you know how that works? I don't think they...

J: No I don't think so. I think this store loses a bit of money. Still...

A: Now I'd hoped we wouldn't mention this store's name.

J: Oh that can always be edited.

A: Right. But I'd like to say that in many respects I embrace this this store as a socially beneficial one; I question my taking things from here. They have, have we discussed this, that the organic label's being contested now? There's a consortium of food-industry lobbyists trying to reduce the organic criteria, so that...

J: You're kidding me.

A: synthetic elements can be added to what still gets called organic food. And W.F. is leading the charge against...I mean they're leading the charge in that they're a big chain not cooperating...

J: That's nice to know. I didn't realize they had a sense of ethics. I thought they were mostly interested in making profits. I had no idea.

A: Well I'm sure if you asked thousands of co-ops across the country you'd hear this place isn't all that interested in ethics. [*Pause*] I also learned from the Sunday Magazine that many brands I identify with are owned by major food corporations. For example Muir Glen, is that...

J: Yes.

A: A standard, right? A staple?

J: Sure.

A. Great tomato sauce, soups are good.

J: That's right.

A: Kraft, I think. No General Mills owns it.

J: Why...

A: Boca Burgers—again a constant of mine, always several in the freezer—I think Kraft owns that. They have front-companies. Boca Burger is based in Madison Wisconsin to make it look like a nice, progressive, granola (we have to take that word out) food source, when in fact it's more of the same.

J: Well well if you think about it, we're in a corporate culture and confronted with tons of choices. Should we place our effort...should we try to escape this culture? Or should we settle down and make ourselves at home, knowing it's the way things are and that they'll keep drifting in this direction?

A: Impossible to decide. And so much of what's of value gets lost when we're complaining. As I started to complain I noticed less. Just before I'd felt better and watched, I don't know if you saw this, a cute girl with um humongous breasts approach the guy with curly hair, hand him a letter and run off giggling.

J: Here in this cafeteria? I was staring at a different...

A: The man started talking with the person seated opposite, someone he didn't know, so that situation too derived from the letter.

J: Was the girl good-looking?

A: Very much so. The the man circled around several times after denying any interest in the girl.

J: Well did he recoil because he's so repressed?

A: It's hard to say. It's hard to say what...

J: Because because he wants affection to take recognizable forms and not be a spontaneous development? Is he so repressed he wants everything to look the same?

A: I've responded similarly when confronted by women. Am I all that repressed? How could we gauge it? I find great joy watching people stretch here. I'd assume repressed people don't notice such things. Occasionally I get lost watching people get lost scooping fruit from bowls held close to their mouths: it's like they're eating noodles.

J: I picture outdoor restaurants in Beijing—not that I've been to Beijing; I've watched some Chinese films and can recall images of couples sharing steaming noodles. [*Silence*] So you consider this a fitting place to have conversations, a pleasant forum, a suitable environment?

A: I think of Kierkegaard in the town square and I'm...

J: Not his study, right?

A: thrilled to be working on a project again. I walked along the water before bed and (for for the first time since drafting my *60 Morning Walks*...

J: A tremendous project.

A: we'll see, still to be finished) I felt the flush that comes when obstacles get thrown in your way, maybe of your own doing, maybe that's better. But it's...we live in New York but it's as though we're traveling to a backwards country, leaving behind all but the most elemental problems.

J: Such as?

A: Such as how position our bodies to best survey the scene, how explain to others, well, first of all the irrational element of what we're doing, in terms of potentially getting caught, the disproportionate...

J: You mentioned walking along the river—what time of...

A: As I said, I got home around eleven and took a quick walk before my valerian-root tea. Well I guess it was over an hour; I guess I was gone a while.

J: And you thought of our upcoming days together?

A: To be honest I don't think when I walk or reflect that much. But for a moment I turned lucid, and it was devoted to us and these conversations. I was thrilled to have you coming.

J: Yeah and I'm thrilled to be here. I just got momentarily distracted by...

A: By what?

J: a girl with rosy cheeks.

A: The woman wearing violet?

J: Actual rosy cheeks: as if I'm looking at some Danish portrait from the 18th century. I didn't think people had her robustness these days. And her skirt, rather her sweater plainly reveals her abdomen, which she's massaging erotically while talking with a friend, well-aware of guys watching from numerous...

A: I don't know. I used to massage myself during soccer games, specifically during throw-ins, and wasn't—wow she's kissing that girl.

J: What part of...

A: She just...

J: yourself would you massage?

A: frenched that girl across the table.

J: Maybe to show she doesn't...

A: Go that way?

J: swing my way, and I should take my eyes off her. But I have removed my eyes from her.

A: The girl she kissed has what looks like an Ash Wednesday ash on her forehead.

J: Right but it's a jewel signifying spirituality.

A: Do you think the rosy girl's cheeks glow because of pink beneath her purple top, just barely sticking out? Does that make us more attentive to colors further up?

J: Perhaps her cheeks have caught some pinkness from the fabric, but I think that she's a beautiful girl, and it's in keeping with beauty to have flushed cheeks. For for all we know she had passionate sex thirty minutes ago. [*Silence*]

A: I sense she's noticed our...

J: Oh she certainly knows she's woven into this project. [*Cough*] am mobile. And this is the first time I've sat on a bench here recording conversations. If this were a regular talk I'd get up and invite her to come on over. But I look at this project as instilling strict discipline. It's paradoxical because it's a removal from the world, but I feel it putting me in touch with things.

A: As as soon as we decide to not go on imagination we look around and realize there's enough to be pleased by.

J: There's often far too much in fact. Many poets we admire think about the intrinsic composition of scenes, and that's what appeals to me most in your work, and it's what I'm developing in my own work. Our presence adds to the scene and it's entirely fitting. In no other city could this talk take place. The setting would lack this abundance. It is it's remarkable, and I'm certainly happy New York is on the map, and despite corporate pressure there's a tangible spirit.

A: I only realized how dull I felt the last ten days when I got up this morning.

J: You were gone ten days? Wow. I like what you said earlier this year: that because you went home for Thanksgiving and Christmas I was exempt from going home. It's true I did get sad thinking about my parents, who were alone together. My my sister's moved to Nashville. She and her husband celebrated Christmas there. I myself was working on the Buffalo application, spending time with, well I almost said my girlfriend, but I mean this girl I've been seeing (who lives in a small Massachusetts town). Still on Christmas Day I got swamped with second thoughts and considered my parents—how they're aging, how I don't have all that many more Christmases to see them.

A: Right. I was swamped by the incessant reinforcement of personality that happens at family events, how people say the same things they've said for a decade.

J: But without? Sorry go on.

A: [*Muffled*] things I did at four. We talked about me as a four-year-old.

J: Did anyone ask about your graduate studies?

A: Nobody asked about life in New York, which seems more interesting than most topics we discussed. But I've wondered if this is caused by me asking questions. I feel I tend to pounce on people. I'll ask a question. They'll respond somewhat tentatively and I'll ask five more. And I'd always thought it better to be the active person, but I find myself bored with what people have to say. I don't mean this about my family; I'm talking about a social situation that...

J: So right now you're inclined...say you're at a party with unknown people...

A: I'm thrilled to be with unknown...

J: But say instead of going over and asking questions about their lives, you'll let them remain silent beings?

A: I would...I'm sorry I wasn't clear about this. No I love to ask questions about people's lives. I just hear a lot about, a lot of repetitive information because I'm always the one asking, and it gets to be—I bring out these responses I don't want to hear from...

J: Can you give an example of a question you've asked which led into a conversation you regret or which bored you?

A: [*Cough*] wait a sec. [*Silence*] Well just: I'd ask an old friend how their job was, how work was going, assuming it's my duty to hear what they...

J: Did they enjoy talking about themselves, or did they shift the conversation to an external subject such as sports or restaurants...

A: No. No.

J: or weather?

A: No they answered the question, which was almost unbearable. But I got screwed up not having my daily rhythm this week, so I could relate to speaking without caring what you're saying. I had a...

J: Why why don't you talk a bit about your ordinary rhythm and how it contributes to your life. What's that set of activities you undertake each day when...

A: Oh. Oh my god I saw...I'm listening.

J: Do you see somebody you know?

A: A woman who lived next door to me.

J: On 110th?

A: My first year in New York, on E. 16th.

J: Oh is it that old woman?

A: Yeah.

