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Spring 2012

Monkeyville

Robert Paul Plantenberg
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MONKEYVILLE

by

Robert Paul Plantenberg

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in
English (Nonfiction Writing) in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Jeffery Porter

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Robert Paul Plantenberg

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in English (Nonfiction Writing) at the May 2012 graduation.

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CHAPTER I: HUMAN PINSETTER

“Should we talk about Monkeyville?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Scooter says in his usual upward, slightly Southern-sounding lilt, his mouth nearly shut.

“Who lives in Monkeyville?”

“Monkeyville’s Uncles.”

Miniature plastic models of horses line the windowsills in Scooter’s bedroom, sorrel workhorses and black stallions frozen mid-buck, one with an unusual shade of neon green, mares apart from their foals, separated by an impassable foot or two. If they could unstick themselves all at once, turn plastic into flesh, they would surely stampede. The tiny horses would be horrified, suddenly alive and looking at these two huge great ape-men muttering gibberish.

Scooter owns five stuffed animals: Curious George in a red sweater, Curious George in a yellow sweatshirt, an albino gorilla that’s a bit light on the matting, Shrek and a great big dog. Ask Scooter, and he’ll tell you that Shrek and the dog are monkeys, too. And those fluffy versions of our most primal ancestors, all five of them, have stadium seating on Scooter’s bed, a lower-deck mattress and upper-deck pillow; and they smile blankly, as though awaiting some sort of spectacle.

“What do Monkeyville’s Uncles do?”

“Sell monkeys.”

“Oh. Well, who buys the monkeys?”

“The green Martian men in their spaceship.” Scooter doesn’t make ironic statements or pithy jokes about Monkeyville. It is a real story. And by way of personality, he is almost

universally agreeable, a man of real virtue, and I have come to love him for his earnestness. But now, in his room, the Martians appear to have gone awry. His eyes suddenly widen, his forehead puckers up, his breathing goes irregular, he mutters something barely intelligible, affect firmly pressed. “Bob’s gonna be at Dartmouth in two weeks gonna take you to S.E. on Mm-T-Th-Thursd-two weeks in the black van please?”

“I’m not sure I caught all that, Scooter.” It could be a bad sign. His panic attacks are inevitable but rarely predictable, and I feel a tug toward urgent action. I’ve learned to resist it. Keep a certain level of nonchalance.

“Huh?” Scooter replies.

“You just have to slow down a bit, relax. I didn’t understand what you just said.”

“Bob will take you back to Dartmouth?”

“Where are we, Scooter?”

“At Dartmouth.”

“Yessir. You got it. Sounds like that darned autism is acting up again.”

Scooter mutters an affirmative “Yeah” and leans back into his rocking chair where he has been for the last hour or so, crosses his legs at the ankle, left over right, swings himself forward and back again. A rhythm dominates the soundscape: a heel thud, a creak, a pop, a deeper creak, a heel thud, and so on. Something feels infinite about the scene, the sounds appear in my dreams, but there are things that mark the passage of time. There’s a hole in Scooter’s right shoe where his left heel meets it. The brown upholstery of the rocker is flattened and discolored, the armrests are threadbare. Deep scratches and pocks stipple the hardwood floor, markers of where the rocker was and will be again.

“One thing I can say about Monkeyville,” I say, “is that it sounds like they’ve got an *economy*. I’ll bet all that intergalactic buying and selling is lucrative. Everyone’s looking for work nowadays, and maybe they ought to look into this monkey business.”

Scooter grins, laughs a monotone huh-huh-huh, and agrees.

When I’m in his room, I always sit on the floor in Scooter’s closet because it is shallow and there is no door separating it from the rest of the space. More of a nook, really, just an odd pocket to sink into. My corner is in arm’s reach of a line of equine statuettes, and I examine one of them in hand. It is black with a neon green spot in the center. The unreality of its coloration is something I enjoy: the model subverts what is actually possible.

I fold my legs and lean back into my corner because it is a habit, a routine, comfortable. Of course, there is also the fact that Scooter’s is the only chair. Nowhere else to sit. And *inside* the closet, where it really matters, nothing hangs because there is no rod, piled on the floor are a deflated exercise ball and an incomplete plastic bowling set stored in a psychedelic tie dye print gift bag. That bowling set has always been a bit of a puzzle. I won’t ever know with any certainty about what happened to the missing pins. They could have been destroyed in some unimaginable crisis, or they’re simply misplaced, or it was incomplete to begin with—stored in a basement box where nobody has looked for a long time—but there are seven pins, that much is certain.

“You want to do some bowling?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Scooter replies.

I set the pins automatically, two red, two blue, two yellow, one green, in a 1-2-3-1 configuration like an arrow, every pin is adjacent to its color-counterpart with the green pin in

back, pointed squarely at the rocker across the room. I roll a ball to Scooter. He bounces it back without looking and misses wide left.

“C’mon, man. The pins are this way,” I give an exaggerated gesture to the right with both arms. “You’ve got to aim the sucker. Right down the gut, you know?”

“Are you done bowling?”

“You don’t want to bowl? That’s fine by me,” I say and start piling the pins back into the closet.

“Do you want Bob to stay here?”

“Do you? I would be happy to.”

“You want Bob to stay here.”

“Well then, I’ll stay, but only for five more minutes or so. I have to make dinner soon.”

“Yeah,” Scooter gets back to rocking. The stuffed monkeys spectate, still waiting.

The focus of Scooter’s attention is intense and brief. The rubberized statuettes, the plushy monkeys, the old chair, all interesting, perhaps, but ultimately insignificant, and eventually he stares at the ceiling where his anxiety comes to an extended rest. I try to imagine what he must see and fail every time. The dimples of paint wobble into neat squares then seep back out – a resultant single-colored mosaic, cracks and lines in the white like a projection screen that just won’t stay still. And here his whole life can play back: The sweeping of a crop duster far off, tumbling hills and a blank, pale blue sky. Scooter sits on a tractor while it works, but he doesn’t drive. The waves in his hair flex under wind gusts and his formidable incisors shine at dawn, mid-autumn, harvest. He breathes through his mouth habitually and has one slightly wandering eye, but the normalness of his features, that he is average-looking and average-sized, his light

brown irises and hair, his hard chin and high nose, his high cheek bones all make him appear rustic and unassuming. A good farm boy.

Someone drives the tractor, but it is not clear who because Scooter's attention is intense and brief. Robbings and jays shriek to one another, "Hi bird, Hi bird," and the gorging tires of the tractor shake the ground and the bluishness of the sky, and then treetops' gasp, beef's low, hawks folded and plunging, cornstalk sway, a perfume of manure, sticky vinyl seat, and finally the input coalesces into a single sensory boom and the tractor carries on. Until whoever is driving the tractor parks at an out building, takes Scooter inside, closes the door, and this is where the movie stops most days.

"You want Bob to take you back to Dartmouth?"

"Where are we right now, Scooter?"

"At Dartmouth."

CHAPTER II: WELL HI THERE

Infinity Systems, a one-stop shop, non-profit corporation which serves people with ‘disabilities and other challenges’, had been my employer for almost two weeks before I met Scooter. Tours of the facilities, trainings called ‘Philosophy’ and ‘Diversity’, “You will be answering to so-and-so, who answers to so-and-so,” composed a typical orientation. The training sessions and conversations in general covered basics of direct care for the developmentally and physically disabled. If you’re talking to someone in a wheelchair, it is best not to tower over them, better to crouch down and speak at eye-level. If you are on the receiving end of aggressive behavior, Infinity Systems’ euphemism for what is essentially a fight, under no circumstances do you fight back. It is your job, they told me, to support any individual using Infinity Systems’ services. It is your job to learn how to communicate with your individuals. It is your job to increase the individual’s quality of life first and foremost. It is your job to be a good, upstanding young man who is sensitive to the wants and needs of the other.

Or something like that. It was hard to stay engaged because the obligatory work meetings were boring in the way that only obligatory work meetings can be. And my job, I had thought, was just a summer gig. Temporary. I would collect my check and have some nice experience under my belt. I would feel good about being a humanitarian for a few months, providing *real* services to *real* people in *real* need. Some faceless upstairs office type said, “You’ll be working with Scooter. Not everyone in the company can work with him, he’s selective about his staff, but we think it will be fun for you. We can always find something else if it doesn’t work out, don’t feel bad if it doesn’t work out, but we think you’ll get along nicely.” His case file said things like ‘low functioning’ and ‘severe’, ‘mental retardation’, ‘ASD—severe’, ‘aggressive behaviors’,

‘echolalia’, ‘depression’, ‘cyclical aggressive behaviors’, ‘anxiety’, ‘perseveration’, ‘headaches’, ‘chronic constipation’, and more. I knew the meaning of each term, all of them with an implied overlap, a Venn diagram of mental illnesses. I had taken a few psychology classes in undergrad and had friends working in the field of direct care. I knew enough, I thought. And with that, I was sent off to meet Scooter, a twenty-one-year-old autistic, on his last day of Senior High.

The classroom buildings for disabled students were situated behind a maintenance garage, two of them, a safe distance from the Senior High proper. They had an air of decay about them, the brown shingles were lopsided and the beige siding drooped as though it had been heated and left to cool. No grass or greenery in sight. I opened the door to the first of the two and was, of course, not ready for what was inside. The teacher, Ed, sat at a desk in front of the room looking at papers. There were all the trappings of a usual classroom: Reading is FUNdamental posted on the wall next to motivational Einstein quotes, a pencil sharpener, cabinets full of worksheets, the days of the week on a large laminated calendar and an alphabet banner on the top perimeter of the room. But the menagerie of quaint nostalgia, all the comfortable reminders of my best days in an academic setting, and my undefeatable spirit of humanism collapsed at the front of the room against the chalk board. Nothing was written on it. Purposeless, as far as I could tell. There was no indication of the actual instruction that took place in that room, no way to examine the evidence that supports each lesson, no glimpse at its abstractions, and the space was overwhelmed by noise.

The sound in the room was purely physical, no music or contextual sound. Nothing cheery or bright or remotely comforting. In the back corner, opposite the chalk board, two paraeducational aides wrestled a large autistic boy into a padded room while he screamed and flailed, nonverbal howls and uninhibited hammer blows. Every note in the cacophony seemed to

come from one body or another, but it is hard to articulate: beating sounds and squeals, wooshes, moans, guttural, throaty sounds lacking recognizable phonemes. A smaller autistic preteen rocked back and forth in front of the only window in the room, rubbed his face into an opened magazine and vocalized. Another autistic boy ran his hands, over and over, through a bin full of uncooked rice and beans and their sifting clatter was pronounced.

“Um, hi. I’m Bob. Ugh. I mean, I’m from Infinity Systems. Doing the summer temp program thingy. Someone I think told you that I would be coming by today. Or, sorry. Did they tell you I was coming?”

“You’ll have to speak up,” Ed said warmly. I noticed he was wearing hearing aids and his voice had the nuance of someone partially deaf. I repeated myself, a bit louder, intent on being comprehensible this time. “Nobody told me. That’s fine. Who are you here to see?”

“Scooter,” I said. Ed’s expression, a half-smile, revealed that he understood exactly what I was getting myself into. He has witnessed all of Scooter’s charms and all of his violence. And Ed, with his hand on my shoulder, led me to a small nook I hadn’t seen when I walked in, around the corner from the padded room. It was darker than the rest of the space and a few decibels quieter. The sounds that were once so visceral took on a muted quality. And in the nook, Scooter sat behind a crescent-shaped table padlocked to the wall at both ends of the curved top. Scattered in front of him were piles of flash cards, jars of beads, toy cars, unfinished puzzles, crumbs from lunch and a laminated piece of tag board with a strip of Velcro down the center. As soon as he saw me, Scooter’s teeth showed in an affected smile, the muscles in his face tight, but the rest of his expressions, his eyes and posture and hands hung unoccupied, blankly leaning out into the sounds.

“Scooter, this is Bob,” Ed said firmly, “He’s going to be your staff this summer.”

“Well. Hi, there Scooter. I’m Bob and it’s nice, to meet you. We’re going to be buddies, this summer, I hope.” I extended my best ‘put-‘er-there hand’. I’ve always had some vague understanding of a handshake being an important indicator of character. That a person ought to have a firm one. Eye contact. Measured in duration. Two hands for an old friend. A bit of a peacock show. But under examination, the firm handshake paradigm reveals itself as a hybrid of nonverbal communication. The participants can gauge one another’s size and strength; the force of the grip can edge on aggression, feel flimsy and useless or meek and humble. The texture of the skin reveals vocation. They measure one another’s subtlest eye movements at close proximity—a metric for presence of mind, awareness, confidence. Any scents are available, smoker or cologne or particularly pheromonal. Posture, the angle of the head, and vocalization; all of these purely physical indicators sweep a magnificently abstract notion into the handshaker’s mind: a first impression.

Scooter’s introductions, however, hadn’t been pressed through the handshake paradigm.

“Well hi there.” Scooter said and began to laugh. He looked over at Ed and back at me. Something mischievous in his glances. “Well hi there!” His pitch began to escalate. Ed sat down at the table. I stood with my hand out not knowing what else to do. “Well hi there!” His voice overwhelmed the rest of the noise in the classroom. “Well hi there! Well hi there! Well hi there!” Scooter was yawping then, full breasted shouts. And he stood with incredible speed, reaching for my face with both hands in one movement.

To say that I flinched does not do justice to my body’s reaction. It was a full dodge, as if something had been flung at my head: a sudden spike in heart rate, a tightening of the skin, leg muscles flared, screaming to run. And I was overcome with an impulse to hide, a feeling like dread driving me out of the classroom and the job. Just a summer gig. Real humanitarian work. It

already sounded hollow. The orientation trainings had emphasized the fact that I was going to be working with an individual. A person, not a disability, and I would have to work to get to know this person. And the work would be hard. And the rewards would be so rich. And so on. All of the ideas they had offered were nice ideas to be thinking about. But foreshadowing one's own altruism is nothing but filling oneself with air. That is to say I felt deflated. Scooter's display had given him total control. In retrospect, the trainings did not sufficiently orient me to what I would be—an outsider, an unknowing participant in a system I did not understand.

