LIAR’S DICE: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE OF THE WRITER

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LIAR’S DICE: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE OF THE WRITER

A Project

by

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Abstract

of

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It is my firm opinion that a clever reader can discern far more about a fictional character than that character himself might know, and an even better reader can discern at least as much about the writer. As such, any body of creative work is bound to include traces of the creator’s inner workings that can be used to build a profile of that person. In this case, of the writer.

In absence of a clearer concept, I propose we run with the presented thesis, and take this particular writer as his word. Or, to be more precise, his words. Seize upon his creations and build a picture of him. I invite you now to read, to analyze, perhaps even to think, and present to you a master’s thesis pedantically named “Liar’s Dice: A Psychological Profile of the Writer.” I hope you enjoy it. If you figure out who I am, please tell no one.

_____________________, Committee Chair

Doug Rice, PhD.

_____________________

Date
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Chapter One: The Shambles

Slinking through the center of the city was a street called the shambles. During the day, its gutters ran with chunky blood carrying organs nobody wanted to buy and little shreds of skin. At night, the congealed blood glistened silver under a creaking and faded sign. The shop behind the sign was shuttered for the night, but a sliver of light slipped out from under the door like the edge of a knife. The meat thwacked against the cutting block, worn into a dome from thousands of cuts. A man in a white apron pinned the meat to the block with one hand. He examined it, then cut into it.

Chapter Two: Genesis

His fat fingers massaged the meat, carefully laying it just so, then he slid the knife through it and cut it into perfect squares and rectangles, then he flipped it, massaged it, and cut it again. The man counted the meat, nudging the pieces around the block and into perfect little piles. Satisfied, he hung the rest of the meat back on the hook, and slid the knife into its sheath.

The man threaded a needle and picked up the largest chunk of flesh. He held it snuggled in the palm of his hand and pierced the needle through one corner. At first, the meat resisted, then the needle passed through and he stitched a smaller piece to the larger.
He sewed more pieces to the meat until it had arms and legs and was clearly a puppet without a head or any joints. He gave it a head and the puppet came to life.

Chapter Three: Flexibility

The puppet crept across the block and would have fallen off the edge if the man hadn’t caught it. He set it on its stubby legs, and it stepped a few steps into a direction with its arms held out in front of it before its unjointed legs betrayed it and it fell over. The man picked up the puppet and quickly stitched some calves to its bloody thighs. The puppet squirmed and flailed, but the man held it tightly in his fist and gave it proper legs. He released the puppet, and it walked ungainly at first, and then smoother.

The puppet’s short and beefy arms made it look awkward and disproportionate. The man stitched some forearms to the biceps, and it moved much better. It was still blind, and stepped about with its arms held in front of its body, but when he knocked it down it righted itself. Satisfied, the man hung the puppet on a hook, where it struggled for a little while, and went to bed.

Chapter Four: Shackles

The next evening, the man took the puppet off its hook and put it back on the block where it continued to stalk around with its hands out in front of it. He amused
himself by knocking it down and watching it get back up, and by letting it walk off the
edge of the block and then catching it in his stout fist.

Tired of this game, the man wrapped the ends of the puppet’s limbs in fine silver
wire to which he tied threads so he could control the puppet. He tugged the threads, and
the puppet danced and stumbled about at his command. The man laughed and the puppet
danced until the silver wire slipped off one of its legs and the puppet ran in circles on its
one good leg. Then an arm slipped free, and that arm freed the other. The man pushed the
puppet down and flicked long needles through its limbs, pinning the struggling puppet to
the block. He cut dainty hands and feet out of a fine cut of meat, stitched them to the ends
of the puppet’s limbs, and wrapped the wire around its wrists and ankles. The man hung
the puppet on its hook, and turned in.

Chapter Five: Struggling

In the evening, the man found the puppet hanging by one foot, struggling to free
itself. It had unwrapped the wire from its hands and left foot and was tugging at the last
remaining shackle. This time, the man bored holes through the puppet’s limbs and passed
the wire through them so the puppet could not free itself. Still, the man grew bored with
the puppet which only danced when he tugged the strings, and when he didn’t it felt its
way about the butcher block, dragging the wooden cross to which it was tied.