J: Oh in the long blue coat. Yeah and she's wearing sweatpants rolled up...

A: She...

J: almost to her knees.

A: used to offer me Pepsis because I'd carry her laundry cart. I'd put...

J: And you had to decline the Pepsis I'm sure.

A: I didn't want a Pepsi.

J: But she kept offering you the Pepsis?

A: Her her sister had dementia and accused my...

J: Does she live with a sister?

A: She did. The sister ended up falling long...one day the stairs were (to some extent) smeared with blood.

J: But did she get up and walk away from it?

A: [*Cough*] head injury. It was a head injury. No I didn't see her after that. I moved out of the apartment and don't know what happened.

J: Well New York might have had another tombstone after...

A: Now what were we discussing?

J: We were talking about your daily rhythm and how, when you're doing what you want, living according to your own ambitions and inclinations, that you care very much about what you hear: what's being said and what people say back.

A: And you want to know how this begins? Where the rhythms...

J: Yeah. Yeah. To give others a sense, because it's a thoughtful set of activities. It's influenced my life tremendously. I mean people laugh—Amanda for example laughed when I told her my breakfast lasts three hours. And then I went into a description of how I learned the three-hour breakfast from my best friend Andy.

A: Whose breakfast now takes seventy-five minutes.

J: Incredible.

A: I also include an hour of meditation, so you could say two hours and...

J: Every morning?

A: Yes. I wake up after eight hours of sleep. I want...

J: Do you ever set an alarm?

A: Always.

J: If you don't set an alarm will you sleep close to nine?

A: I'll get stressed out and wake much earlier.

J: Because you'll think you've overslept.

A: Thinking if I sleep nine hours I'm going to feel off.

J: So you're that hard on yourself?

A: Is that hard? It seems quite gentle.

J: Waking in a panic thinking you may have overslept by an hour?

A: Oh. My means of gentleness is to just set the alarm and avoid that situation.

J: I see.

A: Then I stretch while cooking hard-boiled eggs. I...

J: You eat hard-boiled eggs every...

A: Every other morning. I was giving the condensed version.

J: No give us the condensed version.

A: Ok. Ok. I've timed the stretching to last precisely fifteen minutes, which is what it takes to boil my eggs. After doing that—and that will let me poo. Somewhere in there I can poo.

J: Before you've eaten anything?

A: Yeah, if I stretch. After that I'll meditate an hour and eat breakfast in...I'd say it takes an hour after that: for a total of one hour fifteen.

J: Your eggs cool as you meditate?

A: I then work three more...

J: You eat nothing before meditating?

A: Our bodies...

J: Yeah I hear that John Stuart Mill, before eating breakfast, would work through Greek and Latin exercises, and and this is before he was ten

years old.

A: I used to work before eating but the day got too expansive. I'd feel uncertain of myself by mid-afternoon. When you lived with me, I don't know if you remember this time, but when you and Stephen somehow rented my room with me for...

J: Oh yes, the summer all three of us split your room in Williamsburg.

A: Right it...

J: It was a great summer. You always had James Schuyler and Joe Brainard on your desk and I'd sit in my boxers reading those books. Your roommates would kindly acknowledge my presence. They were baffled when our stay exceeded two weeks—but they never confronted us, which I found noble.

A: I've never been as insomniac as I was that that summer. I'd try to get work done before breakfast (before the full day started) thinking At least there's freshness which comes with...

J: Right. But that freshness was deprived, or rather you were deprived of that freshness on account of insomnia?

A: I was also working on the Staten Island Ferry.

J: That's right. I forgot about that job.

A: A supervisory position.

J: It's...your workers had painted toenails. And they were from Trinidad if I...

A: Eventually we were told no open-toe shoes. But I do remember striped toenails, yes.

J: Did they have fingernails to match the toes?

A: I didn't look. I can picture spaces between a secretary's teeth. I can remember how to spell some strange names.

J: Can you give an example of a strange first name? Something unusual to American ears?

A: I was thinking of last names.

J: Or a last name unusual to our ears?

A: Malenkena?

J: Balankena. What nationality is that name?

A: Peruvian?

J: Peruvian, is that right? Where it's the heart of summer. My final week in Providence I ate blueberries from Peru.

A: Is that...

J: Yes. Alex says they're one of the the superfoods: an important part of the pyramid along with broccoli, flax, walnuts and—let me see if I remember—oh yes, salmon. But I don't eat much salmon because our waters are polluted.

A: I think until recently blueberries were only grown in the United States, so there's some sort of um, transfer...(I don't know.)

J: Yeah maybe General Mills is behind it.

A: Maybe. Oh here comes...

J: [*Muffled*] berries were indigenous.

A: here comes my neighbor.

J: Oh yes, maybe we want to...

A: No—we don't.

J: say hi to her? No? Ok. No I waved...

A: There was a snarl. I saw her bend...

J: She snarled and looked down, yeah, she...

A: Are those aliens on her shopping bags?

J: There are aliens printed on her shopping bags. Her coat's wide open. Her scarf is flung rather messily, dangling almost to the floor. She looks like someone who's lived in this city for a while and has an edge. Do you think she grew up on E. 16th?

A: It's possible. I read a great passage in *I Remember*, no I'm sorry it was in *More I Remember*, you know, the version before the edits, the final edits, in which Joe Brainard was living with Ted Berrigan in an apartment in the East Village, and the woman above used to come and squeeze them. Do you...

J: Squeeze them? No, I've never read this passage.

A: She and her brother, who I think had problems, had mental problems as well, would barge...I guess she would force herself into the apartment.

J: Really?

A: Brainard said she was huge.

J: He was very thin.

A: Yeah. But he ends this entry saying in any other city she'd have been locked up, and I think that's true of my neighbor as well...

J: Yeah such a...

A: and that's why we're here.

J: And similarly, in any other city we would have been asked to get the hell out of this café with our recording instrument.

A: You think so?

J: We'd be conspicuous. But for now we we blend...

A: Now what do you think of this? I've got a final question for you: If we steal things and eat them before we exit is there no way for anyone to do...to catch us? There is, am I right? There's *habeas corpus*, but there's something else. Body of evidence? Doesn't there need to be some physical evidence of the event? As long as we aren't video-recorded, and we consume all evidence, I feel nothing could be done to us.

J: Yeah I guess we're creating a body of evidence right now, but only we ourselves will listen to this tape, and, what's more, I've become friends with many of the security guards. They know me by first name, as I know them by first name. Tonight I spoke to...

A: Don't. You don't want to get them in trouble.

J: Right. Yeah, tonight there were reintroductions. Tonight's my first time in the this store for several months and I shook a lot of hands. It was warm. It's nice to be welcomed back.

A: [*Muffled*] green stickers on coats from the Whitney. Now can you briefly explain what happened in Providence? I mean inside its W.F.?

J: Well I have to admit: my desire to keep my living expenses low became reckless. I would walk into the store with a bag, a plastic bag from W.F., and I'd place it in the cart and, as I'd shop, I'd place things in the bag, and I'd place of course many many groceries outside the bag, but there were certain items, certain expensive items, which I'd place in the bag, such as sirloin steaks and blueberries (for a while they were 5.99 a carton). I'd drink an expensive ginseng tea. There was this hot sauce I'd steal, pure extravagance of course and I knew I was getting sloppy, and I knew...

A: You know the thief's main virtue is modesty? A modest thief never...

J: That's right.

A: I'm guessing. I'm guessing.

J: You're right. And I was modest tonight in stealing my my steamed broccoli and my shredded carrots and brown rice, which has been unnecessarily salted, and that explains why I keep drinking water. You'd think a place committed to health wouldn't salt its foods so excessively.

A: So what happened? So?

J: So as I was leaving the store an undercover security-guard blocked my passage. He said Excuse me; I'd like to speak with you inside. And I looked at him and said I don't know what you're talking about. And he said Oh, you don't know what I'm talking about? And I said No I don't. And he said You left the store with unpaid merchandise. And I said

What? And he pointed to the bag containing my wrapped sirloin, which cost over twenty dollars, and he said I've been in this business six years—get inside. The manager was waiting for me, totally baffled, because he and I were likewise on a first-name basis, and after previous episodes of stealing (in an effort to keep expenses down) I would treat him with lots of affection: shaking his hands, wishing him a good night, telling him I'd be seeing him real soon. He led me into an office, where he did not press charges. He firmly believed that I was confused. That was the story; I was confused. I said I started talking with the cashier about her necklace. She had this charm around her neck, which was imitation gold and spelled her name in cursive and...