“You're fine, Scooter,” Ed said and Scooter sat back down, resuming his previous affect. “Let's show Bob how you do colors.”

Ed produced a pile of flash cards from the mess of activities on the table. On one half of the flash card there was a swatch of color and on the other half the correspondent word. I was a distraction for Scooter, his attention would loose from the cards and he spent many minutes laughing at me. Ed would point to the card, snap his fingers, “Here, Scooter,” he would say, “we're focusing on your colors now.” Scooter identified the colors with ease, but would pause often to balk a few reaches toward my face, still testing my dodge reflex.

“Can he read?” I asked.

“You don't know how to read,” Scooter said.

“Oh. Well, um, I do. Do you know how to read, Scooter?” I said.

“You don't know how to read,” Scooter echoed.

“Scooter says ‘you’ when he means ‘I’,” Ed said. “It's part of his echolalia.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember reading about that in his case file. So he like says things that I say back to me?”

“Well he echoes a lot of things. Sometimes they are things from when he was young. Those can get pretty hard to listen to. Make sure you redirect his attention if he starts to talk about things that sound traumatic. You’ll know what I’m talking about once you hear it. Otherwise he responds best to prompts and simple commands. Yes or no questions. Things he’s answered before. It’s sort of like he has stock answers. It will take you a while to know what’s a stock answer and when he’s expressing something he needs. Like this: How are you doing today, Scooter?”

“Fine, Ed,” Scooter replied.

“You try,” Ed said to me. “Just ask him how he’s doing today.”

“How are you doing today, Scooter?”

“Fine, Bob,” Scooter said. His affect had fully cooled as he listened to Ed’s instruction.

“Just be firm and confident. Don’t let him push you around because he doesn’t respect a pushover. Don’t stand directly in front of him until he knows you and give him space. Also, you need to know that he’s smart. He knows we’re talking about him right now, and he knows what we’re saying. His hearing is actually incredible. He can hear the bus almost a minute before it gets here.”

“This is a lot of information at once,” I said, “but it’s really useful. Thanks. I feel like I should be taking notes or something.”

Ed reached under the desk and handed me a piece of paper, took a pen out of his pocket and set them in front of me.

“All right,” Ed said, “let’s keep working on these colors.”

Ed’s set of logistics and behaviors, the stuff that made a relationship with Scooter possible, re-contextualized the job and the opportunity. I no longer had the impulse to run away

from it. Noting what Ed had told me, I saw the first indications of an intellectual understanding of Scooter's personhood and made notes of it.

- Echoes, trauma. Avoid (redirect?).
- Simple commands, clarity (Y/N questions). Avoid overly complex abstractions.
- Familiarity, stock answers—stability or comprehension? Part of disability?
- Recognize needs (easy to write down. . .).
- [Doodles here, mosaic-looking, clumsy].
- Listen to him! Don't flinch. Respect, respect.
- Give space for a time.
- Space-time! → [Doodles here. Planets?].
- Superhuman hearing!
- What am I doing?
- Language is better?
- How Does Scooter Understand Language?
 - Prompt→Response
 - . . .Scooter is always doing fine. . .
 - Fallacious? Geniality? Something else.
 - Language conditioned or learned? Difference? Questions, questions.
 - Echoes?! Memory? Impulsive behavior? Disorder? And what of the mind?
 - Scooters mind. Conjecture iffy at this point. Obviously complicated. Conjecture iffy at any point?

- Yeah, yes. Okay, yes. All of it iffy. Notes, notes. I think I ought to do this job. Seems challenging.

- [indecipherable, one word: entropy or empathy]

“Bob,” Ed said, “Scooter and I are going for a walk.”

“Okay. Yeah, I’ll come with if that’s okay. Is that okay with you, Scooter?”

“Yeah,” Scooter said. His head turned to the side a bit and he lifted his eyebrows when he spoke. “Bob will come for a walk?”

“If that’s okay with you, man.”

“Is it okay?” Scooter replied.

“Oh, yeah,” Ed said, “he sometimes asks questions where you or me would make statements. He’s fine with you coming along.”

I make a note of it—questions, not statements—and we leave the confines of the classroom.

Outside, the schoolyard was exiting spring. A haze settled over the blacktop and heat started to encroach on the body. But the transit from spring to summer was a familiar gush of pleasantries. Birds chirping, everything green. No drought this year, no floods in the forecast. The flatness of the Midwest announced its quietude and the sky looked huge. Did Scooter recognize the season? Did he feel at peace now? Could I fade into the scene and simply walk with him and with Ed? Scooter’s steps were determined, fast, toward where I could not tell.

“You have to keep up with him,” Ed said.

Scooter led the way out through the parking lot, past the dilapidated façade of the classroom, down to First and Westgate, then a left, past the chain-linked fence separating his

school from the rest of the world, to an intersection where the wind swept and rattled the black walnut trees, pointing left “no cars” and right “no cars” and across to the football field, to the track, behind a shed, through an open gate, along the edge of a windbreak, facing prairie reserve, and around to the left again, to the left again, approaching the school from the back, through a parking lot connected to another parking lot connected to a path connected to the school, past the school, and finally back, fifteen or twenty minutes without a word, to the dilapidated façade of the classroom. The siding sagged. The shingles chipped and weathered.

I make a note of it—routine—and we re-entered the classroom; the sound was still physical. I felt the transition immediately, more in the eyes than anywhere else. Too much was attempting to command my attention, here: the magazine in shreds, there: the rice basket unattended, and back: crisis beaten out, muffled by the padded room. There were only incidental occurrences of incongruity between before our walk and after it, the details had merely shifted. The narrative of the classroom progressed, but did it change? Reading still FUNdamental, Einstein still inspiring, alphabet in order, chalk board still blank and so on.

Scooter moved to his table automatically, pulled the crescent-shaped surface back until it was flush against the wall, and Ed locked it.

“Scooter’s bus will be here in about fifteen minutes.” Ed said, “Why don’t you two do some flash cards while he’s waiting?” Ed handed me a stack of flash cards with letters on one half and an alphabetically related object portrait on the other. Usually an animal. A, Ant; B, Bear; . . . Z, Zebra, but the order had been jumbled over time, the alphabetical structure subverted by its repeated and routine use, always scattering toward chaos. O, Owl before F, Fox; C, Cat then L, Llama then Q, Quill; R, Rat; W, Walrus. Why not Wallaby? Worm? Window or Wind? I

did not think to ask Scooter these sorts of questions until much later on. His answers are often magnificent.

Scooter had little interest in doing the flash cards and was instead screaming loudly. His voice began and the top of his vocal range and plummeted octaves into his gut. Each slide down was a discrete unit of vocalization, echoed as an almost perfect facsimile of the first. A close approximation of his pronunciation is the word ‘hi,’ which was indeed strange. Repeated greeting: ‘hello, hello, hello,’ I thought and shuffled the cards like they were for playing.

“Scooter, listen,” I said. He continued to scream. “I just want to level with you. I don’t know what I’m doing at all, but I’m willing to work and learn. You’ve caught my interest, man. And maybe I should have better reasons for doing it, but there you go. I just hope we can get to know one another this summer.”

Scooter suddenly stopped. “Is the bus here?”

“I don’t know, to tell you the truth.”

“Is the bus here?”

“Oh, yeah. Questions. You know the bus is here already?”

“Yeah,” Scooter says and sits quietly, his head turned almost perpendicular to the floor.

And so, nearly one minute later, the bus arrived and Scooter went home from school for the last time, to his house on Dartmouth Street, and the narrative finally changed. I thanked Ed and went home. The next day was my first day officially on the job. Shadowing and training and continuing to learn. Now, almost two years later, I still haven’t left.

CHAPTER III: RITUAL

The house on Dartmouth street is any house in any city: gray siding, black roof, two car garage, two car driveway, plenty of windows, coat closet, open kitchen, living room, hallway, three beds, two baths, two storage closets, finished basement, washer and drier, window wells, furnace, water heater and so on. But Dartmouth also has a room lined with gym mats, has Plexiglas over a few windows and painted sheets of plywood cover the walls. There are no decorations. Virtually every piece of furniture is in some state of disrepair. All of the doors are beginning to come off their hinges. The back cover of the toilet had been shattered years ago. The bottom outlet to the right of the door doesn't work. One of the fittings of the PVC shower drain is loose and it drips into the basement occasionally. The rate at which repairs are being made cannot keep up with the domestic entropy. But it is the job of Staff to hold things together.

At the house on Dartmouth Street, nothing starts until Staff punches the clock.

Before sunrise, Staff walks through the front door and wakes the overnight Co-staff; Co-Staff sits up, rubs his face, groans "What's up?" and goes totally still on the air mattress, taking the last sacred minutes before transitioning into cognitive awareness, and then Staff heads down into the basement where it is very dark, where Topher sleeps, where Staff must test his stealthiness, where there is a land line and a desk, plastic paperwork receptacles stacked high, where Staff grabs the receiver and dials the Central Nerve of Infinity Systems as quietly as Staff can dial. A computer woman answers: Enter employee PIN: 40500, Enter job PIN: 149; a computer man: "1-4-9—365 Dartmouth Street"; a computer woman: "Press 1 to clock in, Press 2 to clock out": 1, Enter activity code: 500; a computer man: "500—Daily"; and the woman says the time: "6-0," cheerily, "goodbye."

Staff heads back upstairs, wakes JJ, a seventeen-year-old nonverbal autistic, at 6:45, tries to avoid a beating and excessive property damage by prompting JJ out of bed gently, passes meds for constipation, allergies, drops for an ear infection, awaits JJ's sign for breakfast; "Okay, have a seat," Staff says, and JJ nods when Staff holds up a box of S'more Pop Tarts, signs for milk, Staff says "Frankly, JJ, I'm not surprised," and then prepares JJ's usual breakfast while Co-staff wakes Topher, a twenty-six-year-old nonverbal autistic, sometime before 7:15; Staff starts a lukewarm shower, puts a towel on the rod, checks on JJ who signs for more milk, "Drink what you have in front of you," Staff says, and Co-staff comes back upstairs; Staff prepares Topher's meds for anxiety, allergies, topical cream for a facial rash, tabs for constipation, a vitamin supplement, a mood stabilizer, dumps them into a cup of yogurt and Topher appears in the basement doorway fully nude; "Morning, Topher," Staff says; "B!" Topher beeps and laughs at the children walking to school in front of the house; "Take these after your shower but before you eat breakfast;" Topher clicks twice, proceeds to the now fully-lukewarm shower; Co-staff ties JJ's shoes and gets punched twice in the head; JJ continues to crisis; Topher emerges from the shower with a towel around his waist and walks downstairs; Staff and Co-staff trick JJ into chasing them around the house to avoid property damage until the school bus arrives; the bus arrives and JJ leaves for school; Staff places Topher's meds on his unofficial bit of table; Co-staff begins writing his shift documentation; Topher appears in weather inappropriate clothing, short sleeves and shorts, takes his meds; Staff prepares Scooter's meds, one tranquilizers, four mood stabilizers, a to tabs to treat side-effects, two tabs to promote good fecal consistency and a liquid to motivate peristalsis of the bowels; Co-staff prompts Topher to change his clothes into something weather-appropriate and leaves a few minutes early and Staff, now alone on the top floor, enters Scooter's room.

“Well hi there, Scooter,” I say.

“Hi Bob,” Scooter replies from in his bed. These are his first words of the day every day. His voice has the creaks and breaks of early morning, chirping and new, his lilt is soft and singsong-y, relentlessly endearing.

“It’s time for—?” I shake the small plastic cup that holds his pills.

“Well take your meds,” Scooter sits up, wipes his nose with his palm and holds out his hand. The morning dose is a formidable mouthful, the biggest medication of the day. He cracks a few of the tablets between his molars, chugs the entire pint glass of medicine water, first gulp booming, pulls a nasty face and shivers.

“Do you want some breakfast?” I ask.

“Yeah.” His intonation has settled to an even flatness.

“What do you want for breakfast? Do you want an omelet or do you just want some oatmeal with brown sugar?”

“Do you want an omelet?”

“Okay, you stay here. You can just relax in bed until breakfast is—?”

“Ready. Do you want some oatmeal for breakfast?”

“Okay. Which one is it? Omelet or oatmeal.”

“Huh?”

“One or the other. Omelet or oatmeal. You have to make a decision dude.”

“You want an omelet.”

“Omelet it is. You want some toast, too? Maybe hash browns?”

“Do you want oatmeal instead please?” It becomes difficult to maintain my composure when Scooter gets stuck in this sort of feedback loop. To intellectualize it and eventually

empathize with him is the goal, it is not his fault but his autism's and I feel that most days, but tedium and petty frustration are universal constants in human interaction. Interactions with Scooter are hardly an exception.

“Hm. I'm not trying to suggest that having both an omelet and oatmeal for breakfast is unreasonable, and frankly I don't really know what to eat for breakfast most days. So yeah, it might be unfair to make you choose, but whether or not it's fair we still have to work on the whole making decisions thing and you've already made your—?”

Infinity systems calls the above interaction a 'Staff support', and the 'Staff support' calls for a certain level of rhetorical neutrality in both conversation and documentation. Scooter made the decision, not Staff. The individuals using Infinity Systems' services are free to express themselves however they see fit, it would seem, but Scooter was having a hard time with the decision of what Staff should make for breakfast. So Staff exerted his agency. Something like breakfast is, at first glance, of minor importance. But the days at Dartmouth tend to ripple out from tiny disturbances if routine is not properly managed.

“You've already made your—what did you already make, Scooter?” I ask again.

“Your decision.” His voice inflects downward, a note of disappointment.

“What did you decide on again?”

“You want an omelet with some toast please.” And again, Scooter's tone becomes even.