The man cut ears for the puppet to hear him, but when he commanded it to dance
it did nothing. It wasn’t deaf- when he clapped his hands over the puppet’s head it fell
down, and when he sharpened his knives it cringed, but it did not know a word of the man’s language. “Dance!” the man commanded, “Dance!” and he pulled the puppet’s strings. In time, the puppet learned.

Chapter Six: Clots

The puppet danced, and the man was happy. But frequently the puppet danced its way off the butcher block and fell to the floor, where the man would have to collect it, untangle its strings, brush the dirt from the puppet’s meaty limbs, and put it back on the block. The man took a sharp knife and cut two eyes in the puppet’s face. After a moment, the eyelids slowly opened to reveal twin beads of clotted blood. The puppet looked at the man.

Chapter Seven: Fear

The puppet loved its eyes and looked at everything. It looked at the black hair on the butcher’s knuckles and at the velvet smoothness of the butcher block it danced on. It looked at the fine silver wire piercing its wrists and ankles, and at the large crank and screw-fed maw of the sausage machine. The man put the puppet in a cage during the day, and only brought it out at night when he made it dance.

Chapter Eight: Hatred
In time, the puppet grew depressed. It did not want to come out of its cage, and when the man told it to dance it danced slowly and mechanically until the man put it back and shut the door behind it. Sometimes it waved to the man and made strange signs with its meat hands until the man took the puppet and cut it a mouth. A tiny red tongue slid out, a tuft of muscle fiber, and the puppet licked its lips. “Why do you keep me a captive?”

“Because I made you.”

The puppet sat down. “I do not want this.”

“No,” said the man, and stood the puppet on its feet.

Chapter Nine: Resignation

Now, when the man said dance, the puppet danced, and no longer tried to escape.

Epilogue

In time, the puppet grew ill. Its flesh began to dry out, and then to rot. The hansom marbling turned to gray grease, and the meat turned brown. The man stopped taking the puppet out of its cage until one day it was nothing more than a stinking lump of meat in the back of the cage which the man floated down the gutters with the blood.
“I forgot my contacts.” She zipped her carry-on, and crammed it into the back seat, but Yuri didn’t turn around.

“They’re in your suitcase.”

“Oh. Thanks. You know, you’ll be a great dad.”

He exited at Creston West, and then merged to Terminal A: Domestic and Mexico flights. Baby talk made him feel obsolete. He didn’t like feeling obsolete. He slid the car in next to the curb, and lifted the suitcase out of the trunk.

“Have fun with your book!” She kissed him, and picked up the bag.

“Have fun in Chicago.” Then she faded through the sliding glass doors into the terminal.

Yuri opened a new document, hacked out the date at the top and skipped down a few lines. He was a connoisseur of free association, and he wrote what he could, not for the outcome but for the action. Writing, to Yuri, was about losing himself in the act of creation, and if he could slice out a story when he was done, so much the better. Tonight, he wrote about electricity and protozoan soup, about words and puppies and dirt. He tried to write about God, but God refused to listen, so he wrote about a creature, and the creature shimmered its way into existence; it wavered, steadied and placed its weight on
the shelf with a quiet squish. He found the passage clumsy, tabbed down, started over.

The creature stayed.

Yuri typed, erased, smoked cigarettes and found his way through stories like a rat through a new house. He created scenes and personages, but none that were as interested in physical corporality as the golem.

The creature on the shelf craned its neck until breath fluffed the hairs behind Yuri’s ears. It watched for a while, then took a book from its shelf and compared page to screen with a critical eye. The font was similar, and some of the words were the same, but otherwise the two were utterly different. Tentatively, the golem touched his cap, but got no response. Growing bolder, it touched him on the ear.

Letters spilled across the screen and Yuri jerked straight. Sitting on the shelf next to his head was a creature he had never seen before. It had a wide mouth, glistening yellow eyes and a smell that was vaguely familiar and threatened to turn his stomach.

“They’re wrong,” the creature said.

“What?”

“They’re in the wrong order.” The thing turned a page in the book. It narrowed its eyes and examined the book carefully, page by page, both covers and the spine, and replaced it on the shelf. The creature’s fingers clamped onto its shelf, and it peered at Yuri through slitted pupils.

“Where am I?”

“Where did you come from?”

It pointed a lean finger at the books on the shelf.
“You came out of a book?”

It nodded. “What do you want me to do?”