A: I just saw one on this woman sweeping. She has—if you could read the name I'd be interested. It's very long. It looked like Florestan.

J: Florestan, is that right?

A: But the necklace is backwards, so you'll have to read it backwards. But I'm sorry go ahead.

J: Yes. I said I was confused: I'd started talking with the girl about her necklace. I said I was keeping my groceries apart from my roommate's since she's vegetarian. I said I myself used to be a vegetarian, and I know what it's like. I said I'd just started eating meat again and just got confused. And the manager was nodding with a blank expression, neither agreeing nor disagreeing while the undercover processed the paperwork. I said Can't we talk about this? The guard said No. He snapped a photo of me and said If you ever step into another W.F. you could be arrested on the spot. I started thinking of this project, not wanting to jeopardize it, but of course I didn't say anything. It's not like I could have said Oh but sir, come two months from now I'm going to be in New York having conversations over stolen food with my friend Andy. Please don't stand between me and this project.

A: I read a Sunday Times article on on shoplifting. It gave a sense of the undercover...

Conversation 12

8:10 p.m. Tuesday, January 10

Union Square W.F. (a natural grocery store)

J: [*Garbled*] scoot down a tiny bit?

A: This way?

J: Yeah. [*Pause*] Ok there we go.

A: So the hair looks good but something else is off.

J: Yeah I'm, I feel feverish today. I laid down for a rest this afternoon and ended up passing out two hours.

A: Alone? Or with a furry friend?

J: The cat sensed my sickness and watched from the desk. But when I awoke it jumped and started scratching my feet, and when I tried to brush him away he scratched my right forearm.

A: I saw. Looks even worse than the scar from Saturday night.

J: It does and...

A: And on Saturday you had to use vodka. Was that the case this...

J: That's right: Lisa's husband treated the scratch her cat gave me with vodka. They had no rubbing alcohol. Today, since I was scratched near my first-aid kit, which consists entirely of a tube of Neosporin, I could treat myself but still felt tired. And since I was good for basically nothing I went to get a haircut. I took the L to Bedford, found a place with a reasonable price—believe it or not the barber offered student discounts. Country-rock played over speakers. The guy persuaded me in my my sickness to grow out the top of my hair. Ordinarily I say No; I get one haircut a season; it ought to be cut short. But today I kept quiet.

A: If you want something else for the first-aid kit I have rash cream of yours from several years past. It's got a generic label.

J: Yeah it's, what it is it's a generic...blank. We'll have to find the name of this rash cream. I can't re—oh yes, Tanactin. I bought generic

Tanactin in of all places Manchester-by-the-Sea. One June I had a rash flare-up in Boston, and I thought I'd treat it from the North Shore. I was told the generic brand is just as potent and soothing as...

A: I'm sure.

J: It solved my problem within a week, which is quick as far as rashes go.

A: I'm always surprised men won't admit they get rashes in summer. I find that (clean as you might be) waiting for a subway produces rash on the groin. I've wondered if this is a structural flaw in the design of cities: if if males need more delicate clothing down there; if stations should be better ventilated; if extra trains could come on humid nights. It seems like a preventable problem once...

J: Well I think...

A: brought into the open.

J: Right. This is probably the reason so many men take cabs during summer months. Lots of sweating goes on in the tunnels. The only relief's when a train comes down the tracks producing a breeze which, if you're wearing loose enough shorts, can make its way through fabric and dry off your groin.

A: I spend much of August positioning my legs in an effort to catch that breeze. It's nice I find, during the middle of winter (though for now it feels like flamingo country), to recall hot months, to think of days when we'll wear a sweater around the waist just in case it's cool in the library, or subway cars—how while it seems like we're filled with the balm of health in summer we still have to take precautions, people at least...

J: That's right.

A: like us. And that as natural as it is to walk the streets then, with a light umbrella in your backpack for late afternoon, or to stand with legs positioned just so the breeze can dry your groin, it's natural right now to have a coat bothering you, to feel your shoulders cramping on the subway, to get smothered by passengers' puffy jackets.

J: Yeah. Yeah, I wasn't able to focus on the Ruscha exhibit at the Whitney a couple years back. His [*Cough*] books of photographs—sorry.

A: Let's let's keep those coughs to the left.

J: His books appeal to me very much.

A: They're some of the best books in...

J: Yeah I had so much to learn from his approach and humor. But the museum must have been around sixty degrees and I was wearing thin shorts and a sweaty t-shirt. I felt my health slipping. In fact several people followed me out, likewise complaining about the cold.

A: I've trained myself to sleep with a scrunched neck at Kristin's, or [*Cough*] air-conditioner gusts right in my ear.

J: How how would you sleep? I'm trying...

A: [*Muffled*] scrunched...

J: Oh I see.

A: [*Muffled*] to hold all night...

J: Like a turtle.

A: I guess, though I'll picture turtles relaxed in bed.

J: But if they sleep in shells wouldn't their necks be scrunched? Or do you think it's roomy in a shell and that they can hang loose?

A: I bet there's a way to be comfortable within the shell.

J: Otherwise they wouldn't have survived this long? They would have slept exposed and died off long ago?

A: I'm sure many people got stiff in the shell and no longer spawn descendents (many turtles I meant). I'm a little ill as well. I found it hard to, not to reflect, but to get anywhere with reflection today. Kristin asked questions about my childhood, about the period in which my parents divorced: time I don't really remember. I filled her in as best I could but after lunch she said she knew no more than she had to begin with.

J: That could be a compliment.

A: It could be a...

J: I remember, in *Bolinas Journal*, Joe Brainard says that the more you get to know Bobbie Creeley the less you know about her, which I thought suggested depth of character.

A: It can. Kristin speculated on differences in how men and women communicate. This could also be part as an um huge generality—that I wasn't provoking an empathetic bond but simply delivering empirical fact.

J: Well if you think about it, it's what Antin has to say about the difference between story and narrative.

A: Right, which always sounds so murky. Today I read "Tuning," a piece I like very much, but my attention spreads across the room when David Antin discusses narrative theory.

J: In one place he does give a lucid distinction between the terms.

A: And I in no mean, in no way mean to slight him.

J: Oh, I know.

A: He's great.

J: Oh I know. All I'm saying is that in one place (he hints at this in the Santa Barbara talk called "Dialogue") a story gets characterized as a list of empirical facts...

A: Right.

J: while a narrative recreates an experience, so the listener feels an empathic connection...

A: And...

J: to it. And I thought Antin's distinction was relevant to this talk you had with Kristin. I mean maybe she would say that you were telling a story when what she wanted was narrative.

A: Yeah it's true, and the the type of person who can tell a narrative is someone I haven't wanted to be for years. I prefer to combine disparate fact, to not carry—this is what I said to her: It might seem like part of me

isn't expressed, but I feel I don't carry around reflective presence in that way. I prefer a transitori...a mobility to that sort of coherence. [*Pause*]
Um I did enjoy, in Antin's piece, how eventually he used the word "blue" a lot, just as things got dense and theoretical.

J: Blue?

A: Blue came up and then whole lists of colors. I would guess that, in hearing the talk, I'd stay satisfied and aware and maybe remember color streams. That would be enough.

J: Would would, right. Yeah I think I portrayed Antin's story/narrative distinction properly, or did I switch the two terms?

A: No I don't think you switched them. I believe narrative gets presented as as the core of the shell that becomes the story, that narrative is the basis from which, you know, a momentary telling of the story takes shape. I think you got it right.

J: Ok, while...

A: "Tuning" outlines the structure of Chomskian linguistics, with Antin suggesting this theory in no way accounts for how any one person understands what's being said: that there's something beyond the material fact of language...

J: Right.

A: and I believe it's that other thing, that component of understanding not represented by words but but embodied in living people which...

J: Yeah...

A: shapes what he calls narrative.

J: He says that it stands behind language but makes language possible and...

A: Though he distrusts the idea of "behind," of depth, of...

J: Right.

A: He's thinking of Wittgenstein.

J: Right, and perhaps Husserl. Husserl is likewise skeptical of depth (but some argue that he verges on mysticism when he brings up intentionality). I think Antin's been influenced by Husserl.