“Thanks for asking politely.” It is difficult to tell whether attempts to be apologetic come across. “If it were my breakfast, I would have chosen the same thing. Okay, I'm going to go make it. I'll see you in how many minutes?”

“In five minutes.” This is a canned response. Scooter's sense of time is flexible. Five minutes could be fifteen, forty-five, an hour or more.

It is easy to imagine that Scooter's own internal narrative progresses with a loose sense of time. Its departure from what could be called a 'neurotypical' sense of time is almost postmodern. He either lacks a conception of or merely ignores the agreed upon referent structures, clocks for instance, in favor of something more intuitive—indications relative to now. Like the neurotypical sense of time, he has language to communicate those relative durations, but in line with his postmodern sense, the language is exclusive to his own narrative. Two minutes: almost now. Five minutes: a little later on, next, soon. Two weeks: eventually, never.

Where Scooter's sense of time eludes me, however, is over the long-term. Imagine: hundreds of professional caregivers cycling through the same places, the same hospital waiting rooms, the same in-patient psych wards, the same house with the same objects as every other house, the same prompts, activities, routines—a day-in-day-out that is almost mimicry. The changes in his narrative are usually subtle and incidental, given in small doses to ease the harshness of transition. But somewhere, there are memories. Moments of real meaning. Indistinct flashes or perhaps fully-rendered, but always two weeks away.

The day Scooter graduated from high school is a day he might remember, but not a memory we share.

He is in a gymnasium half-full of chairs. A few rolls of streamers had been hung up, red and white. A banner over a stage: Congratulations Graduates! And Scooter walks in wearing a seersucker suit and cap and gown. The crowd is all developmentally disabled individuals and their families or Staff. The mood, for Scooter, is one of almost spiritual significance. He has finished his formal education and is moving out into the adult world and that world will be his teacher. He will learn, now more than ever, from the communities and people that surround him.

It is a great transition that Scooter, despite the rigors of his schedule and routine, despite his general resistance to abrupt change, celebrates.

Walking next to Scooter, K., his classmate and fellow autistic, does not look quite as snazzy. He is much shorter than Scooter and feistier. As the two make their way down the center aisle, K. suddenly drops to the floor in front of Scooter, sitting, clutching his knees, shaking his hands in tight vibrations. His face expresses defiance. His vocalizations are high pitched and begin with an 'm' sound, but his communication is clear. K. has no interest in the ceremony.

"What are you doin'!?" Scooter's disbelief gives his words a melodic quality. And Scooter steps over K.'s shoulder, walks down the aisle, sits in a chair next to the stage and begins to rock.

"Welcome and congratulations to each of our graduates. . ." the principal says.

"Welcome and congratulations to each of our graduates. . ." Scooter echoes, and continues to echo every word until the end of the ceremony.

So the story goes.

"Five minutes on that omelet, give or take." I say holding up five fingers.

"Yeah," Scooter replies, "You want to rock?"

"The chair is all yours, man," I say, gesture to it, and make my way back to the kitchen to scramble eggs and grate cheese. From the counter, I hear the even pulse of his recliner's springs.

Topher comes back upstairs from his room wearing a hoodie and jeans. He clicks his tongue two or three times and sits in front of the television. A commercial for a local bowling alley is on. I pour the omelet into the pan.

“The remote is on the end table if you want to change the channel. Morning news is over. Some warehouse burned down last night, but it looks like it’s going to be a nice day today. Low fifties. I think you won’t regret putting on long sleeves.”

“Bee!” Topher says. He grabs the remote, changes the channel to Comedy Central, every morning Comedy Central, and begins watching a rerun of last night’s episode of The Daily Show.

“Nice.” I say, “I haven’t seen this yet.” Topher then smiles, nonverbally beeps and begins making what Staff has taken to calling The Motorcycle Noise. His voice winds up and up in pitch until it hits the edge of his falsetto, he clicks his tongue and pops back down, winds up and so on. The reason he makes this noise isn’t clear to anyone, it is categorized in his Individual Service Plan as a ‘verbal tic’ and it is my job, as Staff, to discourage it. No, that isn’t right. It is my job as Staff to encourage ‘tic replacement’, menial motor-skill tasks like the endless turning of Rubik’s Cube quadrants, flipping through decks of cards, turning the pages of a phone book, sorting tasks, coloring. And I feel fine telling him to cut out the noise because it is, after all, my job as Staff and a bit annoying to listen to so early in the morning. “Take it easy on the motorcycle noise, Topher. Time for breakfast. Omelet today. Come eat then grab one of your phone books maybe.”

I call Scooter and he comes immediately, his breakfast already in his place at the table, Topher’s at his, and both of them eat. Topher cleans his plate entirely, using his fingers to swipe any food, sauce, fat drippings, water, cheese, etc. that remain. The plate comes back clean. Scooter, on the other hand, is a bit unwieldy with his flatware, the omelet is stabbed in the center, picked up and eaten in bites. He makes a mess every time. These eating behaviors are either a result of an incredible medication regimen or a fundamentally different understanding of how

one ought to consume food. Much has been said about the first proposition, men and women with severe autism in the group home setting are, often, nearly anesthetized. For example, when Scooter had to get his wisdom teeth pulled, the anesthetziologist looked over his medications—trazodone, lorazepam, halperodol, clozoril and more, high doses each, a regimen reserved for extreme minds—asked if we were *absolutely sure* that he needed to be put under, and imagined a drooling vegetable. “You can try to put your hands in his mouth without it if you want to,” Staff said. And Scooter’s ability to break through his medications, the disparate readings of the list, suggests a disagreement merely between the way reality ought to be interpreted, like how one ought to consume food: hotdogs from the top center of the bun in half, sandwiches handled by only the very corner, contents spilling everywhere, carrots and potato chips in nibbles, only water to drink, a whole glass at a time, omelet by the mouthful.

Perhaps it has to be understood as an inexplicable confluence of forces, forces that, acting alone, can easily scatter Scooter’s and Topher’s worlds into chaos, destroying the narrative, or bring the narrative to a halt, inert. Diagnosis and medication, learned behavior and impulse, the mind that is presented and the mind that is hidden away. Topher beeps nonverbally and laughs, makes The Motorcycle Noise and licks his fingers; “Hi, Bob,” Scooter says and moves on to his toast, handled by the very corner.

I wash the dishes. Scooter clears his plate and walks back to his bedroom automatically. Topher stands, goes to the bookshelf in the corner, sits down and begins silently flipping through the Yellow Pages. I go to my daily paperwork and document that Scooter and Topher: *had an omelet, prepared by Staff, with toast for breakfast and ate all of it. A quick note. Staff washed dishes used by Scooter and Topher.* And another note, made under the heading: *Goals. Topher completed his Individual Service Plan Goal of tic replacement. Topher began making The*

Motorcycle Noise while watching television, waiting for the bus. Staff supported Topher by verbally prompting him to flip through a phonebook. Topher complied, and The Motorcycle Noise stopped. What I won't write in my paperwork, in the daily narrative, other than the first person singular, is that Staff will never be sure of what the phonebook and The Motorcycle Noise have in common, what they similarly express in Topher's mind, that Staff does not understand how one can replace the other.

Topher laughs appropriately at one of Jon Stewart's jokes but is otherwise focused on his phonebook for the duration of the The Daily Show. Halfway through the rerun of last night's The Colbert Report, a paratransit bus stops in front of Dartmouth to bring Topher to his day program at Systems Employment. Scooter rocks in his bedroom.

For five minutes, the house is silent.

Staff enters Scooter's bedroom and verbally prompts Scooter to shower, and Scooter replies, "Well let's go take your shower"; Staff starts the shower, lukewarm, and verbally prompts Scooter to remove his clothing; Scooter complies; Staff verbally prompts Scooter to enter the shower; Scooter complies; Staff asks if the water is too hot, too cold or just right, and Scooter replies, "Is it just right?"; Staff verbally prompts Scooter to get his hair and body wet while Staff goes to Scooter's dresser, in the basement, to grab clean clothes; Scooter complies and Staff grabs the clothes; Scooter says, "Do you need some shampoo?"; Staff complies; Scooter says, "Are you done?"; Staff verbally prompts Scooter to wash the remaining shampoo out of his hair; Scooter complies and says, "Are you done?"; Staff explains that there is still more shampoo in Scooter's hair and verbally prompts him to use a cup full of water to rinse the rest out; Scooter attempts to comply but does not put enough water in the cup; Staff asks if it is okay for Staff to use the cup and rinse Scooter's hair; Scooter says, "You want [Staff] to rinse your

hair?"; Staff complies; Scooter says, "Are you done?"; Staff verbally prompts Scooter to turn the shower off; Staff verbally prompts Scooter to dry himself off; Scooter dries his head thoroughly; Staff asks Scooter if he wants help drying his back; Scooter says, "Yeah" and hands the towel to Staff; Staff grabs the towel, folds it over his hand, and begins at the back of Scooter's head.

Scooter's hair grows in large waves. The natural inclination of his hair is to swoop left to right except for the cowlick in back. When it gets long, he has great wings that stand straight off the side of his head. They are impossible to hold down without product, and being a bit of a farm boy, product has never really been Scooter's thing. His neck has a subtle arch forward, years of looking at the ground while walking makes his head hang at an angle from an otherwise straight, strong spine. The musculature of his back is well-defined but not ripped. His triceps are especially fit. Love handles hang over his waste, though they are invisible under a shirt, suggesting that his daily movement and diet are enough to stay near ideal bodyweight, but his exercise does not target any sort of predetermined bodily improvement. His buttocks looks like a buttocks, and his legs are incredibly hairy. The only hairy legs I have seen are my own.

Scooter turns around and I hand him the towel, "Are you done?"

"You want to do some more drying?" Scooter says.

"Okay. Make sure you get your privates and your butt. Nobody wants wet undies."

"Nobody wants wet undies," Scooter echoes.

Scooter slides the towel down his left leg until he reaches his ankle. With quick movements, Scooter wipes only his ankles, alternating between left and right, five or six times for each, and stands again. Scooter wipes his arms and flanks, his chest, his testicles and finally his rear.

"Are you done? If you're done, hang the towel on the rod."

“Do you need to go number two?” Scooter says.

“Go ahead,” I say.

Scooter sits on the toilet and begins to push. Veins explode out of his neck. A quick grunt disappears into silent heaving. Nothing happens. He rocks for a moment and then stands.

“Are you done?” Scooter says.

“Are you done, or do you want to push some more?” I ask.

“Do you want to push some more?”

Scooter sits on the toilet and begins to push. Veins explode out of his neck. A quick grunt disappears into silent heaving. Still nothing. He rocks for a moment and then stands.

“Are you done?” Scooter says.

“Are you done, or do you want to push some more?” I ask.

“Do you want to push some more?”

Scooter sits on the toilet and begins to push. Veins explode out of his neck. A quick grunt disappears into silent heaving. Scooter farts, finally. He rocks for a moment and then stands.

“Are you done?” Scooter says.

“Are you done, or do you want to push some more?” I ask.

“Do you want to push some more?”

Scooter sits on the toilet and begins to push. Veins explode out of his neck. A quick grunt disappears into silent heaving. Scooter farts, wet this time. He rocks for a moment and then stands.

“Are you done?” Scooter says.

“Are you done, or do you want to push some more?” I ask.

“Do you want to push some more?”

Scooter sits on the toilet and begins to push. Veins explode out of his neck. A quick grunt disappears into silent heaving. Scooter farts and something makes contact with the bowl water. He rocks for a moment and then stands.

“Are you done?” Scooter says.

“Are you done, or do you want to push some more?” I ask.

“Do you want to push some more?”

Scooter sits on the toilet and begins to push. Veins explode out of his neck. A quick grunt disappears into silent heaving. Scooter shits, finally. A very high volume of shit, a deep cleanse, all softened from medication.

“Did you go number two?!” Scooter says.

“You sure did, didn’t you!” I say, holding my breath. “Ready for some wiping?”

“Yeah,” Scooter says and then gags.

“I agree, that one was ripe. We might have to step up that lactulose. Keep you a little more regular than every other day.”

“Yeah,” Scooter says and a shiver shoots through his body.

I hand Scooter five connected sheets of toilet paper folded in half. Scooter slides the wad across his right hip and back, wiping his butt with tiny movements of his right hand. He removes the wad, a dark spot of feces in its center, and drops it in the toilet.

“Are you done?” Scooter says.

“You have to wipe until—when?”

“Until there’s no more poo on it.”

I hand Scooter five connected sheets of toilet paper folded in half. Scooter slides the wad across his right hip and back, wiping his butt with tiny movements of his right hand. He removes the wad, a dark spot of feces in its center, and drops it in the toilet.

“Are you done?” Scooter says.

“You have to wipe until—when?”

“Until there’s no more poo on it.”

I hand Scooter five connected sheets of toilet paper folded in half. Scooter slides the wad across his right hip and back, wiping his butt with tiny movements of his right hand. He removes the wad, a light brown spot of feces in its center, and drops it in the toilet.

“Are you done?” Scooter says.

“You have to wipe until—when?”

“Until there’s no more poo on it.”

I hand Scooter five connected sheets of toilet paper folded in half. Scooter slides the wad across his right hip and back, wiping his butt with tiny movements of his right hand. He removes the wad, a yellowish spot of feces in its center, and drops it in the toilet.

“Are you done?” Scooter says.

“You have to wipe until—when?”

“Until there’s no more poo on it.”

I hand Scooter five connected sheets of toilet paper folded in half. Scooter slides the wad across his right hip and back, wiping his butt with tiny movements of his right hand. He removes the wad, a few specks of feces in its center, and drops it in the toilet.

“Are you done?” Scooter says.

“You have to wipe until—when?”

“Until there’s no more poo on it.”

“Okay,” I say, “One more. Make sure you wipe it good.”