“Want? Nothing.” He adjusted his keyboard a little further away. He wasn’t sure where the creature had come from, but its offer to do things was unexpected, and Yuri felt vaguely responsible for it.

The golem sat on the shelf and fidgeted. Its spindly arms felt around above and below. It examined the grain of the wood and tasted the dust on Yuri’s dictionary, it reached off the shelf and touched the bulb on the desk lamp. There was a hiss and a bit of skin stuck to the bulb. After that, the creature stayed on the bookshelf.

It began to read, first the Bible until Yuri got nervous and took it away, then a Pynchon novel. The creature devoured Pynchon, but sped up dramatically when it pulled a history book off the shelf beneath it. Yuri pretended he was alone, smoked, and wrote.

He wrote whatever came into his head, quickly, mindlessly, about flat screen televisions and diamond mines in Africa, about broccoli and papier maché, and the creature read. Yuri wrote about drums and hats and children who found rocks, he wrote about the carnival and candles, he tried- and failed- to write about love. The only time he stopped was to relieve himself when he could no longer contain it, and feed the golem books as it finished them.

“Can I go to Starbucks?”

Papier maché and children blinked out of existence. He shook his head, impossible.
“Yes,” his hands hovered over the keyboard like a pair of startled birds. The golem clambered down the shelf.

Chilly air slid between the edges of Yuri’s coat and curled up his trousers with every step. The creature was naked and raised its arms to him, like a ghastly child demanding to be carried. The fingers were cold and when they grabbed his hands his bones ground together, but its doughy torso was hot and slick. It snuggled into the chest of his jacket.

Starbucks was busy with people, laughing and chattering nonstop. He left the golem in a planter with his scarf to keep warm. It demanded lots of cream and sugar, and its gold tinfoil eyes shimmered in the dark, following him all the way in. He bought the coffee in a hurry, tipped too much, upset the pitcher of cream. Cream hissed across the counter, bounced off a divider and trickled over the edge. Yuri soaked up what he could and surrendered the rest to a woman with a towel and a hard smile. He stirred sugar and the thing brushed by his leg.

It already had a dingy paper cup with tea tags hanging from it dribbling brown liquid, and shuffled toward a child with a cookie. Its golden eyes were fixed on the cookie, and when the child looked up the eyes hesitated, dropped, and played around the floor near the child’s feet. Nobody was paying attention, and nobody except the child saw Yuri’s fingers curl into the loose skin at the back of the golem’s neck and carry it from the shop.
He dropped the beast on the chilled sidewalk and strode away. The golem’s flat feet plat-plat-platted along two steps behind and one to the right, keeping pace like a dog. When he stopped, the creatures thin fingers clamped around his knee and cold seeped through. He shook, but it did not let go.

“Stop it!” and he shook again, but the shining eyes just blinked, slowly.

“Let go!”

It did, and stood on the sidewalk with its arms hanging loose by its sides, lips flaccid and shut, eyes gazing.

“Go away,” he said, but the golem shrugged.

“Where?”

“Go back where you came from.”

The golem’s right pupil contracted a fraction of an inch. “Where did I come from?”

“Just go!”

It turned, and ran down the street.

When Yuri got home, the golem was sitting on the bookshelf watching the phone ring. It was Marissa, calling to say Chicago O’Hare was having weather problems, she was delayed in Denver, but she didn’t know how long. She promised to call from Chicago. The golem sat on the shelf and examined dirt patterns on its feet.

“You have to leave,” he said.

The golem showed him a foot. “I stepped in some gum.”
“Shit.” He tore off a piece of paper. “Stick that to it. You have to leave.”

“I didn’t get it on the shelf.”

“I…”

“There’s some on the carpet.”

“Shut up!” The golem froze still as clay, only its eyes turned to look at Yuri.

“Listen to me: you can’t stay here. I can’t have you running around and getting gum on book shelves.”

The eyes expanded until they seemed to fill its face. “Where should I go?” it asked.

The phone rang. It was Marissa again, the flight had been canceled, O’Hare was closed until further notice. She had called the conference to let them know, and was flying home on the first flight in the morning. When Yuri hung up, the golem was no longer on the shelf.

It wasn’t under the desk or chair, behind the door, or in the closet. He knelt to peek under the bed.

“Hey! Where did you go?” There was no answer. “Golem?” Silence. He checked the hallway, and bathroom, but could not find it.