A: I remember discussing Husserl's intentionality the night we saw thousands of Hasid boys dance on choir rafters in Williamsburg, and being disappointed by what Husserl meant though um, I don't remember what it was. But much like the legal-law, the legal-law connection, do you know about this, that among literary—I I'm sorry, I meant the literature-law connection—that among literary scholars there's a movement in which you study the law, and among lawyers you study texts? I'd always conceived of it as Nietzschean, as referring back to code, to writing as a form of memory, to our sense of coherent identity emerging out of the debts we owe others. Really it's just about, you know what Shakespeare meant when he made a lawyer joke. It's very boring. And Husserl's theory of intentionality somehow recalled...

J: Well...

A: Or it seemed in your telling...

J: Well he...

A: too obvious. A rip-off.

J: Well he he wants to be obvious, because he's not wanting to get metaphysical or to build Kantian...he doesn't want to elaborate concepts.

A: But doesn't he—he talks about the life-force.

J: Life-world.

A: Life-world: that seemed like a metaphysical concept.

J: Um, I think all he wants to say with these terms "intentionality" and "life-world" is that when we look at an object...

A: Oh yeah. Ok, go ahead.

J: something in us organizes perceptions. Each time I glance at this cup of Rooibos tea, though I see just portions of the cup, though I look at it from just one angle, I perceive an entire cup. Similarly, if I were to rise

from the table and look straight down at the cup and inspect its lid, I wouldn't think I was seeing a different object. I'd think Oh yes, this is the same cup. But of course these thoughts are lightning fast and...

A: Wait, hold, this is where problems start. I believe that what you're calling "this object the cup" is itself a cultural construct, is bound to your recollection of how we've been told to think about cups. Does the cup include the cardboard holder that prevents us from burning our fingertips? Does....

J: Well, well...

A: does the cup include the color...

J: Well, Husserl...

A: of the cup? The dye? Or is there something else that is "the cup"?

J: Well Husserl...

A: Is the air inside it the cup or not?

J: Husserl would say those kinds of questions don't need to be addressed, since the meaning of cup comes from our life-world.

A: Right. This is...

J: It's it's...

A: where it gets metaphysical.

J: Well no, he's wanting to boil down...

A: Does he mean our specific cultural milieu?

J: Yeah. The use of the cup. Right exactly. How we treat it in society. And though he never read Wittgenstein as far as I know, I can imagine him saying, as Wittgenstein does, that a society could worship cups. A cup could be treated as a religious object. And there the meaning of cups would change. It wouldn't be nearly as utilitarian as it is in our life-world. When I say I see...

A: What what...

J: When I say I see the cup, I see a cardboard container that holds my tea.

A: But when, when you say “our” life-world—it seems there is no cultural homogeneity that would allow us to speak of “our life-world.”

J: Well, well I think both Husserl and Wittgenstein would say that argument is unnecessarily skeptical, that we know what things are from the uses to which we put them: we know their meanings by how we talk in daily speech.

A: The difference...

J: For instance, we don't ordinarily think about air inside cups as belonging to cups. We treat cups as things to be filled.

A: One difference is that, as an aphoristic writer, Wittgenstein sketches our coming to consciousness, or our perception of what we call objects, before this solidifies into any abstract concept he could then employ. But I don't find that to be the case with Husserl.

J: Wait, say that again. You may want to redirect your breath cause I'm, I think I'm thinking of germs.

A: We'll both speak straight ahead.

J: Ok.

A: I was saying I can see...

J: Andy's repeating what he just said.

A: I can see that in Wittgenstein's writing. I just don't find it in Husserl's. Husserl develops a much more lengthy and systematic argument, which involves a degree of abstraction not present in Wittgenstein, so that...

J: Yeah.

A: a deft formulation of utilitarian principles may be something we take away from Husserl, as our understanding of what Husserl says, but I've never seen it in the writing itself.

J: It's only in the later work—the last work in fact. There's a turn in Husserl as there's a turn in Wittgenstein. Again, I'm not an expert on Husserl. I know much more about Wittgenstein. But his, in his last work he introduces this...

A: Is this The Science...

J: Yeah, Transcendental, yeah ah Transcendent, or what's it called the um *Crisis in the European Sciences and...*

A: Right.

J: *Transcendental Phenomenology*. In this last book he comes down to earth, though critics still complain he gets far too metaphysical thinking about a faculty behind language, behind perceptions, something which allows us to speak of objects in the world. But again I think he's attacked without adequate reason, because there are commonsense proofs for what he has to say. All we have to do is consider what's involved in describing this room. Something besides um impulses hitting our retina allows us to form an idea of it.

A: Wait. Grammar...

J: In other words we, we're in this world confident there are such things as objects.

A: I I guess, in terms of what you keep calling...

J: I reach towards the cup and don't think Maybe it will vanish this time; I hope it doesn't vanish; I hope I can touch it and bring it to my lips.

A: Right, though Wittgenstein would be the example of radical doubt in which that possibility's...

J: Well Wittg...

A: Wittgenstein may wake up and think he's in his room but no longer be in England.

J: Sure he opens up that scenario in some sense, but I think he emphasizes the impossibility of believing anything so at odds with his world-view, or world-picture as he calls it in *On Certainty*. And the concept world-picture is very much like Husserl's life-world. In other words, when

when it comes to fundamental beliefs, such as knowing where we are in space (in England, not the stratosphere), or other examples, such as knowing our names, knowing...

A: That there's a brain inside our heads.

J: knowing there's a brain in our heads, and so on, Witt Witt Wittgenstein feels bound to his world-view and notes the impossibility of ever believing...notes notes the impossibility of ever agreeing with two world-views which conflict. He believes some world-views are incompatible with his own. He can't hold both simultaneously. He can't both believe he's in England and believe he doesn't know where he is. Total skepticism is, then, inconceivable. I mean there's the notion in Wittgenstein that, by virtue of being who we are, our horizon is bound; it's not limitless.

A: But what about Wittgenstein the writer? I sense in some of his books, and I never know if I should or not, a comic pathos let's say—in the wacky tone, the offbeat examples, that makes me think he's not proving it impossible to conceive this boundless life, but suggesting it's impractical given human limitations.

J: Right.

A: There's there's creaturliness in Wittgenstein. Now that's what I don't detect in Husserl's writing, ever. So that while it makes sense to adopt a utilitarian argument for the world as we construe it to be considered the real world, I find that there's (though I haven't looked at the last book) always a qualitative jump in which Husserl moves [*Cough*] beyond so-called commonsense understanding...

J: Yeah. Yeah.

A: beyond the vernacular explanation—which Wittgenstein can still provide, however hermetic people think his...

J: Yeah all yeah all my remarks on Husserl are based on his last work. Before then he sought a systematic approach. But in the *Crisis* he says that for once he's going to "zigzag," since that's how human minds move. And all I'm...

A: Is the tone different? Is the form different?

J: It's written, it's composed of short sections.

A: Ok.

J: It looks almost aphoristic. The only reason I brought up Husserl is to say his concern matches Wittgenstein's. He wants to slow down time and observe what goes into observing the world. And I find that Antin holds this in common with his philosophical...

A: Sure.

J: predecessors. That's what I like so much. I think this is why Perloff says he's an expert at defamiliarization, because he's confronting us with what it means to forget and then remember something, or what it means...

A: What it means to understand something at all: to grasp something, to conceive of...

J: What it means—right, what it means to tell a story, how a narrative unfolds, if it pre-exists in our mind or if we put it together word by word. He doesn't know if it's like a scroll or if it gets patched together as we go along, and these are really important questions. And in bringing out our uncertainty on these most basic issues, I I I think that, like Wittgenstein or Husserl, he's he's wanting to say that by and large we remain ignorant beings, and that we tell each other narratives, stories and narratives, without knowing how we have these capacities; that we live largely in the, in the dark. I think that for Antin as for Wittgenstein (and I'm not so sure about Husserl) this insight serves as transition from philosophy to poetry.

A: Right of course. I especially like the erratic gaps in Antin's printing of his works, formatting of his works. I assume a breath pause is taking place. But I'm happy to not really know why those spaces...

J: Right.

A: are there. They're not...there's no precise logic to them, so that they seem to be part of a temporal rather than analytic experience. It reminds me very much of Alice Notley's *Descent of Alette*—have you read this? The book I gave you years ago?