I hand Scooter five connected sheets of toilet paper folded in half. Scooter slides the wad across his right hip and back, wiping his butt in broad strokes. He removes the wad, a dark spot of feces in its center as if nothing had occurred, and drops it in the toilet.

“Are you done?” Scooter says.

“Where was that hiding?”

“Are you done?”

“You found some sort of poo reserve back there, man. I don’t know what. We’ve got to wipe until the poo is gone. I’m sorry, it must be uncomfortable. But dingleberries are a serious concern. Those would be more uncomfortable, trust me. Want me to put a little water on the toilet paper?”

“Yeah!” Scooter says loudly, his eyebrows furrow.

I look in the cabinet for a second roll of toilet paper. Inside, I see a package of wet wipes.
“Oh shit,” I say, “look.”

“Oh shit,” Scooter echoes.

“Man, you’re going to make me look bad. Please don’t say that all day. I shouldn’t have said ‘shit’, that’s a bad word.”

“Oh shit,” Scooter echoes, laughs, and I hand him one of the wet wipes.

And so on, for five minutes, until Scooter wipes himself clean.

The tedium of Scooter’s daily routine is enormous. Both Staff and Scooter, however, are resigned to it. Apart from tedium, these routines provide a basic framework or structure for a whole day. A narrative both Staff and Scooter can expect to follow. The conventions of these

routines—timing, movement and transition, bodily proxemics, repetition, prompt-response and time—supply a kind of syntax. The day unfolds like a sentence. Or better yet, a paragraph. Composed in fragments; or longer, sometimes too long; tediously long interactions between Staff and Scooter, interactions that, on one hand, suggest a kind of importance—they take a very long time to finish, have a certain tension in their repetition, as if about to snap out of it at any moment—and as a result, the daily narrative feels like it progresses; but the interactions also evidence the opposite—the diagnosis: autism, or sensory misalignment, or being easily fixated, or being easily distracted, or getting stuck, or feeling literally overwhelming anxiety toward reality much of the time, or taking a lot longer to do something than you ought to take to do it, or doing it differently, or not doing it at all, or breaking all narrative rules, or a savage trick has been played on Scooter by the universe, or some impossible collision of environmental forces had changed Scooter in utero, or Scooter is what evolution looks like, or our society has removed some of its most important members, or new language to describe an old thing and so on—the routines merely resist entropy and will fail essentially.

But what better defense against the scattering of the universe into chaos than routine?

Without a narrative there is only chaos.

“Jesus Christ, man. I’m bored.”

Scooter is rocking in a fresh set of clothes. Straight cut Wranglers with a few holes around the rivets, a Nike hooded sweatshirt and black and red running sneakers. He, too, looks bored.

“You got anything on your mind? Anything you want to talk about?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“Monkeyville.”

“Oh yeah, it’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Anything new going on in Monkeyville?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s going on in Monkeyville?”

Scooter looks around the room. His gaze moves in tiny jerks until he is looking far out of the corner of his eye, and then, like a typewriter having reached the end of its line, darts back to the center. Twice, three times.

“Are they selling monkeys?”

“Yeah,” I say. “What else?”

“They’re selling them in their spaceship.”

“Who sells the monkeys again?”

“Monkeyville’s Uncles do.”

“Interesting. Good monkey business, I bet.”

Scooter laughs.

“They sell them to the green Martian men in their spaceship.”

“Good monkey business. What else do they do in Monkeyville? I mean apart from selling and buying monkeys. Like what do they do for fun?”

“Do they go bowling?”

“Awesome! Do you want to do some bowling?”

“No!”

“Okay. Um, what else? What do they eat in Monkeyville?”

“We’ll have lunch?”

“Well, it’s getting to be about that time. I have to go make it first. How do you feel about a turkey sandwich and like applesauce, maybe a granola bar and some chips or something?”

“Fine, Bob.”

“Glad to hear it because that’s all we have for lunches in the house. I’ll see you—when?”

“In five minutes. We’ll go to S.E. today?”

“Yeah, after lunch. When is lunch again?”

“Five minutes.”

“You got it. Happy rockin’.”

“Happy rockin’.”

Scooter finishes his lunch and takes three meds at noon—halperodol, trazodone, lorazepam—and we leave Dartmouth for Systems Employment in a purple, 2001 Chrysler Town and Country minivan. Affectionately called the ‘shit box’ by Staff and Scooter, one of the back windows is held to the car with duct tape. JJ had kicked the window off of its hinges after attacking Staff on a particularly aggressive van ride. The floor holds much garbage: paperwork and receipts, the labels from soda bottles and putrefied gunk. Only one of the two sliding doors is operational; the other had the handle torn off of the paneling by, of course, JJ.

But with JJ at school, Scooter is in the back seat echoing the same phrases as the day before. “We’ll go to S.E.?” “Bob will take you to S.E. on Thursday?” “Hi, Gerald.” “Hi, Ian.” “Hi, Jon.” And so on. Scooter’s routine at S.E. is efficiency-oriented—as many tasks in three hours as Staff and Scooter can manage. Staff is held accountable by relatively simple paperwork:

Date _____

Time: 1200 to 1215—Activity: Transport—Location: S.E.—Staff Initials: BP

Time: 1215 to 1230—Activity: Schedule, Rocking—Location: S.E.—Staff Initials: BP

Time: 1230 to 1250—Activity: Work Task—Location: S.E.—Units: 25—Staff Initials: BP

Time: 1250 to 1320—Activity: Sorting Task (2)—Location: S.E.—Staff Initials: BP

Time: 1320 to 1340—Activity: Exercise—Location: S.E.—Staff Initials: BP

Time: 1340 to 1345—Activity: Bathroom—Location: S.E.—Staff Initials: BP

Time: 1345 to 1445—Activity: Walk—Location: Oak Hill Park—Staff Initials: BP

Time: 1445 to 1500—Activity: Transport—Location: S.E.—Staff Initials: BP

Narrative Notes:

Scooter and Staff arrive at S.E. and park near the far end of the back lot. It is a nice day in the fall, sunny, low fifties. Staff puts the van in park. Scooter, hearing this, says, “You sure did, didn’t you?” and flaps his hands. “You sure did!” Staff replies “Let’s do it, man.” The two walk past a group of smokers, Marc, Megan, Libra, another Megan, and enter S.E. through the back door. The two walk through a stairwell and another door and approach the guts of S.E. proper. It begins with noise, an absolute sea of chatter. Gerald is walking laps through the hallway, utilizing S.E.’s circular layout, with L., brain damage at a young age, mental retardation, seizure disorder and so on. “Hi, Gerald!” “Well hi there, Scooter!” Staff and Scooter walk to grab Scooter’s picture schedule and paperwork, past the kitchen in the center of S.E. Janice, tending to a table of wheelchair-bound individuals, paralysis and neurological disorders, says “Hi, Scooter!” and her voice is patronizingly loud. She means well, Staff thinks, and Scooter does not reply. The two continue their walk, past the shredding room where individuals shred documents and make money, past finger paintings and photographs of picnics and plastic-y banners that celebrate happiness in general and past T. Staff does not know T.’s diagnosis, and T. points at

Staff, “Bang! Zap!”. “Ughh, you got me! Pow!” Staff points back at T., and T. laughs, drools, “Pow!” Scooter enters the documentation room before Staff, grabs his picture schedule, and Staff grabs a clip board, pen, paper.

The lines between days fall out of place. Are there lines between days? There are nights, to be sure.

Staff leaves work feeling a little burnt out after his double and watches a few hours of television. Staff has a few drinks. Smokes some weed. Staff eats a turkey sandwich for dinner, goes to bed promptly.

No lines but, yes, night. Other words between days: yesterday, tomorrow.

Staff and Scooter exit the documentation room and make their way to the ‘a-room’. N. sleeps in the corner on a gym mat, and his Staff, Jon, is talking about his summer work as muscle for a group of sea turtle researchers. J. sits in a rocking chair and plays air guitar to Michael Jackson, and his Staff, Nathan, is listening to Jon talk about his summer work as muscle for a group of sea turtle researchers, K., smaller and feistier than Scooter, shouts a syllable that begins with an ‘m’ sound at his Staff, Anthony, who is offering him lukewarm fish sticks with neither cocktail nor tartar sauce. Scooter sits in the corner behind the door, near the coat hooks, and Staff pulls up a chair. Silently, Staff takes the binder from Scooter and begins to build a picture schedule. Tiny laminated squares with a visual representation of an activity, stuck to a piece of Velcro on tagboard: Peel Labels (work task, black and white photograph image, medication bottle), Sort (sorting task, color M.S. Paint picture, small circles, squares, triangles, in groups, arrows point suggesting movement), Lift Weights (color clip art image, man lifting barbell overhead, torso only, blue tank top, no hair), Bathroom (black and white clip art image, empty toilet, three-quarter angled view), Walk (color clip art image, man walking, red shirt, blue pants,

black shoes, no hair), Transport (color clip art image, purple minivan, profile view of driver side). Staff completes the schedule, hands it to Scooter who recites it, and realizes that the van door in the picture is the broken one.

Other words: sometimes, always, never, like buttoning a suit coat.

Scooter is attending his High School Graduation ceremony in a seersucker suit, cap and gown. He echoes every word the principle says. Staff is not in attendance.

Or again, still, again.

Staff and Scooter go to the shred room to get twenty-five empty medication bottles with the labels still on. Scooter and staff take the bottles back to the a-room, N. naps, sea turtles, J. plays air drums, listening to sea turtles, K. eating a lukewarm fish stick. Staff and Scooter sit at a table and begin to peel labels. Staff has mastered the technique of removing the entire label without leaving any glue residue: flick the corner up with your nail and pull it slowly with gentle, even pressure at a twenty degrees to the side of the bottle and adjust your grip often, being sure to pull the whole thing as it comes off. Staff hands the bottle to Scooter who rips it the label the rest of the way. “You want to go for a walk on the Key Watch Trail?” “I still don’t know what the Key Watch Trail is, but we are going for a walk at Oak Hills today. Let’s stay focused on your labels, okay?” “Yeah.” Staff begins a second bottle and hands it to Scooter who rips it the rest of the way. . .Staff begins a twenty-fifth bottle and hands it to Scooter who rips it the rest of the way. “You’re all done!” “Good job, man. What’s next?” Scooter looks at his schedule. “Your rings.”

Staff has this on-again, off-again thing with a girl in town. He doesn't know whether it's going to lead to anything, but the sex is good, athletic, almost violent sometimes, and it happens a few times a week. Staff and the girl in town both like to cuddle afterwards.

What I really mean is that it sometimes becomes difficult to separate work from life.

Staff and Scooter go to the cabinet where Scooter's sorting activities are stored. Staff takes the key from a lockbox. Scooter grabs his rings, painted key rings, blue, green and red, stored in a to go box from a Chinese food restaurant, and cylinders, blue, green and red, M&M Minis packages with the labels peeled, and his marbles, blue, green and red glass beads, rounded on one side and flat on the other. Staff dumps the activities onto Scooter's tabletop one at a time and Scooter sorts, in order, blue, green and red. Staff does not pay attention and daydreams about banging the girl in town who likes to cuddle afterwards. Staff gets a hard on, but nobody can see it.

Scooter is naked, locked inside of cleared out closet. A busy week for the local in-patient psych ward. Scooter has been naked for nearly two whole days and hasn't been given his medication, food practically thrown to him. Hospital Staff is afraid to go near him, and Scooter cannot focus for any discernible amount of time. "Are you feeling funny?!" he screams.

Scooter and Staff are in the exercise room, down in the basement of S.E. "Are you done?" "We haven't started yet, Scooter." "You're all done, Bob." "Is that really true?" "No." "So what do we need to be working on right now?" "Your exercising." Scooter does three sets of five exercises: stationary bicycle, bench press machine, five pound free weights, jumping jacks and squats. Scooter's movements are not neurotypical, most exercises incorporate some element

of rocking, his squats especially. Scooter bends at the waist as far as he can and then at the knees, low enough to touch the ground. And then Scooter begins to bounce up and down. Staff runs on an elliptical machine or spins in a desk chair and counts repetitions.

Staff has a day off and goes to Oak Hill Park for a walk. He walks the same route he and Scooter walked the day before.

Scooter uses the bathroom, number one, and takes off with Staff out of S.E., out to the back of the parking lot, to the van, “You all buckled up back there?” “You’re telfered in and goin’,” Staff wonders where that phrase came from while he pulls out onto Scott, onto First, right to Benton and straight through the lights, three blocks, up a hill and then down and then halfway up the next hill, and on the right, a parking lot near some woods. Staff puts the car into park, “You sure did, didn’t you?” “You sure did! Let’s do it, man.”

Co-staff visits Scooter in the hospital and gives him meds, food and a sponge bath. Hospital Staff is completely amazed. Co-staff brings Scooter home immediately. All Staff vow for him to never go back. Scooter seems to vow also. Scooter is feeling much better today, but next year, come harvest time, Scooter may again be locked away.

It had rained the night before and the paths at Oak Hill are all muck. Scooter takes the lead, his Nikes gathering mass as he walks. I walk at his side, making sure I stay in the middle of the path, ready to thwart any attempts Scooter makes to introduce himself to a passerby. The

trees are giving their last show before fall completes its action, and I ask Scooter about what he can hear.

“A lawnmower.” “Some birds.” “A train.” “The trees.”

“You mean the wind through the trees? Or the trees themselves?”

“Yeah.”

And we walk a usual route, down the main path to a fork, right is prairie, left to a creek, and Scooter turns left. We walk down to the lowest point in the park, over bridges. “You see any fish in there?”

“Do you see some fish?” Scooter points to a group of minnows just beyond the shadow cast by the bridge. The air smells like decaying undergrowth. “You want to keep walking?”

I take the lead now, past smaller paths blocked by downed tree limbs, covered in mushrooms. “You know anything about wild mushrooms? I’ve always wanted that as a hobby.”

“Yeah.”

Scooter and I hit a sharp curve in the path and he almost steps on the carcass of a dead chipmunk.