“Come out!” there was movement in the desk drawers, a papery shuffle and muffled grunts. The drawer wheeled out, and there was the golem, chest deep in paper, sucking on a tube of rubber cement. It had bitten the tube open, torn it like a popsicle wrapper in a jagged diagonal tear. Yuri threw it in the garbage, then lifted the golem out
and set it on the shelf. There was glue all over the creature’s hands and face, and thin trickles ran down its chin. He held up the plastic wastebasket.

“Spit.” It spit trails of thin rubber cement that pulled in streamers and stuck the paper together. The golem burped a cloud of turpentine fumes.

He offered it the wastebasket. The golem reached for it and sat in the corner of the shelf, hugged the wastebasket and stank. It stared at Yuri for a moment, then vomited bile and clots of flesh-colored glue into the wastebasket. The phone rang again. The golem held the full wastebasket out to him. He carried golem and wastebasket to the bathroom, put the creature in the tub and poured the vomit in the toilet, flushed, and gave the golem back the wastebasket. It shivered, curled up in the tub and occasionally belched glue smells. The answer phone beeped: it was Marissa, leaving a flight number and a time and a hotel phone number, please call her later.

Yuri got a the golem a glass of water, and it spat out a mouthful of water and rubbery strings of glue, but stopped vomiting.

“You can’t stay here.” The golem nodded, mute, and when it regained some of its color, Yuri cleaned the wastebasket and returned the golem to its shelf.

“Are you going to write?” the golem asked.

“I need to think.”

“Make a golem for me.”
“No.” The golem stared at Yuri until he picked up a book of Russian history and handed it the book. It read for a while, then reached off the shelf and tapped Yuri on the shoulder.

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Go ahead.” The golem was a little pale, but climbed easily down the bookshelf. It vanished, the toilet flushed, water ran. The golem peered around the corner.

“Do we have any rags?”

“What happened?”

“I need some rags.” It stood with its neck sunken into its shoulders, defensive as a child.

“There are rags in the closet by the washer.” The golem thumped down the stairs, the laundry room door opened and closed, something clattered and thumped. The rag basket scraped across the floor. Yuri sorted books the golem had pulled off the shelves and put them back. He wiped dusty fingerprints off the dictionary and mud off the shelf.

He listened for the golem, but heard only silence. He threw out the Starbucks cup, rinsed the bathtub, then checked the laundry room.

The basket was empty, and rags covered the laundry room floor. The golem sat in the closet with its back to him, assembling a small figure out of rags. The figure had a potbelly and frail limbs, long fingers and no head. The golem stuffed rags into an empty bag and shaped a head then laced the head to the body, and the figure was complete. The golem stood up and heaved its creation to spindly feet, but it fell into a heap. The golem picked it up and hugged it like a doll. It brushed by Yuri, happy and babbling to its doll.
He followed the golem upstairs and into the bedroom. The golem and the creation were on the bookshelf and it told the rag doll to do nothing. The rags did. Then the golem told the rags to leave, and they did not. It told the rags to leave, sterner this time, and pointed to the door. With a toe, it nudged the doll over the edge of the shelf. The rags fell, and landed in a disjointed heap. Yuri picked them up.

“I don’t think it worked,” he said, and put the rag golem back on the shelf.

“It worked for you.”

“I never wanted to make a golem.” The flat gold eyes stared.

The golem slept on the shelf with its creation laid out next to it, and Yuri wrote. Whenever the golem stirred, he adjusted the rags to match, and in between he wrote what he could—about books and clay and electrons and penmanship and cigarettes. He wrote about a golem sleeping in the bookshelf, and about a basket of rags the golem tied together in a doll and tried to bring to life. He wrote about the rag golem coming alive, but nothing happened.

Yuri turned off the light, and it was morning and the golem still snored on the shelf. He eased the rag doll out from next to it, examined it. He found a slip of paper sticking out of the doll’s head. It was the word “golem,” torn out of his dictionary and incorporated into the rag doll’s head. Yuri had not meant to make a golem, but his creature was certainly attempting to. He replaced the doll and printed the story.
“Golem,” he said, and it awoke. He picked up the printed sheet of paper with the story on it and showed it to the golem. “This is you,” he said. “Do you want to stay?”

The golem sat and twisted the neck on its doll. He held the cigarette lighter under the page.