J: You you gave...

A: She puts quotation marks around everything.

J: Yeah. You gave it to me last Christmas and it's in my top five, but unfortunately it has not been the book on my desk.

A: One of the the best. But again, with her use of quotation marks and breath-like spacing (without the whole convention of a poetry that depicts human breath and takes place in public), there's a continuous sense of presence or of the work itself. Meanwhile a somewhat coherent narrative occurs, with you constantly slipping back, trying to remember what just happened, trying to envision what's being described. It's very amorphous. It's very much like, you know Dante's *Inferno*. I mean Ovid. People become animals and things like that. So that that...so that amid these great transformations you can always grasp the nodes of time in which a story gets told. For me at least there's no coherent experience of taking in a story. I simply take in parts. I don't know why. My sense of the whole comes through this altered hearing. I find that process encouraged in Antin's and in Notley's work, and again it reminds me of the appeal of aphorisms: a palpable construc...I don't know if you saw but the lights just, the lights went out in half the store.

J: Incredible. [*Pause*] So I I walked around Williamsburg while awaiting my turn in the barber's chair. I had thirty-minutes and went to the—do you know that CD store SoundFix?

A: I know the coffee place...

A and J: Fix.

J: SoundFix is the other half.

A: What used to be Video-GameFix?

J: Is is, was it a video-game store?

A: It had glossy skinny magazines...

J: Oh wow.

A: and video...

J: Hmm. I, yeah I don't think I ever allowed myself to register a perception....

A: It was...

J: of the store.

A: supposed to have a living-room feel. But “living-room” meant stuffing poured out from pillows, bottles: two-liter bottles.

J: Right.

A: I could never look any closer than...

J: Yeah there is, you know Husserl does say that a human body's at the root of every perception. We don't have a priori notions. In other words, to form an idea of an object we need to turn our eyes, and I never turned my eyes towards that that video-game store, so my intentionality had nothing to work with. It lacked...

A: If you had any recognition it was to keep up a fierce denial of the place's...

J: Yes. Though I did see guys older than us cruising around on skateboards.

A: This...

J: Yeah, and I did look their way. I remembered a remark you made about Williamsburg during our conversation in the Bedford Mini-Mall. I got to thinking...

A: That George Bush would be happy with adults steering skateboards, rather than protesting war in Iraq?

J: Right I felt...

A: That being edgy...

J: while I was—yeah exactly.

A: being a rebel is...

J: Yeah.

A: buying pink grip-tape?

J: It was funny; walking through Williamsburg I had the distinct sensation that it's hard to remember there's a war going on...

A: Right.

J: overseas. I'm not sure if I have this feeling in other neighborhoods, but it was so strong there it came directly to mind. So I thought I'd pretend for a while that there was no war. I sampled CDs at SoundFix.

A: How?

J: Oh I played songs at the listening station. I haven't bought music in years but I used to. When I was a high-school student and a college freshman I collected vinyl.

A: Right. Right. We've discussed your vinyl collection.

J: Yeah six-inches, or rather seven-inches, and full-length LPs, and lots of hard to find EP splits if you can imagine that.

A: Sure.

J: And today...

A: EP split means two different bands on the, on the...

J: Yes exactly. Up-and-coming bands who hadn't released their own EPs yet.

A: Right.

J: So I had a certain eye, and would—no I mean that's how the rock-and-roll community worked. We'd learn about bands and trade our secrets. It...

A: If you don't mind also directing breaths forwards: I feel the wind from your speech on my lips and know I'm inhaling germs.

J: That right. We'll look straight ahead. I'll pretend you're sitting across the long table. So yeah, I listened to a band from Philadelphia called Bellini, who has the drummer from Don Caballero.

A: Bellini as in...

J: I listened to tracks off the new Lightning Bolt album (which were totally primitive and great). And then I listened to a track from this Montreal band Arcade Fire.

A: That you knew of already?

J: Al Alex introduced them to me on a drive from Northampton. It was probably five in the morning, and there were a couple girls from Smith College in the back of his car. They'd decided on a whim to come with us. Alex played some quiet pop music to which they could sleep. But so I walked around with these, with this music um floating...

A: The war. What about the war?

J: Yeah I didn't think much about the war. I was still hearing music, and I heard the sound of skateboard wheels rolling over pavement, and I saw...

A: It is a pleasing sound; it...

J: Yeah.

A: suggests infinity.

J: I saw a pack of girls hauling large pink bags from Beacon's Closet and...

A: Did they have erotic hair?

J: It looked like they'd woken from a two-week slumber...

A: Yes.

J: mixed with lots of drug use and violent love-making.

A: But really they'd just got back from internships at P.S. 1?

J: Yeah or...

A: Working retail in Soho.

J: Yeah. Who who knows? I'm not sure how they spend their days. But

they looked absolutely wrecked and were carrying tons of new fashions, and I didn't think much about the war. And maybe that's ok—if we treat the society we're born into as accidental. I mean why should we concern ourselves with these troubles? Are they, are they ours? Emerson says in one of his essays that the world's poor aren't his poor, that he ought to think about himself before considering political turmoil.

A: Right. I can emotionally agree with this sentiment. However I, intellectually I think it just shows how alienated we are and to what extent our own consciousness, our own sensibilities, our...perception of the world is diminished by the political circumstances we find ourselves in: by a present in which it's hard to conceive of social concord, cooperation, commerce (as Whitman uses the the term)—the way that, for example when Eileen Myles spoke at the Grad Center six months ago, she was able to recall New York as a place where the government, the federal government had provided funding for her to come here pretty confused about her life and end up at state-sponsored poetic...

J: Which no longer exist, right?

A: projects, where she was able to cohere in a way we haven't, and I wonder how much of that can be attributed to this reactionary...

J: The poetry programs no longer exist is that right?

A: Correct.

J: What what was the name of the project where she studied? Was it the St. Mark's Poetry Project?

A: Yeah, but it was some program. I mean of course St. Mark's still exists.

J: But they charge money?

A: They...

J: I don't know if they've always charged.

A: If they did it wasn't the same as now. She pointed out that what she was doing is no longer, that what she did is no longer possible.

J: Right and we'll we often try to understand ourselves by contrasting our lives to previous generations'. Last night we talked about Antin's youth,

how he hitchhiked from northern Idaho (where he worked in a national park) back to his parents' place in Brooklyn.

A: Yes have you noticed that our conversations after the conversation always flow so much better than these taped talks?

J: Do you think so? Well last night we walked, so maybe we want to start walking again.

A: Um it just so happens that yesterday we were walking. But I'd say that's false causality; a similar...

J: Anyway what what I'm trying to say David Hume is there's a huge divide separating us from previous thinkers. For example we can't give long narratives to a large audience about hitchhiking across the country.

A: I don't want...

J: This experience has been...we've been deprived of this experience. I did think of going out to Martha's Vineyard for a week and hitchhiking [*Cough*] that island. Do you remember hitchhiking there?

A: Yeah sure. I wonder if in trying to to recapture the past you'll of course...

J: Right. It's not in the air. [*Silence*] Antin wasn't trying to be a hitchhiker. That that that was, that simply flowed out of...

A: Or he wasn't treating it as an entitlement: as part of his preordained literary growth and personal...

J: Right.

A: heritage. My own cultural heritage includes lots of professional wrestling. I could never deliver a lengthy account of hitchhiking, but I could list the weights and origins of many wrestlers (from various federations). I do again think we ought to be aware of the limitations imposed on us by politics, not to mention what gets imposed upon....

J: Yeah. Because of politics I grew up thinking about baseball cards, while you were thoughtlessly memorizing the names of wrestlers and their theme songs.

A: Because of politics...

J: I was committing to memory the different brands of trading-card, the rookie—the years of rookies and...

A: because of of politics I masturbated to classbook photos of girls rather than fool around with them.

J: Yeah I was the same. I had that problem with a certain section of my high-school yearbook, which contained photos from dances, and some very cute girls were clearly drunk and dressed in skimpy...

A: I thought your high school was Jesuit. Oh I guess somebody had to...

J: Yes.

A: And I'm sure you found yourself entranced by the exoticism projected onto these girls, is that right? The different schools? All with distinct reputations—the schools I mean?

J: Oh yes.

A: I, yeah, we can blame that all on politics.