“Yeesh. Tough day. How’s that chipmunk doing, Scooter?”

“He’s dead, Bob.”

“If you had to guess, would you say he was happy or sad when he died?”

“Was he happy?”

“Let’s hope so.”

Scooter revises in almost a whisper, “Was he sad?”

CHAPTER IV: OFF THE CLOCK OR A GREATER CYCLE

The first thing I do on a day like today is pass myself every PRN, *pro re nata*, what the doctors call “as needed”, that I have in my possession. Two Xanax, one marijuana, a potentially life-threatening energy drink, an equally dangerous dose of nicotine, a glass of water and tumblers of mid-range whiskey until I become immutably indifferent. The medication regimen is purely psychosocial de-escalation but with a serious sense of urgency. Think of it as a necessary disconnect with one reality in favor of a muted one. Calling it escapism is not incidental. Unhinged might be a better word though, like yawning on the verge of tears. Not that any of that stuff really matters though because, on a day like today, it is difficult to control one’s annoying and totally earnest compulsion for so-called altruism.

Because earlier today, at Dartmouth, I had just finished the ritualistic sending-off of both JJ and Topher, and Scooter and I were left to wait. The laundry, however, was backed up nearly four loads and I decided, at most, I would fold what was currently in the dryer, move a load from the washer, start a new one, and that this household task would take me approximately one-and-a-half hours to complete because Alton Brown was on the television talking about peaches. And what could be up next? Asparagus? Tips on boiling water? It could even be the genuine incompetence of Guy Fieri or Paula Deen, the episode where she spends a half-hour slowly choking to death on a stick of butter. On cable television, The Food Network is the closest thing there is to pornography and I watch it almost constantly while at work.

While I sat and learned that a person could freeze peaches almost indefinitely without compromising their texture or color using only a three-quarters cup of sugar and half of a crushed vitamin C tablet, I managed to get the folding part of my laundry quota finished. Credit

roll on Alton and JJ's, Topher's and Scooter's clothes were in neat piles; from bottom to top: jeans, athletic shorts, sweatshirts, t-shirts, underpants. My demand for order in tedium is, indeed, compulsive and my favorite obsession, so I did not attempt to sort out the socks, left it for another Staff, someone who can readily work through tiny distortions of the algorithmic Dartmouth routine. I was fully committed to the idea that I had complete control over the narrative of the day. That was my job, as Staff, and I was good at my job. The enforcement of routine and scheduling is the keystone of Scooter's care and development. The prognosis is that if we can quantify reality into manageable pieces, pieces that are predictable and trustworthy, we can find analogues for things neurotypicals have come to cherish: freedom of choice, freedom to love and want, freedom to explore the world outside, to be a member of a community of like-minded individuals, to gain artifacts and objects to be cherished, to have friends.

And then something started to happen. The first stroke of a bad day. Maybe a bad month. Scooter stomped out from his bedroom and stood in front of the refrigerator, a great big grin on his face.

"Hey y'all." Paula Deen it was. The episode I had been thinking of. "We've got some recipes that are just to die for y'all. Y'all are in for a treat today." The vapidness of Paula's subsequent laughter was almost graceful.

"Did you pee your pants?" Scooter said.

"Oh wow. Okay, okay, no problem. Accidents happen. Let me have a look," I said, standing.

Scooter looked me in the eye, screamed a high-pitched whine that slid down into a fat growl and, right then, deposited nearly four cups of feces onto the floor with a thick splash. Two piles, one from each leg of his athletic shorts, joined together in the middle making a mirror

image of his own rear end. He took a few steps back and laughed with hard affect. “Oh wow,” he echoed. “Did you pee your pants?”

“Oh Jesus Christ,” I said, just looking at it, the creaminess. Something about it suggested tacos, bits of red and green. The textural quality was goop, gruel. Scooter did not appear surprised. “Get your clothes off and get into the shower,” I commanded in a deep, authoritative tone.

Scooter, ever the agreeable fellow, dropped his shorts immediately and I noticed that there was significant dripping I would have to take care of before he could walk over the plot of carpet between him and the bathroom. It is something, in hindsight, I should have expected.

“Don’t move.” I said, grabbed vinyl gloves and a soapy rag and commenced with preliminary wiping. I kept my eye on the large picture window. The shades were drawn back. Nobody walked by, but I’m certain people would have benefited from seeing it, in the long run. A bit of good fortune and they would be scarred for life. Transcendent doubt. No window is safe. “Into the bathroom, now.”

A system, like the one at Dartmouth and the one outside the picture window, like routine and narrative, can only be tested when shocked.

“Yeah,” Scooter replied, smiling too hard to properly pinch the ‘Y’ at the beginning of the word.

As I angled the showerhead and turned the notch on the water knob to twelve-o’clock, lukewarm, I heard a grunt from behind me and the familiar gush of diarrheic evacuation. This time, it was a slightly larger, more putrefied movement with baroque complexity in the bouquet, an edge of sweetness amidst the expected stench. There is little one can think at times like these. At least it hadn’t been on the carpet.

“Get into the shower,” I said.

Scooter complied and began to whisper in falsetto with a special exaggerated scoop through the “you do”, “Why did you do that? Why did you do that? Why did you do that? . . .”, punctuated with little breaks to chuckle and whine. He stood and rocked, vestibular thrashing, flapped his hands hard. “You’re fine, dude. Everything is okay here. You don’t need to beat yourself up over it.”

The steam in the air caused the stink from the shit pile to sublime into something that could be felt on the skin. I worried about Scooter, his mind, and gagged a few times. Scooter’s self-flagellation became a skipping soundtrack and he too began to gag. But as often happens in times of real crisis, my mind moved into logistics:

Scooter is in the shower; there is a pile of feces in the bathroom; there is a pile of feces where Staff must later prepare and serve food; to maintain his quality of life, Scooter must be cleaned and Staff must pass a PRN for agitation; per Scooter’s PRN protocol, Staff will pass a physical sedative; the PRN cannot be passed until Scooter is cleaned; in order to reach the soap under the sink, Staff must first remove the bulk of the feces from the bathroom floor; Staff notes his vinyl gloves and begins transporting the feces by handfuls into the toilet; after approximately five minutes, Staff has cleared the bulk of the feces; Staff does not flush the toilet in order to preserve the temperature of Scooter’s shower; Staff steps over the remaining feces, discards his gloves, and fills a mop bucket with disinfectant and hot water; Staff puts on a new pair of gloves and mops the floor of the bathroom; Staff applies soap to the dish rag, verbally prompts Scooter to bend over, to which Scooter complies, and Staff physically assists Scooter in cleaning himself; Scooter remains agitated; “Why did you do that? Why did you do that? Why did you do that? . . .”; Staff verbally prompts Scooter to remain in the shower until Staff comes back with clean

clothes; Scooter complies; Staff exits the bathroom, discards his gloves and calls his supervisor to inform him of the incident, gain permission to pass the PRN, and request that his supervisor to come to Dartmouth and help with the cleaning process; Staff's supervisor complies; Staff prepares the PRN and clean clothes; Staff mops the floor of the bathroom a second time to ensure it has been disinfected; Staff verbally prompts Scooter out of the shower and physically assists him with drying off; Scooter remains agitated; Staff verbally prompts Scooter to dress himself and Scooter complies; Staff passes Scooter's PRN and verbally prompts him to rock in his room, allowing him time to de-escalate; Scooter complies; Staff tells Scooter he will check in in five minutes; Staff flushes the toilet and attends to the second pile of feces.

At Dartmouth, the television is audible from the kitchen.

"I don't know about y'all," Paula said, "but I just love addin' me some butter to my creamed spinach." Utter pornography, I thought.

The kitchen floor at Dartmouth is a single piece of linoleum cut to size. There are no nooks and crannies, which I imagined was an intentional feature to help repel spills. At the very least, I was thankful for it. I scooped feces into a plastic bag and felt my mind retreat into Zen-like quietude, a detachment from reality, a place that was utterly blank. Clinically, it might have been shock, but whatever it was I was thankful for it, too.

"Oh my," Paula had a mouthful of her dish, "this is so tasty y'all. I wish y'all could smell this. Just make this for dinner tonight and everyone'll think y'all are the best."

Despite her capacity to be annoying, Paula won me over. My mind needed something to fill it. If I'm honest with myself, I love butter as much as anyone. Maybe more. I thought that I might make creamed spinach for the guys some night.

Credit roll on Paula and my supervisor, Marc, walked through the door.

“How’s it going, dude?” Marc has worked directly with Scooter for a fifth of his life, five years. He has borne the brunt of Scooter’s most intense crises and essentially wrote the book on how Staff interacts with Scooter on a day-to-day basis. He is truly unflappable, unable to be surprised. A man-animal with sharp instincts. He ran his hand through his longish brown hair, moving it out of his eyes, patted his hard stomach, cracked his knuckles.

“Oh, you know. Rough morning.”

“Where’s Scooter?”

“He’s rocking in his room. I was about to go check on him after I mopped the floor.”

“Alright.” Marc, all business, went to see how Scooter was doing. Their voices were muffled, but it sounded like Scooter had calmed himself down. All I could make out was Scooter saying, “Well I know you are!”—the traditional greeting for Marc—and Marc’s reply, in his best Scooter impression, “Well I know you’re doing pretty good!” Where that greeting comes from, precisely, is between them. And then it was muted. Marc’s questions were soft, Scooter’s responses were softer.

After I finished mopping the floor, I went into Scooter’s room and stood in the doorway to assess the situation. Things looked normal. Scooter sat in his rocker, not rocking, and had a few stuffed animals and horse statues in his lap. Marc was sitting on Scooter’s bed, right next to the chair. I went and sat in my usual closet corner. . .

When one speaks of constructing or supporting a schedule, routine or narrative, it is easy to take those verbs at face-value. But there is a metaphor at work, and the metaphor is of a physical object—a schedule, routine and narrative are propelled, they are propped up, superimposed, they unfold and are therefore folded to begin with—and that metaphor is evidence for

narrative-as-complete-fiction. No version of reality abides by narrative rules, but some minds are better at pulling off the trick, creating the object, the narrative, better at kneading the bread, molding the clay.

So the difference between actual happening events and a narrative is the same as the difference between flour and baked bread. Scooter defecating on the floor? That flour could potentially make good bread, but not without the right tools and supports.

Imagine if this were the case:

Credit roll on Paula and my supervisor, Joe, walked through the door.

“How’s it going, dude?” Joe had been the supervisor at the house on Dartmouth Street for a few weeks. He had only heard about Scooter’s behaviors in paperwork and by anecdote. He was trained by Marc, the company’s resident Scooter expert, and had experienced similar diagnoses in other houses. There was a nervous quality in his voice at that point, but, in general, he laughs often and gives a vibe of stability in his posture. He is neither strong nor weak. Average height. Average haircut. Beard. Work hands, one of which he used to wipe a bit of sweat from his brow line.

“Oh, you know. Rough morning.”

“Where’s Scooter?”

“He’s rocking in his room. I was going to go check on him after I mopped the floor.”

“Alright.” Joe, all business, went to the storage closet and put on a pair of rubber gloves. “Hi, Joe.” Scooter said from his room. It was barely audible. Joe ignored the greeting for the time being, content on mopping up the feces as quickly as possible so that we could both go check on Scooter together.

After we finished mopping the floor, I went into Scooter's room and stood in the doorway to assess the situation. Things looked normal. Scooter sat in his rocker, not rocking, and had a few stuffed animals and horse statues in his lap. Joe was sitting on the edge of Scooter's bed. I went and sat in my usual closet corner. . .

. . .“Well hi there,” Scooter said. I could hear the sedation from the PRN in his voice. “Bob's going to take you to S.E. today?”

“Scooter, we'll discuss that in a second.” My supervisor said. “Let's finish the discussion we were just having. How's your head feeling?”

“Fine.”

“Is your head feeling fine, or is your head feeling bad?”

“Is your head feeling bad?” Scooter replied and looked up at the ceiling. His eyes ticked, vibrated hard.

“Does your head have pain, or is it telling you to do funny things?”

“Is it telling you to do funny things?” The conversation paused.

“Is it telling you to do funny things, or does it hurt?” I asked, checking for consistency.

“Does it hurt?” Scooter replied, quieter this time.

The Staff looked at each other apologetically. “Does your head hurt, is it telling you to do funny things, or are you just feeling a little mixed up?”

“Are you feeling mixed up?” Scooter's response was quick, loud.

“Well, what do you say we talk about Monkeyville?” My supervisor asked.

“Yeah.” Scooter said, evenly now.

“Who lives in Monkeyville?”

“Monkeyville’s Uncles do.”

“What do they do in Monkeyville?”

“They sell monkeys.”

“Who buys the monkeys?”

“The green men in their spaceship.”

“One thing I can say about Monkeyville,” I said, “Is that it sounds like they’ve got *economy*. Maybe I should look into this monkey business.”

“Har, har, har,” My supervisor said, nudging Scooter on the arm.

“Yeah,” Scooter said.

“He laughed at that once, twice actually.” I said.

“Really? It’s a pretty bad pun, so I don’t blame you for not laughing now. Who else lives in Monkeyville?”

“Does Scooter live in Monkeyville?”

“Anyone else?”

Scooter lifted one of the statues from his lap up to his face, flicking it a few times with one of his loose fingers. His eyes bounced between the statue, my supervisor and me. “Some horses.”

My supervisor leaned back onto Scooter’s bed and kicked his feet up a bit. “Wow! Developing the narrative! Awesome shit, dude. You’ve been telling that exact story for as long as I’ve known you. This is the first time there’s been horses.”

“Yeah, we’ve been working on it,” I said.

“What do the horses do in Monkeyville?”

“They run. You want me to leave?” Scooter said urgently.

“Okay. If that’s what you want, sure. But we’re going to come check on you in a little bit. Later dude.” I said.

“Yeah.” . . .