The golem hit the rag doll against the shelf. It flailed the doll by the neck, hitting the shelf, hitting itself, the books, anything, in a mindless, repetitive motion.

“Well?” He raised the lighter under the page, and the edge of the paper darkened and curled.

“Don’t kill me!” He jerked the lighter away, and it went out. The golem crouched like a frog, white knuckles curled over the edge, and shrank, quivering. Then it began to rock back and forth, its flabby face loose and eyes glazed.

“Hey,” There was no response.

“What’s your name?”

Rock, rock, rock.

He folded the paper and gave it to the golem. It stopped rocking, and stared at the paper, not reading it.

“I named you Aleph.”

Aleph held the page with the tips of his fingers. He folded it into a little square and ate it.

The phone rang. Yuri got up, and Aleph followed, and said “Aleph. Aleph. Aleph.” It was Marissa, her flight had just come in and she was waiting for her luggage at the turnstile, it might be a while, but she should be out of there in twenty minutes or so.
Aleph’s eyes roamed around the room and locked onto the bookshelf. He climbed into his shelf, opened a book on religious architecture.

“Aleph, you can’t stay.”

He noted the page number and lowered the book. “I want to say hi to Marissa.”

“She won’t like you being here.”

“You don’t like me being here.” Yuri took the book away.

“If I let you finish reading, will you leave?”

Aleph closed his eyes, hands floppy in his lap. The balls of his eyes rolled around and made the lids shift and twitch, then stopped. His eyelids flicked open, and the shimmering irises contracted, concentrated the pupils to black points.

“If I can read your book, I promise I’ll be gone when you get back,” Aleph intoned. Yuri put the book down, and Aleph’s greedy eyes followed it.

Yuri drove to the airport where Marissa was waiting on the curb, with her suitcase next to her, her hat off in the early morning sun. She got in, and he suggested breakfast in town. She was tired, but he looked like he hadn’t slept at all; breakfast would be nice. They stopped at a café, and got reacquainted.

He took her suitcase straight upstairs, and stood in the doorway looking for Aleph. He wasn’t in the bookshelf, or anywhere else. There was a sheet of paper on the desk. Yuri picked it up. It was the story, still slightly damp, covered in notes and edits, signed Aleph. Yuri’s creation had gone off on his own, the same way Yuri did, and the way his children and grandchildren would.
The youngest memory I have is of my grandfather’s pocket watch, huge and distant as the moon. It was polished silver and hung from a chain. He had many pocket watches, and many clocks. They were beautiful and ticked and swung always out of reach.

When I was old enough, my grandfather wrapped the chain around his hand and let me hold his watch to my ear and listen to the ticking from deep inside. He showed me how the hands could be made to move by turning the knob on top. He said they moved by themselves too, but never when I looked at them.

His house was full of clocks, on the shelves and on the chimney, they hung and stood and sat. He had frames on the walls, like other people keep pictures in, only his frames had watches lined up like checkers. My favorite frame was full of watches from all over the world, each one set to a different time, and with the name of the country written on a piece of tape.

In the spare bedroom he had a large work bench with hundreds of tiny wooden drawers, a leather top and a lamp. He repaired clocks that were broken, and when I was six, he let me help him.
I sat on the stool and he explained how clocks need to be wound or they don’t work. Clocks are like people, he said. The Good Lord winds us up when he puts us on this earth and the clock ticks as long as we live.

His favorite watch stopped ticking too soon. He stood next to the stool, and I handed him the screw drivers and tweezers. First, he stuck a magnifying glass in his eye. He opened his eye and pinched the glass between his eyebrow and the bottom lid. Then we pried the back off the watch. There was a label stuck inside that was starting to peel up. He examined it carefully, and glued it back on.

We started taking out tiny little screws and gears. The more teeth each gear has, the longer the watch can go without being wound, he said. This one can go a day, but some big clocks can go a week. We took out more gears and a spring that made it all move. One of the gears had a piece of lint stuck in it. Grandfather picked it out with tweezers. He said that happens sometimes, and put the lint in my hand.

We put the watch back together, first the spring and then the gears, making sure there was no lint on each one, just a tiny bit of oil to help it move.

Did Grandma have lint in her? I asked. No, he said, it wasn’t lint. What was it, then? She had nothing stuck in her, her heart just stopped, he said. Because it wasn’t wound far enough? I asked. He put the lid back on and lifted me off the chair. Time for dinner, he said.