J: It's hard to comprehend the damage, the extreme limits we've had to suffer. I know we we do the best we can, but there's a huge gap between ourselves and previous generations.

A: Still...

J: Though, though who knows? Maybe all generations are exactly the same and it's what Diogenes said: how back in Ancient Greece he walked around carrying...

Conversation 14
2:26 p.m. Thursday, January 12
Union Square Park

A: [*Garbled*] sign says the lawn's getting seeded for grass now. Pigeons and sparrows seem to be ignoring that.

J: Yeah they're gobbling up the grass-seed. And some anxious squirrels appear to be searching for a misplaced acorn supply.

A: It's bright but but I find it dreary. The weather shouldn't be this way. I mean there's room for statistical variation in temperature, but we have lost...

J: Well I imagine if we looked at the Times and consulted its weather section, we'd notice the record high took place in the twenties or thirties.

A: Oh no. That's not true. The average global temperature's broken records seven of the past ten years.

J: Really? [*Pause*] So you're talking to Ron Padgett today about...

A: Yeah, at De Roberti's pastry shop...

J: your research.

A: a classy choice on his part.

J: It's one of your favorite places as well; you already have so much in common.

A: My my favorite intimation of infinity is eating a napoleon on a summer, a hot summer night at De Roberti's—with a glass of water and The Supremes in the background. This happened once, or I may be making it up, but I've taken solace from the moment ever since.

J: Do you know in some ways (since we talked later than ever last night, and today have to talk earlier than ever) I feel like we've been talking through the night?

A: I just slept and worked on my dissertation.

J: I didn't have a chance to sleep. I thought your fan would bring uninterrupted quiet, but it agitated the cat and...

A: Was it the oscillations? Noise?

J: The cat didn't sleep last night and kept me up for four straight hours...

A: Of...

J: if you can believe it...

A: No.

J: from five a.m. until nine.

A: Really.

J: I thought I'd open a screen and free the cat. But still I feel the sensation of having talked through the night. Of course the setting's different. We are not in your room. We're out in the air...

A: I'm squinting.

J: again. I'm squinting in sun. That's the starkest contrast from last night when I...when we weren't squinting as we looked down at Monsignor McGolrick...

A: Wasn't...

J: Park, which seemed to stretch on endlessly.

A: I especially like squinting so that front teeth hang from your top lip. Does that make sense? Your gums get extra oxygen. Your nose crinkles and looks cute in photographs; it's both a squint and smile at once. It's got a glinting quality much like this broken glass spreading in concentric circles—probably because we're sitting with our backs to um what you thought was a Declaration of...

J: Yeah I didn't get this statue's title. Today we're pressed for time. You need to meet Ron Padgett in an hour and I should head back to Brooklyn.

A: Do you feel prepared? For your big night?

J: Well I stopped by the, by a Duane Reade on 14th and asked the enormous sales-girl if she knew where condoms were: not wanting to ask directly about lube and...

A: Right.

J: found the Astro-Glide you recommended.

A: You hear, by the way, while we're speaking, someone playing Led Zeppelin licks? [*Pause*] Hey la-dy...

J: That...

A: You know the...

J: I don't know much classic rock. It separates me from most people our age.

A: Astro-Glide gives me what what I would call an unbearable pleasure if it didn't last so long. I'm happy you can share in that.

J: The producer, the people who make Astro-Glide say it's got an authentic wet...

A: Did did they say whether it's ok to get on your mouth?

J: I...

A: [*Muffled*] dry lips in winter.

J: I didn't read that far down the package. Do you notice sun glinting off strands of straw?

A: It's great.

J: Isn't that great? And I find the light, while much brighter than the street lamps and park lamps last night, to be much more hospitable. It causes me to squint but I can look endlessly.

A: You keep screening your eyes like you're at the mast-head. I, I enjoy as well that it's winter light. It's not golden, nor does it really penetrate

things. It sort of slides over them. I guess there's less color out in winter, so it's hard to know how this light would illuminate, say, a resplendent green park: the type which will stand here several months from now (though we're impeding that by walking on grass-seeds). But I appreciate how the light warms buildings just...it doesn't enhance colors but makes them distinct.

J: We've started a migration onto the field. [*Muffled*] pair of friends is coming our way.

A: Did you—the girl's carrying a green water bottle. It's some hi-tech plastic. Does...

J: They're...

A: everyone under twenty-five own these bottles?

J: Yeah often they're strapped to one of ...

A: Right.

J: numerous straps dangling from backpacks. The bottles are called Nalgene bottles, which...

A: That's a material? Nalgene?

J: I'm not sure if it's material or if it refers to the company that manufactures them. So, ah yes...

A: The, the...

J: you were remarking on the difference between winter and summer light, and until today I've always looked for a...I've always erroneously looked for the difference in sky alone, thinking there's paleness to the winter sky...

A: There may well be.

J: which doesn't belong in summer. But I was...

A: I want to find out.

J: wrong. I never thought about the things that are lit. I mean clearly this

grass is...

A: Beige.

J: Well yeah it's the, it's it's non-existent. We're looking at straw tossed over a field.

A: Quite a quite a thin toss as well.

J: And it's obvious the difference in light has as much to do with things lit as...

A: Animals shed dark coats right? Or more vibrant coats? They try to blend in with snow. We ourselves tend to wear more grays, blues and...

J: Well I happen to wear those colors year-round since they're the most commonly bought and resold hues.

A: Right um, before we leave the Astro-Glide topic: I recommend not applying it yourself.

J: Oh yeah. Why would I ever do that?

A: Um.

J: Yeah Amanda gave a call from Boston's South Station, to where she's just...to to where her commuter-train recently pulled...

A: What a...

J: Sure.

A: what delight to use the South Station commuter—that that part of South Station. In my early twenties I watched crowds...

J: She sounds excited to come back to the city. Last summer she stayed here for a week with friends.

A: Is this her first Fung Wah experience?

J: This is her first Fung Wah bus, yes. I'm the person who revealed Fung Wah to her. She had always taken Greyhound...

A: That's what my...

J: which nowadays is at least twice as expensive as the Fung...

A: Well...

J: Wah. They're no longer trying to push out their Chinese competitors.

A: I'm glad they didn't succeed.

J: They've recognized Fung Wah's inherent superiority and are once again charging outrageous prices.

A: Do you think Fung Wah will go go back to playing match-maker? Trying to seat single young men next to young single women, as it...

J: It was a great promotion, a great unadvertised...promotion. There were several rides from Boston to New York in which, from the moment I sat until the moment we pulled along the curb at Canal (139 Canal Street) I talked nonstop with a pretty girl. Some conversations continued along city sidewalks, and I still see one woman now and then.

A: Are you terribly uncomfortable?

J: There's something about this...

A: The relief sculpture on...

J: Yeah. Yeah.

A: the base of this monument's hard to cozy up to.

J: It's jutting into my lower back. I—again that's a contrast from last night. Last night we sat in those chairs I hauled dozens of, at least a dozen blocks to the N-R station once, and carried all the way to where you lived in Astoria Queens. Remember?

A: Sure I...

J: I presented...

A: It was a nice gift, yeah: an early Ikea model that's been complimented by both professional designers...

J: Right.

A: who have graced my room.

J: That's right.

A: We seem to be lodged against a mythi...an allegorical figure holding an infant (star-haloed) up to the sun. I guess it's our nation...

J: Yeah.

A: represented by a babe.

J: With the thirteen stars of the states encircling his head.

A: Do you think it's intentional that of the um, I would guess 48 to 50 triangular stones on on which we could have placed our feet, that you're on Massachusetts...

J: Hm.

A: and I'm on New Hampshire: a pleasant...

J: Yeah Alex and I did some filming for his movie in New Hampshire, though audiences believe it was shot in Minnesota.

A: You might...

J: I guess we'll eliminate that.

A: No it's...I just made eye contact with a Park—don't look Jon—with a Parks Enforcement Officer.

J: Oh. Is he pulling out tickets?

A: Yeah but I don't think, I don't think they're for us.

J: I, did he...is he giving those guys tickets?

A: Well they're the ones yelling at him.

J: He just pulled out more tickets. He doesn't seem to have enough tick-

ets right now. Maybe he'll give the Zeppelin guitarist a ticket for playing in public.

A: We could um, spin around to the opposite side of this statue—is he looking our...

J: No. He's looking at the guitarist and a couple guys who might have been packing beers in a black duffle bag. [*Pause*] We could say we didn't see the sign.