So what are the actualities that took place that day? Since I am trying to be a generous narrator, I will tell you. Marc was acting as supervisor while Joe was transitioning into the new house. I called both of them, and both of them showed up. Marc first, and then Joe. All three of us were talking to Scooter in his bedroom.

Or was it that way at all? Often, my memories of actuality change as I construct them into narratives. My notes aren’t of any help. They simply read, “Marc and Joe arrive for support,” and then there are reference points to rebuild the conversation. Overwhelmingly, my notes focus on the addition of the horse to the Monkeyville narrative. The symbolic center of the scene is what really matters here—how we arrive to that center ought to be efficient, feel effortless, as if it could not have happened any other way. It needs to serve what follows in terms of plot and setting up more symbolic centers of scenes. It is merely *techné*. What is at stake is *poesis*, the moment that asks the reader to interpret the horse in light of growing conjecture on the nature of narrative. What does it mean that Scooter progressed his narrative after experiencing a state of entropy?

Or another test.

. . . Scooter had just gotten out of the shower after defecating on the floor and was rocking alone in his room. He could orient himself in neither space nor time, his sensory systems were all out of whack, sounds seemed to be coming from everywhere, even inside him, and the light creeping in from the windows was devastatingly bright. The mass of his body began to lose

its boundaries, he folded into his chair, he was the chair and felt the chair at once, he experienced true empathy with the threadbare rocker. Through his disorientation, he saw a horse statuette with a neon green blob on its side. He liked its unreality. Scooter focused all of his energy into his hand, his arm, to move over there, to grab the horse and take it into his lap and examine it. The horse, for one reason or another, hadn't washed out with everything else. Perhaps it was an item that contained a complete memory; perhaps it ran across a recently harvested field, a man and an autistic boy riding a tractor along the edge, a great open sky, birds screaming to one another, "Hi, Bird. Hi, Bird." And the horse continued to run. Ran and ran until he punctured through the Monkeyville city limits. On the other side? A recently harvested field, great open sky, birds screaming to one another, "Hi, Bird. Hi, Bird." In the center of the field, a knuckle-dragging group of great ape men muttering gibberish with matching tattoos: Monkeyville's Uncles in cursive script. Behind them, cages full of monkeys, and above, a flying saucer, flashing blue, green and red, Martian men viewable through the port holes.

. . . There is an unsurpassable boundary between Scooter and Staff's reality, but it is clear that we do not see the same thing. There will always be something omitted from my interpretation. This isn't much of a claim; the same could be said about any two objects that exist in space. But crossing that boundary is possible, only achievable through narrative. It requires searching and researching, questions and imagination, and perhaps most importantly, analogues from one's own experience. Narrative is empathy, and the greatest irony of empathy is that it must highlight any boundaries before it can call them into question, thus creating an awareness of otherness that haunts me.

Date: _____

Incident Report:

- 1. Please describe everything that happened prior to the incident, noting any unusual environmental factors or behavioral indicators.*

Over the last few weeks, Staff had been getting a little bit too comfortable in the routine. He's been showing up to work fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes late most days. He's sick and fucking tired of working doubles, of being up at five in the morning, of knowing what will happen and knowing, down to the minute, when it will happen. Staff hasn't had an actual conversation with Scooter in days, who has been rocking happily in his room, Staff thought. And how's Scooter been? Staff really doesn't know at this point because he's too distracted by his own boredom. Scooter's been making it through the routine, just like Staff. He hasn't been asking to do anything though. He's been refusing sensory activities and sorting tasks, and Staff hasn't been pushing the matter. Routine, routine, routine, routine—like that, for two weeks, Staff and Scooter shuffled along. Today wasn't any different. Abbreviated sending off of both JJ and Topher, Scooter in his room, Staff checking out.

- 2. Please describe what occurred during the incident, noting Staff supports and if a PRN was used.*

Scooter shit on the floor. Pretty simple to describe. And Staff supported Scooter with an adrenaline kick that was righteous for Staff's psyche. Scooter woke up, too. A lot, actually, too much. Staff couldn't help but assume some blame while all of this was going on because his brain seemed to be working better than it was prior to the incident. Staff had forgotten that Scooter isn't just a regular guy, and that Special Needs means something specific for people who have them, and that Staff is one of maybe a handful of people who has a good idea of how to meet Scooter's needs, and Staff suddenly started to feel like he had really fucked up, and that

now Scooter was suffering the consequences of Staff's laziness, and that now Staff was suffering the consequences of Staff's laziness. And yes, of course, Staff passed a PRN, which is shortening Scooter's lifespan, which means that Staff is also responsible, in part, for Scooter's death, which, due to his medication regimen at large, is guaranteed to be untimely.

3. *Please describe how the incident was resolved, noting how the individual responded to the natural, chemical and Staff supports used.*

If Staff is being honest, he really finds Scooter's mind completely inaccessible right now and most of the time. Physical indicators? He sat in his chair and started rocking. He looked like he had just been given a tranquilizer. He stopped shitting on the floor, one would assume, because he had none left inside of him. Or because he didn't want to any more. Or because whatever sparked his defiance, the mechanism inside of him that tells him to push every boundary until it breaks, had moved on or changed into something else. Or he had simply received the help he had needed. Staff could see that something was happening inside of Scooter's mind, his eyes were moving like the machinations of a typewriter, but Staff can't gauge his responses without knowing what, precisely, he is responding too. The best Staff can do is imagine.

[Head rocking through space, basic orientation: here, corner, rocker, bedroom, Dartmouth Street, not in the van, not S.E., not home on the farm, not in-patient psych closet]. Is it time for lunch? Is it time for lunch? Is it time for lunch? Is it time for lunch? Is it time for lunch? Is it time for lunch? Is it time for lunch? [Head rocking through , basic orientation: not in-patient psych closet, here, corner, rocker, bedroom, Dartmouth Street, here, corner, rocker, bedroom, Dartmouth Street]. Where's Bob? Where's Bob? Where's Bob? Where's Bob? [Head through , orientation: here, corner, rocker, , corner, rocker, corner rocker here, not in-patient psych closet]. Is Bob going to make you some lunch? Is Bob going to make you some

lunch? Is Bob going to make you some lunch? Is Bob going to make you some lunch? Is it time for lunch? [through , ori nta ion: here, , , , , not in-patient psych closet] Is it time to take your shower? Is it time to take your shower? Is it time to take your shower? Is it time to take your shower? Is it time to take your shower? Is it time to take your shower? [, o n i n: he , rock , , he , not , in-patient psych closet, in-patient psych closet, in-patient psych closet]. It is time to take your shower, Scooter. It is time to take your shower. You need to find Bob, you need to get his attention and tell him that it is time to take your shower, and then have lunch, and then go to S.E. You have to get out of here now, and you have to pee your pants.

After Scooter asked us to leave, Marc, Joe and I went outside to discuss the plan for the rest of the day. Marc and I each had a cigarette. Joe doesn't smoke. The breeze was zephyrous, the mood halcyon, the puns abound.

"That's a shitty way to start a day," Marc said.

"Yeah, you might be in for a shit storm later today, Bob," Joe said.

"What was that if not a shit storm?" I said. "Jesus fuck. I hope the guy's okay."

"I have my doubts," Marc said. "He gets like this every year around this time."

"Was that when I was back at school? After that first summer?"

"Yeah man, it's in his case file. He's diagnosed with cyclical behaviors. Every fall and every spring."

"Goddamnit. What do we do?"

"Try to keep him out of in-patient psych. Honestly, defecating on the floor isn't a big deal. It got so bad last year with this self-hate speech and really harsh ass kickings, and his mood

swings got to the point where all the Staff were about to quit, like weeping, sobbing and moaning right into hysterical laughter, and then just a totally blank face for like five minutes, and all this would go on for hours and hours, days, nonstop, so we had to put him in in-patient psych. They were full so they emptied out a closet and fucking locked him in there. He was naked for like two days until I went in to visit him. I went in there and gave him a sponge bath and food and clean clothes and whatever. The hospital staff was looking at me like: ‘what the fuck? oh my god!’” Marc laughed, “I was just like: ‘Okay, Scooter you can kick my ass later,’” Marc feigned dodging, “‘let’s just eat this Salisbury steak.’ Needless to say we brought him back immediately and he was fine for months. Until now, really.”

The silence that followed Marc’s anecdote was nearly cinematic. Joe and I looked at the ground. At the same spot, it felt like, and Marc blew a plume of smoke straight up. And the smoke dissipated into the air, swept down the street until it collided hard with the nearest windbreak, bent around it and continued to fly, thinner and thinner, until it mingled with exhaust fumes and oxygen exhaled through trees, a few parts per billion, scattering out and out until the smoke became immeasurably sparse, until it entropied, became something other than smoke, into oneness with every other gas-soluble pollutant and breathable atmosphere.

“Alright man,” Joe said, “I’m headed back to the office. Call us if you need anything.”

“Yeah, me too.” Marc said. “Are you guys going to do S.E. today?”

“I think we should. Scooter seems fine now, and we should at least try it. Make sure to keep him on his routine,” I said. “You guys have a good one, thanks for the help.”

This is a point at which the narrative must change its course. Classically, a complicating incident. A new schema, one that had been lurking, finally presents itself with full force. So what does that mean for the old schema, the old paradigm, or in Scooter’s case, the routine? Staff’s

reaction is to continue to enforce that routine, to attempt to stabilize Scooter's reality with the familiar. But Scooter's sense is more post-modern, it favors defamiliarization, destabilization and subversion. It is almost as if Scooter is merely attempting to take control of the narrative, to lead it toward entropy, to communicate what is inside of him, to make the intensity of his reality felt to his audience, his Staff, in an act of forced empathy.

Or is it simply a mind unfettered, the diagnosis, sublimated like smoke into breeze?

Date _____

Time: 1200 to 1215—Activity: Transport—Location: S.E.—Staff Initials: BP

Time: 1215 to 1230—Activity: Schedule, Rocking—Location: S.E.—Staff Initials: BP

Time: 1230 to 1235—Activity: Work Task—Location: S.E.—Units: 25—Staff Initials: BP

Time: 1235 to 1245—Activity: Sorting Task (2)—Location: S.E.—Staff Initials: BP

Time: 1245 to 1300—Activity: Transport—Location: S.E.—Staff Initials: BP

Narrative Notes:

Scooter and Staff arrive at S.E. and park near the far end of the back lot. It is a nice day in the fall, sunny, low fifties. Staff puts the van in park. Scooter, hearing this, says, "You sure did, didn't you?" and flaps his hands. "You sure did!" Staff replies "Let's do it, man." The two walk past a group of smokers, Marc, Megan, Libra, another Megan, and enter S.E. through the back door. The two walk through a stairwell and Scooter refuses to walk through the second door. Staff verbally prompts Scooter to enter S.E., and Scooter complies. It begins with noise, an absolute sea of chatter. Scooter has lost his sense of volume. A door creak sounds like a thunderstorm, footsteps sound like a beating drum, every voice is screaming. "Hi, Gerald!" "Well hi there, Scooter!" Staff and Scooter walk to grab Scooter's picture schedule and

paperwork, past the center of S.E. Sensory information explodes, a sea of human bodies move through the kitchen like a film with missing frames, tracking shot, jump cuts, their faces jumbled and distorted. A mesh of noise like static. The two continue their walk, past the shredding room. From inside, a radio DJ is speaking about this week's top forty so loud that Scooter thinks it is a voice inside his head. Scooter enters the documentation room where it is quiet, grabs his picture schedule, and Staff grabs a clip board, pen, paper.

Staff and Scooter exit the documentation room and make their way to the 'a-room'. Sensory information explodes. K. is howling about cold fish sticks and the sound penetrates Scooter's body tissues. Jon is spouting absolute gibberish, a muck of nonsense words with the exception of 'turtle'; his volume is maximum, his laugh insane. Scooter sits in the corner behind the door, near the coat hooks, and Staff pulls up a chair. Silently, Staff takes the binder from Scooter and begins to build a picture schedule. Staff sticks 'Peel Labels' to the top but it lands a bit crooked. Staff pulls 'Peel Labels' from the Velcro and resticks it. Scooter hears the sound of distinct fibers separating and they each echo ad infinitum.

Staff and Scooter go to the shred room to get twenty-five empty medication bottles with the labels still on. Scooter doesn't know if the DJ is a voice inside his head, his own voice, Staff's voice, the voice of his step-father beckoning him into an outbuilding during harvest, a nurse in an in-patient psych ward, God himself, some formless narrator instigating him to find the boundaries again. Telling him to reach out for something. To reach out again, to grab reality by the hair and not let go. Scooter begins to laugh loudly. His eyes lack coordination. His posture is forward. He is showing all of his teeth. Scooter and staff take the bottles back to the a-room. Staff and Scooter sit at a table and begin to peel labels. "You want to go for a walk on the Key Watch Trail?"

“Not today. We might go back to Dartmouth soon. How are you feeling, Scooter?”

“Fine, Bob.” Scooter’s affect is tight and he does not look at any one thing for longer than a second.

“How’s your head feeling?”

“Fine, Bob.” Scooter begins to chuckle.

“Does it feel fine, or does it hurt” Scooter’s affect returns to normal.

“Does it hurt?”

“Is it pain or are you just feeling a little funny?”

“Are you feeling a little funny?”

“Okay. Let’s try to get focused on our labels now. You really have to focus on them. That will help your head.”

“Is it pain?” Scooter winces, begins to moan.

“Do you want to leave? Do you want to go back to Dartmouth?”

“No!”

“Okay. Peel this label please.”

...

“Do you want to go for a walk on the Key Watch Trail?”

...

“Are you feeling a little funny?”

...

“Is it pain?”

...

“Okay. Peel this label please.”

...