When I was seven, we visited and my father said he should come live with us. He said, no, he was happy. My mother said this wasn’t about happiness, this was a matter of
time. Look around you, he said, I’ve got all the time in the world. She didn’t laugh. They talked about time for a while, and I got up and hid behind Grandpa’s dresser.

6 There was just enough space for me to squeeze behind it. It was the only place in the house where you couldn’t hear clocks, but today there was a faint ticking. I put my ear against the grainy cedar of the dresser, and suddenly the ticking was inside my head.

My grandfather kept his socks perfectly folded in the top drawer, matching pairs tucked into themselves. There was one sock that didn’t have a match, and when I pulled it out it had a silver pocket watch in the toe. It was covered in tarnish, with some letters on the back and two matching lightening bolts on the front. Grandpa’s chair slid back in the other room. I put the watch back in the sock, but it snagged on the fabric and wouldn’t slide down. Grandpa flicked the light on and said Time to go, then he was in front of me and holding out his hand for the sock. I gave it to him, and he squeezed the watch out of it into his other hand. He pinched the latch that caught the sock between his fingers, and ripped the sock loose, then the watch vanished in his pocket and he held the sock, limp, empty. I’m sorry, I said, but he just turned the light off and put the sock in the kitchen trashcan and walked us to the door.

7 We didn’t visit him much after that. My parents asked him to come to our house instead, and after dinner they talked about how far away he lived, and asked him to stay over night and drive home in the morning. They prepared a room for him to stay in, but he never spent much time in it. He liked spending time with me, and we went to
museums and the library, or took walks in the park and he told me where the different kinds of rock came from. Some were crushed together out of mud, but others had once been molten and flowed like syrup. Sometimes we stayed in and played checkers, but he preferred going out. He said people were in such a rush that they didn’t enjoy life.

8 He came to live with us the following spring. He had to give most of his clocks to a museum in Denver, but my father made space for his workbench in the garage. Grandpa was working with wood now, and carving gears and ratchets out of bloodwood and ebony. He drafted the whole clock on onionskin paper, and schematics were everywhere. He finished each piece by matching it up to the right shape on the paper, numbering it, and putting it in a drawer. Some of these gears were big as dinner plates, and had hundreds of teeth.

9 Sometimes he didn’t wind the ones that stopped. I think he was so worried about his wooden clock that he forgot. By the Fourth of July, he was planing wood for the case he was building it in, and by Halloween he had installed the glass and the clockwork was whirring away in the belly, although there weren’t any hands on the face yet. He had carved a mahogany key to wind it with and wore it around his neck on a little silver chain. The clock was so big that he had to climb all the way inside it to get at the back of the face.
One day, a package came. It was covered in stamps and red and white striped tape. Grandpa was very excited when I told him about it, and let me help unwrap it. It was a clock face from Germany. He had sent them the size he needed, and they had made it just for him out of enameled tin with curly black numbers. The clock was almost done.

The closer the clock was to being finished, the fussier my grandfather became. He made three different sets of hands for the clock, but decided he liked the first ones best. He took all the gears out of it and sanded them again, and polished them with wax and oil. Then came the chimes. He built a lever so I could ring the chimes from the outside whenever I wanted. He climbed inside and fiddled with them for days, changing the timbre with little pieces of wood and tuning them just so. One day, he did not come out.

I knocked on the door and called, Grandpa? But he didn’t answer. When he hadn’t come out by dinner time, my mother gave me a plate with food to slide under the clock. After dinner, the plate was empty, and that’s how he took his meals from then on.

We heard him puttering around inside the clock for a few days. The ticking settled into a slow and even rhythm, and the chimes matured to glowing warmth.

After a week, the clock ran down, and the food stopped disappearing from the plate. The hands no longer moved, and you had to make the chimes ring by hand. But when I laid my ear against the smooth grain I could almost hear a faint and even tick.
AM AMERICAN IN VIET NAM

Last week I drove across the Highway 5 causeway seven miles north of Sacramento and looked out onto the rice paddies of Viet Nam. A Honda with racing decals on it passed me, and I thought about us, a generation with nothing to fight against. A tree next to the Sacramento River exploded in a napalm blaze, and my pickup with peeling gray paint rattled over the bridge, past water buffalos and college kids in inflatables playing in the river. We never knew Viet Nam. We never knew what we missed.