A: Yeah.

J: And...

A: Yeah...

J: apologize profusely.

A: I think there are only two signs in the park.

J: Then we ought to stay put. If we move it implies we're guilty.

A: Right. He'd have to break the law to come...

J: I'm going to stop looking at him. He...

A: [*Muffled*] conflict of interest.

J: he looked up and saw I was looking at him.

A: Is that right? You're doing it again.

J: I, yeah, I can't stop. So um, it's a nice site. Do you see that pigeon sleeping amidst incandescent strands of straw?

A: The little Brancusi over there? I do.

J: He is...he needs to take a nap after eating all that grass-seed.

A: Did you not have lunch Jonny? In the checkout lanes I looked for...

J: No I've decided to stop eating at W.F. I think it's at least partially

responsible for my sickness. I hate cold food, and I hate—I detest cold food and I detest just as much eating food warmed in a microwave. That food has become inedible to me. [*Dog barks*] stayed in Brooklyn as long as possible, though I did walk around Washington Square before meeting you. I looked over those animal flash-cards you gave me last...

A: I'd love a brief quiz.

J: spring. Yeah we can...well I don't have them on me, but I looked over a card for the brown bear.

A: You don't remember questions?

J: Um, ok, I can ask a question: What is the largest brown bear?

A: The Alaskan Brown Bear?

J: The Kodiak.

A: Aren't they the same?

J: Are they?

A: Kodiak did come to mind as well...

J: Ok...

A: and Kodiak Island.

J: It weighs over 700...

A: It used to. I think it's lost weight since it no longer experiences—lots of screaming to our left now. I think that's probably in our favor.

J: Yeah.

A: The greater the public disturbance...

J: Oh. Oh.

A: the less a concern our mild...I wanted to say truancy (using it in an abstract way) but I guess that's not...

J: You could call it a minor transgression.

A: Transgression.

J: We're lodging poetry where it ought to be, right? In the realm of minor transgression? But here's another question about the brown bear: Does it have good vision?

A: [*Pause*] No.

J: Ok...

A: Scent.

J: Right...

A: Great scent.

J: and and...

A: Hearing.

J: Very good. Its senses of smelling, its senses of smell and hearing are...

A: Tremendous.

J: its most powerful senses. So when when I walked through Washington Square Park I pretended I was a brown bear. I paid little attention to what I could see and tuned into sounds and smells. Thanks to this metamorphosis I made a delicate auditory observation.

A: Which was?

J: There was a saxophonist playing in one corner of the park, and a trumpet player about fifty yards south, and listening to the saxophonist I couldn't hear the trumpet player, but then I started walking towards the trumpet player, and at around the midpoint of the distance separating them I heard the trumpet blend harmoniously with the saxophone...

A: Right.

J: rhythms. I stood there listening. I then continued walking towards the trumpet...

A: Um...

J: and the saxophonist—I lost the saxophonist, but still...

Parks Enforcement Officer: You guys have IDs?

J: What's that?

P: I got to see your IDs.

J: Why would...

P: Because you're on Union Square's lawn. You're not supposed to be on the lawn.

A: Oh.

J: I didn't know that.

A: Yeah we didn't know.

P: Well I need to see some ID.

J: Oh my.

A: How would, how would we sense we couldn't be here?

P: Excuse me?

A: How, how—is it always the case? How would we...

P: Always. There's signs all around this park.

J: Well we didn't see any signs. We came right...

A: Where are the signs?

J: What... [*Tape stopped*] though I guess we can talk for now...

A: I can't believe you stopped the tape. He's he's gathering other licenses as well.

J: Yeah the couple who followed us onto—sir, could we just leave?

P: Hmm?

J: Can we leave?

P: After I write y'all a summons.

J: A summons?

A: But how are...

J: Sir we didn't see a sign. I mean...

P: Alright sir you can, you can fight this if you want to.

J: Can you just warn us and we'll leave?

A: It's not like you asked us to go and...

J: Off, officer please. [*Officer radios headquarters; tape stopped*]

A: ...the worst: going to court again. It lasts all day.

J: So we have to to go and plead our innocence.

A: We can bring the tape recorder with us—at least redeem some...

J: The courthouse is near Kristin's?

A: [*Muffled*]

J: Should we stand and gesture that we're ready to go? We can pin the mic on your collar.

A: Sure. No, no let's not do that.

J: Ok. We'll just stick... [*Tape stopped*] Is there a fine officer?

P: Excuse me?

J: Is there a fine?

P: Yes.

A and J: How much?

P: Fifty dollars.

J: Fifty dollars. But we'll plead our innocence and wait in line all afternoon, without...

P: What, to fight the ticket you mean?

A: Yeah.

J: Absolutely.

P: Well you can fight the ticket.

J: Yeah I'll fight it. I'll fight it with my dying breath.

P: Alright.

J: Do you understand how silly this is? I mean, we're all...

Man from California: Yeah come on. How about you...

J: human beings; it's the sunniest day...

M: give us a warning, and we'll...

J: in winter. Just give us a warning.

P: Honestly speaking with you guys? Honestly speaking with you? This is not coming from me. This summons is about, this is over my head right here.

J: But we—over your head? Who's...

M: Over your...

J: enforcing it?

A: [*Muffled*] screaming?

P: This is over my head right here: why I'm issuing you a summons. I could really care less about this right here.

J: Officer, you should...

M: Well then...

A: [*Muffled*]

J: let us go.

M: Yeah.

J: It's your decision.

P: Let you go?

M: Because...

P: My superior's here.

J: No he's not.

P: What do I need to lie for? [*Silence*]

J: Where is he? We should talk with...

M: Yeah let's talk with him.

A: [*Muffled*]

J: Let's talk with your superior.

M: Can you still make...

Woman who lives in London: No.

J: Could you please radio him over, so we can talk? I mean we're...it's it's sunny. We came out to celebrate the lunch hour. We're busy industrious New Yorkers, and the last thing we need to do is waste an entire day in in court pleading our innocence with our dying breaths. I think we should all just laugh about this. If you ever see us again on the lawn of course arrest us. [*Pause*] It would be great to talk with your superior.

W: God I have to get going. [*Muffled*] no just leave that...

P: I got to issue these tickets. It's automatic since I started writing. I guess you don't believe me.

J: It's, but is that something you're inflicting on yourself, or is it honestly coming from above?

P: Seriously? Honestly? I could care less about this right here.

A: [*Muffled*] so far with the mic.

J: But most...

W: At least let me come in on Monday.

J: people...

W: Dude, I just...

M: Look *we're* not even from New York. Why do you need to give *us* tickets? We'll never be back here. We...

P: [*Sighs*] Alright so don't pay it then. So don't pay it.

M: Well can I have my ID then?

P: You're gonna get it back. Just wait...

M: Let me have it now. [*Pause*] Please?

J: He's going to write you a ticket first.

M: That's that's good.

J: You'll have a souvenir. Where are you two visiting from, California? I notice you have a California...

M: Yeah I'm from California. She lives...

W: I live in London.

J: Oh you live in London yeah?

M: She's not even a citizen of the United States! Come on it's...

A: I think you're set. I think you ought to walk away fast.

W: He has my vi, he has my ID...

A: Oh. Then maybe...

W: and...

J: Don't worry: I'm not going to litter officer. That's that's my cup. I...

P: You got a good personality, you know?

J: Well obviously it doesn't, it's not sufficient to get me out of a ticket. I guess the ID's fake anyway. I could run...that's a joke. That's an authentic Missouri state-ID man.

A: This may push me to engage in um deviant behavior. If I'm going to get tickets I might as well do drugs or something.

J: So so many people doing drugs in this park. So many thefts and rapes going on...

P: So find 'em for me, alright.

J: in this city.

P: So help me out.

J: What do you mean?

A: I—we're too busy looking over our backs. We never know when a cop's gonna nab us.

P: If there was so much drugs in this park then you wouldn't be in the park. Why would you surround yourself around that?

A: It's the only place with...

P: That's a good question right?

A: open...

J: Officer I'm fiercely committed to my sobriety.

A: These parks are put here because we're claustrophobic citizens cramped in offices and apartments all day long.

J: Where the climate's the same every month of the year. It's nice to to come out and experience—oh he, what is that, hair? Wait, brown? You see that? He noted you have brown hair.