Scooter takes unusually long to complete ‘Peel Labels’. Staff is worried. He and Scooter go to the cabinet where Scooter’s sorting activities are stored. Scooter’s head continues to echo a cacophony at maximum volume. J. turns on a vacuum cleaner and it howls. The soundscape in Scooter’s mind is given a jolt, an input spike that he can feel shoot out the top of his head. J. echoes the sound in almost perfect mimicry. A voice tells Scooter to locate the boundaries at any cost. Staff takes the cabinet key from a lockbox. Scooter lifts his arms, he reaches out, he gropes at the top of Staff’s head, looking for hair, which had been falling out since Staff was nineteen; Scooter’s hands mash and squeeze, at first slowly, searching; he moans, his brow furrows hard and he moans; he appears to be watching himself; Staff turns around; Scooter gropes at Staff’s face, across his beard, knocks off his glasses; “Everything is okay, Scooter. You’re okay. We’re at S.E. We’re both here. . .” and so on; and Scooter goes totally blank, escapes himself, slaps Staff’s face many times, boxes his ears, claws for hair that is not there, finds the boundaries for a moment, finds a limit, makes his mind felt, and Staff becomes possessed by his own body: Scooter’s face dominates the visual field, sallow, sunken, expressionless, the periphery all gone, covered by Scooter’s hands, the chest tightens, the face blanks, words exit, hand into chest, guiding, gestural, saying, “move back”, saying, “we’re both here”, saying, “you’ve found a boundary”, saying, “you ought to sit down”, and the legs walk forward in measured steps, right, left, “move back, we’re here”, but the hands want to ball up and swing, the legs want to dash, “it is okay, we’re both here”, the jaw clenches, the nose gasps and flares, “it is okay, we’re both here”, no, measured, right, left, right, left, and an infinitesimal timescape—where has everyone else gone?, why isn’t anyone helping me?, do I need help?, do I have this under control? where are the sea turtles and the vacuum?, did I make it to the cabinet?, is the key still in my hand?, is it

in the cabinet door?, did I leave the cabinet open?, can I remember what was in the cabinet?, if I can, did I leave it open?—rings, cylinders, beads, human voices in piles, the radio DJ and the voice of God, Velcro peel, Scooter’s hard laughter, Scooter moans and a separation occurs— Scooter is in his rocker, Staff in a plastic chair.

“Hi, Bob.”

“Hi, Scooter.”

Is it sublimation?

Is it entropy?

“Bob,” Marc snapped. “Jon came and told me that you might need a hand. Scooter, take these meds, okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You alright, man?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

“You pulled Bob’s hair.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Are *you* okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You pulled Bob’s hair. Why did you do that?”

“It’s okay, Scooter.”

“Why did you do that?”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Scooter. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Why did you do that?”

“Is that something we need to discuss? Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, why did you do that, Scooter?”

“They were telling you to.”

“Who was, Scooter?”

“In your head.”

“Were the people telling you to do it in your head?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, Scooter. You’re doing a great job, man. Just do some rocking, relax in that big ol’ chair. Marc, can you sit with him for a minute? I need to step out for a cigarette.”

“Of course, man.”

“Bob will come back?”

“Yes. Don’t worry about that. I’m not leaving. Five minutes, okay?”

I walked back to the cabinet, shut the door and locked it, and went back outside the way Scooter and I came in. Behind S.E. is all prairie reserve, long fields of tall grass that stretch on forever. The flowers in spring and summer are bright and numerous, but it was fall, almost winter it seemed, and I had nothing to say to the other smokers. I had nothing to say about the prairie reserve or flowers, nothing to say about Scooter or his narrative. It was merely

psychosocial de-escalation but with a serious sense of urgency. It was a time to listen for trains and lawnmowers and the trees, to find the ground again.

It was hard to tell how long I was outside, but I finished one cigarette and lit a second. My contract with tobacco products has always had an admittedly problematic philosophical foundation. The trade-off feels even with each discrete unit, with each smoke: a few hours of neurological leveling for a few hours off my lifespan. Fair trade, I think. It is a form of medication, like Scooter's PRN, and also a physical addiction, no doubt, like Scooter's scheduled meds. But the unfortunate reality is that living in this world almost requires some kind of escape, and medication approximates that escape quite well, most of the time.

I walked back into S.E., into the a-room, where Scooter had Marc by the hair with both hands, pulling hard. Marc's face was a little flush, but his voice level. "Scooter, let go," he said. "Scooter, let go," I said, "Are you going to let go or do I need to help you?" Scooter did not respond with his words, instead he only moaned. Marc had him by the wrists and was trying to resist the pull. I worked my fingers between Scooter's fingers and Marc's scalp and started to uncurl his grip one digit at a time. Marc's hair is well-kempt, longish and brown, clumps of it wound up in Scooter's loosed hand. Scooter again attempted to get a grip on Marc's hair, so the two of us coordinated. "I'll take that hand," Marc said, "Okay, I've got the other one," I said and began the same process on the second half of the grip. The whole ordeal lasted no more than thirty or forty seconds. Or two minutes? Or five?

But how does Marc react to these behaviors? Does his body tell him to fight, tell him to run? Does Scooter pull him into a world that is fractal and in pieces? Or does his experience lead him somewhere else? Is it an expected state, familiar? Is it quiet, Zen-like? Or is it only waves of pain? Or is it a slow crawl up to a maximum and then ecstasy? A full adrenaline high? Or does

the animal inside wake up? Is he driven out to bars on the weekends to get laid, to emasculate softer men, to compete and to win? He has borne the brunt of Scooter's most aggressive behaviors and has been working with Scooter for five years, and my imagination failed to reach empathy.

"We're going back to Dartmouth right now," Marc said.

"Let's hold hands, Scooter," I said.

I locked fingers with Scooter's, ran my arm along the inside of his and pulled his elbow into my flank. Marc did the same on the other side, and we briskly walked to the van.

"Scooter, that's enough." Marc said. "We're going back to Dartmouth. Now you can get in the van yourself or I can help you get in."

"Yeah." Scooter said, laughing.

What ensued was almost a dance. Scooter, with his back to the van, stepped into any gap between Marc and I, and Marc and I closed the gap. Scooter would reach out for one of our faces and we would back off, or the other would step in to block, or we would bluff forward and Scooter would step back. It was an exercise in bodily communication, in male posturing, misdirection, redirection, control and confusion. We both knew that helping Scooter, pushing him into the van, would only lead to more problems, but we had to make it look like we were going to. I put my hand on Scooter's back and gave him a gentle push toward the van, corralled him back between Marc and I, and he braced for it, pushing back. Marc began to give him a head rub and high fives, little bits of sensory input to attempt to re-ground Scooter, and Scooter would pause for a second, go blank, then quickly dash for Marc's head. Marc dodged; I redirected Scooter's attention to me.

“You want to stay at S.E.,” Scooter said. But the S.E. environment had betrayed him, overwhelmed his senses, there was no use in staying, and we needed to get him to the relative silence of Dartmouth. Scooter eventually either got sick of the dance or one of our prompts caught on, and he climbed into the back seat of the van. I drove fast, Marc rode shotgun.

“Hi, Scooter.”

“Hi, Marc.” Scooter’s affect had normalized. The vestibular stimulation from the moving van had helped him reorient himself in space.

“You’re doing a great job, Scooter.”

“Hey, Scooter,” I said, “can you tell us a story?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s the story about?”

“A dog.”

“Oh yeah? What did the dog do?” Scooter looked up at the roof of the van, his eyes moving in tiny jerks.

“He barked.”

“What was he barking at?”

“Some dogs.”

“A dog barking at some dogs. I believe it. They were probably just talking, saying ‘Hi’ to one another. That’s my interpretation anyway. Your story has verisimilitude, and that’s an important quality for a story to have.”

“Yeah,” Scooter said.

“Where is the dog from?” Marc asked.

“From Monkeyville.”

“Who else lives in Monkeyville?”

And so on, for five minutes, until we reached Dartmouth.

Despite the break, Marc and I kept up the pace. We both grabbed on of Scooter’s hands and led him into the house, past his roommates JJ and Topher and into his room. Scooter sat in his rocker and began to rock. Marc sat on Scooter’s bed. I sat in my usual closet nook.

“Can we talk for a little bit, Scooter?”

“Yeah.”

“Should we talk about Monkeyville?”

“You want Marc and Bob to leave?”

“Okay, man. One of us will be back to check on you in five minutes.”

“Yeah.”

And finally, resolution. Marc and I stepped out for a smoke and decided to go for a drink later. I told him I would probably have a few in me by then and left for my apartment. End of the workday, end of my shift.

CHAPTER V: MARC

“One of the first years I worked with Scooter, when he was in the middle of his big behavioral cycle, we were out at the park. I was trying to get him to swing and he just wasn’t having it. And then all of a sudden he stripped off all of his clothes and was completely naked, screaming at the top of his lungs. Looking back on it, it was pretty funny. There were kids everywhere with their parents. *Everyone* was looking, I think. I mean you can’t really tell when you’re in the middle of something like that, but you can sort of feel their looks. You know that you and Scooter are the most interesting thing going on at that park by far. And then he just started pulling my hair and punching me and whatnot. This is when he was younger, he was a real ass kicker then. His stuff now is small-time, relatively speaking. It’s amazing how you react though. You just figure out how to take care of it. I got him back into the van and got his clothes back on and we left. And now, I’m like, I think about how sometimes, yeah, I would love to strip naked in public and beat someone’s fucking brains out. It must feel great on some level.”

“I’ve seen Scooter do things that are literally superhuman. I was working a shift at Dartmouth, back when I was Staff there, and Scooter was in the middle of his big behavioral cycle. It had been kind of a rough day, he had been really aggressive but I managed to avoid any sort of real incident. He was rocking in his room and I was watching TV or folding laundry something. I remember, I was folding a pair of Topher’s jeans. Then I just heard him scream really loud one time and then this sort of crashing noise came from his room. There used to be two-by-fours screwed into the walls all around his room at like waist level. Each one was screwed in with five or six screws. I ran in there to check it out and he had ripped one of them out with his bare hands. He was just sitting in his chair, rocking holding a two-by-four with

screws sticking out of the bottom, and he said 'I know you are'. Just like really happy, like how he usually is. I couldn't help it. I was dying of laughter."

"Do you remember meeting Eddie? He was Scooter's Staff at Dartmouth for a while. Once Eddie was taking him to a doctor's appointment at the hospital, this is when Scooter was in the middle of his big behavioral cycle, and they were walking through the parking lot. Needless to say, they didn't make it inside. Megan and I were meeting them there to make sure they had backup, and when we pulled up, we saw Scooter holding Eddie on the ground. Scooter had ripped his shirt into like five pieces and was just beating on him, just bam, bam, bam, and Eddie just covered himself up. Megan and I rushed over and he started beating on us, too. That one didn't end well. The cops showed up and of course they have no fucking idea what they're doing. So they were telling him to stop and like wrestling him to the ground. Telling him to stop resisting and whatever. And Megan and Eddie and I were like, 'He has autism! He has autism!'. He ended up in in-patient psych after that one for about a week. The cops have no fucking idea what they're doing."

"The way I think about autism is that it must be like having a head full of LSD all the time. Can you imagine? Just having the most unpredictable crazy shit going on all the time. Also just seeing the most beautiful, unimaginable information coming in from outside. Feeling literally at one with everything around you, losing track of where you end and everything else begins. It's a sensory disorder which is obviously really vague and doesn't describe a lot, but I've seen studies where they treated autism with LSD. Things got a lot worse in some cases, but it also had paradoxical effects, where the guys they gave it to had really big increases in language

use, attention, everything. Really, everyone should hallucinate at some point in their life just because it's a good experience, you learn a lot, especially if you do what we do, but I wonder sometimes what would happen if we gave Scooter a hit. It would probably be really bad, but I'm so curious. His mom emailed me once, talking about how she read that weed can be an effective way to treat autism, and she was like 'Do you think this is a good idea for Scooter?' I thought it was funny. Put weed in a group home full of degenerate stoners like me and you? Bad idea. But I wonder sometimes."

"I brought Scooter to his high school graduation ceremony and you remember K. from S.E.? He was in Scooter's graduating class. I put Scooter in one of my suits, he looked like a fucking badass, he's actually a really handsome guy, you know? But right when they walked in, K. just plopped down instantly. He was shaking his head like 'no fucking way, you all can go fuck yourselves.' And Scooter, I'll never forget, he said, 'What are you doin'!' Just yelled it out. My god. And then he stepped right over K., walked up to the stage, sat down directly next to it, rocked and echoed every word the principal said. I felt so fucking happy I can't even describe it. That's one of the best stories I have about him, really one of his greatest moments, I think."

"We were going to a doctor's appointment at the hospital, just the two of us. This is actually why we always do two people for doctor's appointments now. We were in the waiting room, and seriously, who feels comfortable in a waiting room, especially if you have autism and you're in the middle of your big behavioral cycle. So I couldn't find an open chair and we were standing, and he just started pulling my hair out. Handfuls of hair, ripped right out of my head. This went on for, oh I don't know, like a half hour or forty five minutes. I remember seeing

nurses walk by, the room was full of people, and nobody helped me. Nobody. I mean, at least come grab my cell phone out of my pocket and call someone for christsake. I'm not too proud of this, but do you know how I got out? I hit him in the balls. Not really hard, but like a firm smack and he backed up right away. I told everyone that I managed to get my cell phone out of my pocket which was an outright lie, but whatever. That's red tape I don't want to have to deal with. Anyway, I called Megan and she came right away. I had big bald patches on my head and I was bleeding everywhere. That was another trip to in-patient psych. You can't imagine how pissed off I was at the medical fucking professionals who walked by and did nothing. I actually confronted the people at the desk about it, and they told me that they didn't do anything because thought we were brothers. But now, when I go to a waiting room, I can *always* find an open chair."

"Last year, right around this time, when he was in the middle of his big behavioral cycle, he pissed on the floor in his bedroom. I went in there and cleaned it up or whatever. He had just covered the floor in piss. So I cleaned it up and talked to him and then went back out to keep washing the dishes or whatever I had been doing. And he pisses again, just as much. Like where is this coming from? So I went in to clean it up, but this time he grabbed me by the hair and pulled me into the corner of his bed. He opened his mouth and dragged his teeth across the top of my scalp. That was a weird one. He doesn't really bite any more. But this was just last year, so yeah, today was a rough day, but be prepared for it to get worse, man."