My parents reminisce about draft cards, about black-and-white films of naked children running down the street, about demonstrations and riots, about a generation coming out of the straight-laced 50’s and into the turbulent, colorful, peacenik 60’s, about democracy and change, but they never told me whom to fight. In college, I went to demonstrations anyhow, loud, boisterous gatherings around the flagpole. At the strike of noon we roared up out of nowhere, we took over the fountain by the Memorial Student Union with bullhorns and placards, we chanted and sang and gave speeches and were enraged. At 1:10, we went off to class and argued about the capitalist agenda in The Great Gatsby. Some of us skipped Gatsby to get on a bus to Berkeley and join the protests there. They chanted and marched and roared for peace in the Middle East, they chained themselves together and were arrested and missed a day of classes. They came
back heroes, with court records to prove their dedication to peace, but they never saw a palm tree explode in Da Nang.

I waited for the bomb to blow the railroad tracks beside Highway 5 into a twisted mass of snakes, but the wood pilings continued unbroken. Maybe it was already cut, or maybe the Viet Cong was waiting until they could blow a whole train full of tourists into the hot air. A helicopter thumped through the sky, a big dual-prop motherfucker with a minigun and a lead-faced Marine blasting craters into the mud. Bullets whined across the windshield and ricocheted off the pavement. I pulled off and bounced the truck over a dirt road into a field, killed the engine and listened for thuds and pops and screams. I climbed into the truck bed and scanned the grass with field glasses. A canal, a muddy field with a dirt track, some trees in the distance, and birds. A dog wandered down the track, sniffed the horsetails, ignored the truck. Its master walked behind, inspecting the ditch. He gave me a long look. Americans aren’t wanted in Viet Nam. Go home. You don’t even know why you’re here.

We fought the Man tooth and nail, demonstrated against oil wars, signed petitions banning CFC’s in drinking water, waved signs that demanded Clinton, then Bush, then Obama should bring the troops home. We declared ourselves angry, and protested our righteous indignation, and threatened what would happen if the draft were reenacted, college students ripped from their dorm rooms and shipped to Afghanistan with fresh M16’s and Kevlar helmets. We have a Viet Nam too, we said, It’s called Iraq! Iraq never
needed a lottery. We were still buzzing from recent arrests in Berkeley and Washington. I went to non-violence workshops, and read up on direct action. It wasn’t safe anymore: Black Bloc marches broke away from peaceful protests, and I was ready to join when that happened here. Word got around about a march in downtown, a real demonstration with community outreach, plans to close roads, everything. This wasn’t a student-run campus affair, but went straight through town from Central Park to the Davis Commons. Anyone was welcome, but there would be no hard feelings if you didn’t have the balls to come out and support peace. I left my ID at home and wore black under my jacket, just in case things got interesting. I wrote my name on one calf, and the emergency number on the other, loaded my camera and set out to document any police brutality I could find. They were entitled to arrest us, but we were going to make them work for it. No draft in California! I was 22 years old, I was in good health, I had no criminal record, I was unmarried and I was male – the first rank to get sent to the Big Sandbox. I shot two rolls of pictures of people playing dead on the Central Park lawn and waving signs at the corner of 1st and E street. A couple of bicycle cops came out to flirt with undergraduate girls.

Summers are hazy in Viet Nam. The light mixed with rice field vapor and the trees shimmered, Highway 5 floated above the grass and Americans came down the track, dirty and wary as animals. I lay in the canal, up to my eyeballs in mud and watched them shuffle up a thin cloud of dust. The GIs scanned the road and the weeds and one of them peeked under the truck, opened the passenger door and had a look. The young
corporal went through my truck and handed out my bag with a laptop and notebooks, camera, memory cards, my ipod, the recycled grocery tote bag, the maps and pens from the glove box, the CB radio, the jumper cables, jack, tire irons and lug wrench from under the seat. A kid with a backpack radio piled my things on the tailgate, and when the radio came out, he paused. He flipped the CB on its back and inspected the info plate. He said something to the corporal and took a screw driver out of his pack. I stood up and said hey! and was surrounded by sweaty green shirts and boots covered in stinking mud. These fuckers were jumpy. Civilian? Yes. This your vehicle? Yes. Sorry, sir, have to search it. The radioman was putting the case back on the CB. Nice unit. His nametape said Engle. He was ten years younger than me.