P: It's on your license.

J: His hair's been lightening in the springtime sun. You may want to call it brown slash blonde. [*Pause*] What does the violation say Andy?

A: Park rules, Number 9.

J: What's that little piece of prose?

A: Um: that it was found, or I guess I was found, on Union Square Park...

J: The fifth, the date of the hearing's the fifteenth of February.

A: What's today?

J: Today is the eleventh?

P: Twelfth.

J: The twelfth.

A: So that's a Sunday? Saturday?

P: That's a Wednes...

A: Oh, oh this is January. That's right.

P: What he say?

J: I thought the hearing was the fifteenth of January (just a few days from

now). So so we can go anytime before then?

P: It'll probably be after the fifteenth.

A: How does that work?

J: What do you...

P: It has to be on a Wednesday. It depends on how crowded the courts are.

J: But can I go later next—can I go in next week and protest my ticket?

P: You can try but I doubt it.

J: Because I'm visiting New York and won't be here.

P: Oh you're not going to be there? [*Pause*] You really want to fight this ticket?

A: [*Muffled*]

P: What's going to be your argument? I'm just, I'm curious...

A: We didn't see a fence...

J: There's no fence.

A: or a sign I mean.

P: There is a fence. You're looking at the fence. The fence...

A: The sign—where's the sign?

J: People sun themselves in this city by hopping over fences.

P: How do you know if you're not from around here?

A: Is it only in spring that...

J: Because I used to live here. Now I'm visiting.

P: Then I'm sure you know there's a sign.

J: There's no sign.

P: Right there. Keep off lawn. There's another one on that side: Keep off lawn.

J: Yeah two two two signs for...

P: Alright so that can be your argument. You want it to be your argument?

J: Yes exactly...

A: Do you recommend...do you know...

J: and I'm sure it will hold up.

A: any arguments...

P: That will hold up?

J: I'm sure it...

A: [*Muffled*] particularly successful?

P: Huh?

A: Do you have recommendations for our...

P: For your defense?

A: Yeah.

P: Well if I botched the summons; but I'm sure I didn't.

J: I'm sure you didn't.

A: The ticket looks clean.

P: Let me let me see your license.

A: Is there a mistake?

P: No there really ain't no mistakes here.

J: Park rules. [*Pause*] Where's the supervisor? It would be great to talk to him. Do do you know where...

P: You think I can just call my superior over to discuss this?

J: What, is your superior getting his jewels polished? Is he getting ten blowjobs as we speak or something? [*Pause*] I see so many people pulling flasks from duffle bags. You'd think they'd get fines.

P: Hold on.

J: Did he make a mistake?

A: He just added to my license number.

P: No it wasn't a mistake.

J: I think you're free. That was a mistake.

P: It was not a mistake. [*Police siren*]

A: I bet our two friends are gonna get off.

J: Are you going to...

P: I'm not like that. My boss knows y'all here, so he's going to expect me to come back with four summonses.

J: So you radioed before you wrote the tickets out?

P: He actually saw y'all before I saw you.

J: What are—really? Would he have come after us if we had run away? Oh well.

A: We we won't get another ticket crossing this lawn to get back to sidewalk?

P: Alright, have a nice afternoon...

J: Ok.

P: and get that defense ready.

J: Well officer, I'm sure I'll never make a defense. I'm also sure I'll never mail anything in, and...

P: Go ahead.

J: thanks I'll just recycle the ticket. [*Pause*]

A: He's not the...

J: [*Muffled*] make 100 dollars off this ma manuscript someday, we can be honest and pay these tickets.

A: We could return the tape recorder at the end of January.

J: Supervisor my rear. Where's the supervisor he's talking about? I think the supervisor's his fucking superego. I think the guy's brainwashed.

A: I thought he was pretty low-key in fact. As soon as he began writing the summons, when it all became inevitable, I started to like him more. He...

J: Yeah, yeah but still...

A: seemed to not enforce law in any normative way. He...

J: He wasn't...

A: was very pragmatic about it.

J: wasn't spiteful.

A: Not in the slightest. I guess we...why don't we sit Jon.

J: You don't want to find some sun? I feel we might soon catch cold here.

A: I don't know where else to...

J: The sun's probably off limits, right? Everywhere in sun is illegal? We could...

A: There's no reason for the continued defense.

J: Yeah I'm sorry. I'll try to shed this...

A: How many tickets is that for you in New York? I think...

J: It's my second.

A: this is my third.

J: Your third.

A: I don't know if there's a cumulative effect. On the back of the summons I saw something along those lines. I—it often happens on otherwise liberating days. I remember getting caught trying to sneak through a subway entrance at two in the morning with my bicycle, and just screaming at the cop. I kept calling him a hero and...

J: You were...

A: had no defense whatsoever. I was drunk actually. I'd been given free alcohol at some place where Ezra Sherman worked as bartender.

J: Right. Who's now a DJ on Martha's Vineyard?

A: Is that...

J: This is what Alex tells me.

A: The other ticket was with Alex (I'll take the mic). We assumed you could drink alcohol from paper bags in public, since that's what people always do, but when I explained this to the cop he called me a wiseguy. Now those were both typical cops: ruddy-faced white boys from the Bronx who who clearly thought I was the biggest fag. This guy was much cooler than that. He was...

J: He was a respectable guy. Well-disciplined. Fond of obeying an imaginary superior. Legible penmanship.

A: Nev...

J: Good sense of humor.

A: Never lost the relaxed timbre to his voice.

J: We've, we're both starting to shiver; we need some sunlight. I can't afford to get sick again.

A: Nor... [*Tape stopped*]

J: Yeah today's conversation: phenomenologically it's lasting much longer than usual. It's it's hard...

A: Let's go east.

J: Yeah. It's hard to—wow look at that. I'm glad that skateboard didn't collide with us.

A: What about this bank? Maybe they have steps we could sit on.

J: We should make sure no grass-seed's been planted. [*Silence*]

A: It sounded like we would've gotten away no problem, which is worth remembering. I'm not lamenting or...

J: Though apparently the supervisor had seen us.

A: The...

J: But the supervisor's the man upstairs right? I think the supervisor's the the the holy god, right? That woman has a microphone as well.

A: This bank is calling itself Maine for some reason: "Almost Maine."

J: Well I'll tell you, whenever we step outside W.F.'s predictable atmosphere we run risks.

A: Today I simply—are you worried about...

J: I'm going to stand.

A: flu from this bird feces?

J: Wow look at this. This is absolutely disgusting.

A: Today I was sloppy. I put half my lunch in a bag, or in my coat I mean,

folded it over and paid for other stuff.

J: Really?

A: Yeah a shoddy, a shoddy move which should never have been attempted.

J: What did you stow away in your coat?

A: Tandoori chicken. Rolls.

J: [*Muffled*] go there after this and put an expensive hair-product inside my hat.

A: Yesterday—to get, or was it two days ago, to get our cold medication—what I did was, and you may want to try this with toiletries, was I brought a paper and folded things around it once in line: as if reading. Anything small and expensive...

J: Right.

A: It makes the newspaper strangely firm um, like cardboard, which is satisfying. [*Pause*]

J: So I was...

A: [*Muffled*] girl spilling coffee.

J: talking about this obser observation I made in Washington Square Park on the way over: how, equidistant from the saxophone and trumpet players, I heard their sounds fuse harmoniously.

A: Right, and I was going to say (just as the cop approached) that in the center of Union Square I'd sensed, earlier, before you brought it up, a very similar effect with the different sounds—the different gravelly urban-motion sounds coming from left and right. But I'm curious about your Washington Square Park experience.

J: I heard this convergence of sounds and felt like a brown bear. I noticed that, I noticed food smells on the breeze. People were eating lunch along...correspondingly, there was smoke along, there were more people than usual smoking cigarettes outside. So with my sense of smell I picked up aromas from styrofoam containers, and tobacco smells from

dozens of cigarette brands. I (though my eyesight is weak as a brown bear) I saw, on on hexagonal paving stones, a pool of golden light nearly as bright as the sun itself. That was my experience as a...

A: So I'll have my sense of smell back tomorrow? Is...

J: I never lost my sense of smell. We have two separate sicknesses.

A: I I'm very much enjoying the different paces at which these Union Square crowds move. Big shopping bags, which are always discouraging, but I like to see bodies balanced between two bags, plus...

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