"This might seem like a stretch, but we've talked a lot about Scooter and autism, Bob, and I'm going to tell you what I think. Think about how the autism rates are skyrocketing, and

think about savantism. The question to me is whether or not savantism is going to start happening more often. You could look at it one of two ways: it's an exceptional case, a freak occurrence in the disability, or it's what it looks like when the autistic brain develops extra sensory resources where they can be put to use, when nature gets it right. Okay, yeah, what I'm saying is, this sounds like a stretch, I admit it, but I think autistic people are like a different stage of human being. I'm just going to say it: I really firmly believe what we call autism is the next step of human evolution. Or at least I want that to be true. Just imagine a world where everyone is a savant. Like, I'm just going to sit over here and do the most beautiful math and you can just go do whatever you want. Things like evolution take a long time to sort out, and I think we're seeing the beginning of it. How long has the term 'autism' been around? Like the early forties. Do you think there were autistic people before that? Yeah, of course there were. Probably in ancient civilizations, too. We used to call them shamans or mystics or seers or whatever, but I think they would be called autistic today. Shit, everyone is autistic. I don't know what evidence I have for that, and I think it's more important for people to try to understand 'autism' than it is for us to make it mystical, except that working with these dudes, I've seen literally hundreds of cases of autism, these dudes have changed the way I understand everything, and if that's not mystical I don't know what is."

CHAPTER VI: CONJECTURE

The narrative should be working toward its climax. The elements have been placed, structures built, forms explored, and ideas tested. What is in order is a system shock, an explosion of elements to start a new universe, a new entropy, a new sublime. I feel myself arriving at the top of an upward slope, but the summit simply does not exist. In actuality, Scooter is reaching the peak of his cycle, and I'm stuck in the narrative.

But whose narrative? The impulse is to say that it is mine, some collision of an empathic self and a writerly self. Scooter's by proxy. Marc's in actuality. And the story: mining our shared experiences in an attempt to comment on empathy. The purpose of the narratives carry the same unexciting altruism that drives me into the job, to Scooter, to be an upstanding young man who is sensitive to the wants and needs of the other.

It is true that narrative, that crafting experiences into a kind of fiction, is an effective way to communicate the body and the mind, to push an audience into feeling, into experiencing a reality. But there is always a complication: the entropic nature of actuality. Once or twice a year, Scooter's reality falls apart. Staff's by proxy. Any behaviors outside of this cycle appear to happen for one of two reasons. The first and most admirable reason is because Scooter thinks it's funny to push boundaries. I can relate to that. The second, and I relate to this, too, is a test to see who can weather the storm; who will come back after he loses control?

But I'm here in the narrative, basking in the gloam of self-flagellation, abandoning the story, abandoning compassion, abandoning Scooter, who is, at this precise moment, rocking in his bedroom at the house on Dartmouth Street. It was this week last year that Scooter was locked naked in the closet. The terrible truth is that my imagination places him in trauma. It is beyond

my control to imagine it that way always, and I wish I could do more to fix it, and I wish I could make his life easier, and those are self-serving in the way that self-flagellation always is. As if the other Staff, the rest of Scooter's support network, and Scooter himself are unable to manage what he has been managing for twenty-three years, as if he is incapable of feeling fine. Regardless, I am here in the narrative, compelled to persevere.

The dimples of paint on Scooter's ceiling wobble into neat squares then seep back out – a resultant single-colored mosaic, cracks and lines in the white like a projection screen that just won't stay still. And here his whole life can play back: The sweeping of a crop duster far off, tumbling hills and a blank, pale blue sky. Scooter sits on a tractor while it works, but he doesn't drive. The waves in his hair flex under wind gusts and his formidable incisors shine at dawn, mid-autumn, harvest. He breathes through his mouth habitually and has one slightly wandering eye, but the normalness of his features, that he is average-looking and average-sized, his light brown irises and hair, his hard chin and high nose, his high cheek bones all make him appear rustic and unassuming. A good farm boy.

Someone drives the tractor, but it is not clear who because Scooter's attention is intense and brief. Robbins and jays shriek to one another, "Hi bird, Hi bird," and the gorging tires of the tractor shake the ground, the bluishness of the sky, then treetops' gasp, beef's low, hawks folded and plunging, cornstalk sway, a perfume of manure, stickiness of a vinyl seat, and finally they coalesce into a single sensory boom and the tractor carries on. Until whoever is driving the tractor parks at an out building, takes Scooter inside, closes the door, and this is where the movie stops most days.

Why does my mind return to this place? It is merely my own conjecture, trying to make sense of an event that has been alleged but never discussed. Something that Scooter and I don't discuss. Yet Scooter gives evidence for it in the way that only Scooter can. Screaming fits and weeping and hysterical laughter:

“Hi, Bill,” he says of his stepfather, “Does that dick feel good in your ass?” And so on.

And so on, always here.

And so on.

And this is where the movie stops most days.

CHAPTER VII: RETURN TO MONKEYVILLE

I have spent many hours attempting to understand Scooter and his reality. I've read everything from memoirs about autistic loved ones to neurological studies about autism to websites administrated by crazy people who claim vaccinations as the cause of autism. The problem is that, while always compelling in one way or another, the point of all the work I have encountered is like a case study. By understanding so-and-so-who-has-autism, we can move toward an understanding of autism in general. That thesis is in many cases true, but nothing I have read illuminates Scooter more than my experiences with him. The memoirs don't exist in a group home, and most of them are about children. The scientific research sails clear over my head. The websites administrated by crazy people are, of course, crazy. So I've moved into my own laboratory, into a kind of narrative.

Scooter, in his own way, offered to me that mode of understanding with the telling and retelling of his story: Monkeyville. What is Monkeyville? How can it persist even in times of extreme crisis? What does it look like? Where did he find his terms? Is it borrowed and assembled from pieces of other stories, or is it wholly original? Where does it exist in his mind? Or is it simply a trained response? Did some imaginative Staff or teacher put the pieces in place? I have asked those closest to him for the genesis of the story, I have scoured his case file, I have asked him and have not found any answers. All that is left is to imagine. To imagine is to seek empathy.

Somewhere in the deep jungle, there was a civilization of monkeys. They had come a long way from their simian cohorts, building structures, bowling alleys, houses and a street

called Dartmouth. They had farms overflowing with corn. They domesticated animals, dogs and horses especially. They lived peacefully, they had much to eat and drink, and all was well in the city called Monkeyville.

One season, during harvest, a group of monkeys discovered that they could see more than the rest of the population. They built a great dish and used it to send a message into outer space. They spoke of the great resources and prosperousness of Monkeyville, they spoke of its monkeys, of its bowling alleys, of its horses and dogs. But the rest of the monkeys said that their work was insane, that the hope to find something in the vast, entropic abyss of the sky was a waste of time, and the simians of Monkeyville cast the group out. Now alone in the jungle, left with only their intergalactic broadcasting device, the group called themselves Monkeyville's Uncles and made matching tattoos in cursive script.

After Monkeyville's Uncles had established themselves in the wilderness and started their own civilization, a monkey named Bob stumbled into their camp. Bob was a nice monkey, but more than a little naïve. The leader of Monkeyville's Uncles, Scooter, took pity on Bob, liked Bob for one reason or another, and decided to teach him the ways of intergalactic broadcasting.

Bob was a hungry learner, and although he made many mistakes along the way, he successfully came to understand enough to operate the device. The broadcasted message, however, had to change. No longer was it one of prosperity and wealth, but one of the struggles of Monkeyville's Uncles and the injustices committed by the denizens of Monkeyville proper. Scooter did not like this message, but he trusted Bob's judgment, and Bob began to broadcast the message on repeat: we are here, help us, and so on.

And one day, out of the big blue sky, a group of Martian men came in their spaceship. It had lights on the side, blue, green and red. They were green and short. They told Monkeyville's

Uncles that they would help the civilization, but at a cost. They needed workers, and the Uncles had enemies. Monkeyvilles Uncles were given a choice: capture the monkeys from Monkeyville or be captured themselves.

There was much debate in the days that followed. Bob said that they should go and get the Monkeyvillians and sell them off.

“Monkeyville cast us out!” He shouted. “They doubted our message and they were wrong to do it! Let’s get them!”

“Is it okay to separate ourselves from our fellow monkeys? Are we not stooping to their level? Is that what you want?” Scooter asked.

“Yes!” Bob said, and he gathered up a pitchfork and torches. “Let’s go get them!”

Every one of Monkeyville’s Uncles came except for the group that had founded the society. It was an army of lost monkeys leading the charge, those who had stumbled into the camp like Bob. They burned and pillaged Monkeyville, scolding and enslaving its members for their insensitivity and discrimination.

The monkeys came back in chains. The Uncles imagined themselves heroes. And before the Martian men left, they gave the Uncles better buildings and better streets, better systems and more control.

The Uncles evolved and evolved and became men, continuing the story the Martians had taught them.

Or so the story goes.

But does the imagination have its own limits? Can it account for actuality at all? Early childhood education instructs that, no, the imagination is limitless and no, the imagination

always triumphs. But what does it owe to actuality? How can the imagination exist without actuality? How can these two apparently disparate elements of human experience be reconciled?

Scooter would answer these questions with questions directed at you. Do you want to imagine more? Do you want to feel more? Do you want to build better answers? Do you want to ask better questions?

If we lived in a Platonic universe, these sorts of questions would have no resonance, but they seem like the only questions I have. The answer is always another question, cyclically downward, perseverating, the same questions asked again and again, like art.

In addition to being an autistic I have come to respect, Scooter is an artist I have come to respect. His work is mind-shattering; it is felt in the bones.

CHAPTER VIII: A REAL STORY

Scooter and I walked the trails at Oak Hills Park. It was springtime, renewed and blooming everywhere. The quality of the air was fullness, pollinated and alive after a harsh and peculiar winter. Everything settled into itself, everything spoke. The trees creaked at the joints of their boughs, the birds whistled, thunder groaned far off.

“Do you think it’s going to storm today?” I asked Scooter.

“Yeah.”

We wound through the trails at a brisk clip, and Scooter led the way. His hair was longish then, great wings sticking straight from the sides of his head, waving effortlessly in the breeze. The crunches of gravel under his sneakers were even in their intervals, like an echo. We walked the same path as always until we reached a fork, right to prairie and left to a creek. Scooter veered right and I followed.

We took a final step out of the shade and walked a ridge line, prairie below us on both sides. The sun was unmasked, but the heat was light. What was once a song of tree creaks and birds washed out into the sound of unobstructed breeze across our earlobes. Scooter and I were silent, listening. Wildflowers had begun to bloom. The grass was getting tall. It was a nice day to be outside.

“Sure is a nice day to be outside.” I said.

“Yeah.”

And we continued our walk, gravel still echoing in even intervals, over creeks and past wild mushrooms, and a snake crossed the path in front of us. It was short, about the size of a pen, and out earlier than it ought to have been.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing.

“It’s a snake, Bob.”

“Is it a mean snake or a nice snake?”

“Is it a mean snake?”

“Let’s hope not.”

“Why is it out so early in the year?”

“Why is it out so early?” Scooter echoed.

“Well, why the heck is it out so early?” I said in my best Scooter impression.

Scooter laughs, a monotone huh-huh-huh, and we continue our echoes.

The weather was absolutely balmy. Spring is the most glorious, I thought. We reached a picnic shelter. Graffiti covered the walls as standards—hearts and arrows and gangs and stick men, all of them in the same place, in a shelter, where the narrative has become unintelligible. So many have come and gone, I thought, and any mark they’d left has been rendered meaningless after facing the unstoppable cavalcade of time. Perhaps they would have fared better with Scooter’s sensibility—indicators relative to now. Too late though. The artists could all be dead. They could all be alive. But their work remains as a monument to the inevitable failure of attempted permanence, to the futility of expressing meaning that maintains its meaning. Nothing is exempt from the entropy of change.

Scooter and I sat at a table in the shade. I lit a cigarette and offered Scooter one, who declined as he always does. I wouldn’t have given it to him anyway, and I tell him that.

“Scooter, I want to ask you something. We’ve been friends for a while now, right?”

“Yeah,” Scooter’s eyebrows lifted up, and he looked out to the path that had led us to the shelter.

“I want to write a story about us. About how we are friends now, and how we became friends, and all the things you’ve taught me. Is it okay if I write a story?”

“Yeah,” Scooter’s gaze was fixed, but his face still responded brightly.

“I mean I’m going to tell people everything. I’m going to tell them about all the really horrible shit that you have to go through sometimes, and I’m going to tell them about all the fun times we have, like now, and I’m going to tell them about your story, too. You know that story I’m talking about, right? What is it about again?”

“You’re telling them about Monkeyville.”

“Yeah, you got it. But are you sure you’re okay with me doing this? I really want your permission before I start. Are you sure you’re okay with me telling the story?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you really okay with it, or are you just saying ‘Yeah’?”

“Yeah.”

Scooter will always remain an enigma in my mind. Any linguistic strategies I’ve accumulated over the years working with him are just that—strategies, devices, tools and best practices. There is no finality. There is no knowing.

“Okay. Let’s try something else. If you were going to tell people about the time we spend together, how would you do it? If you can tell me how you would do it, I promise I’ll tell the story that way. If you can tell me how you would do it, I’ll take that as meaning that you’re okay with me doing it. So what kind of story would you tell, Scooter? Or would you rather we just get back to walking? It looks like rain soon, so we have to get a move on.”

In the distance, thunder groaned. The first storm of the season began to encroach. The wind picked up, turned cold. The birds fell silent. The trees creaked at the joints of their boughs. Scooter fixated at the path that had led us to shelter.

“A real story,” he said.