My father never joined. He was issued a high number, then joined the Peace Corp. His number came up, he challenged it, but never got his day in court. He got a new number, challenged it, and when he came home, the war was over. He went back to school, became Professor Engle and started picking up night classes. In Los Angeles in the sixties, in Costa Rica for the Peace Corps, then doctoral work in Germany in the 70’s, there were those who got lucky, and those who had to go. They were a generation polarized by a common charge. Everyone in America knew Viet Nam, everyone in Germany remembered the bombings. Everyone lost friends, brothers, fathers. War was not a choice they had to make. We are the generation that enlisted into the Middle East. We railed against the military industrial complex, and signed our names to petitions and paperwork and volunteered. Our parents made waves across the world with the anti-war
movement, and are the biggest heroes to a generation that has only ever known consensual war. They did not have to volunteer. A friend of mine was engaged to a Marine and an ardent supporter of the war. I never met her Marine boyfriend, but I hated him. His signature on the enlistment papers was a betrayal of all of us. Because he enlisted, I never needed to be drafted. No matter how loudly I crowed about peace, about gasoline fortified with 100% pure Iraqi blood, it was a hobby, idealism without a shred of desperation.

How’s the shit? He shrugged. It’s shit. A bomb exploded in the ditch, a long, searing roar that refused to end, mud, ragged plants, bits of animals and water floated down around us, touched cool on my face. The soldiers kissed the dirt before the ditch reached level with the field and lay there, curling, mouths screaming. Half a fish bounced off the truck’s hood. A staccato laugh floated up through the roar, and a boy in green stood up, grenades dangling from his jacket, danced and whooped, pointed at the crater filling with mud, a pin still on his finger like a ring. The corporal fumed at him, the patrol glared or laughed, relieved and embarrassed but coiled like snakes. It left me drunk and shaky. The corporal formed up his men and put the joker on point. They trudged off scanning the field. They came to a rise, dropped, crawled, the joker stood, jerked his gun up, threw his arms, fell. The patrol fanned out and crawled up the rise. He convulsed, then stood up and stretched, held his hand over his mouth, yawned. The corporal cracked him on the head, and they vanished. I wrestled the truck out of the field and back on the freeway.
I was sixteen years old and discovering rock and roll, girls, and the Fresno State University library. I prowled the stacks for rock history books with photos of Monterey Pop and the Venice Canals in boom. Thursday nights I played pool. A girl in the pool room had gone to “a Woodstock” that afternoon; her friends had spread a blanket on the grass and they listened to the hottest local bands doing their thing for six hours. I told her Woodstock was almost thirty years ago in the middle of Viet Nam, but she had no idea what I was talking about. Ten years later, her husband was killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq.

As I drove, the trees in the distance resolved to a row of eucalyptus and a badly disguised cell phone tower. A platoon of kids sloshed through the rice patties below me and popped each other with paintball markers. When everyone was dead, they regrouped, picked new teams, and trudged back out to kill each other again.
THE ALBANY BULB

Introduction

Yesterday, I took a camera and went to an old land fill that is now used as a park. If Alameda County decided to dump every scrap yard it has into the San Francisco Bay, pour dirt over it, wait for plants to grow and allow the local artist population to decorate it, they would get the Albany Bulb. I had heard the Bulb was a sculpture garden, a place for creativity to flourish, where anyone could produce art, of anything, for any reason. It was overgrown, they said, and the sculptures cobbled together out of driftwood and whatever was on the Bulb, rocks and trash. I was curious just what the dirty animals who call ourselves humans can do to a spit of land when we really let ourselves go. Our waste has the staying power to outlast us all by centuries, and I was going to immerse myself in the bowels of this human-induced decay.

And So It begins

I didn't get to the Bulb until late the afternoon, parked behind the horse racing track and walked out onto artificial peninsula. Confronting an entire tract of land built entirely from trash was dizzying; colors were too bright and washed out, I had trouble keeping my balance. Sounds seemed far away, and spatial relations seemed distorted. The whole place looked like glowing holograms of painted trash superimposed on a natural beach.
The graffiti there was bright and abstract.

A dirt road ran along the edge of the San Francisco Bay out to the Bulb. The road turned right and up over the top of the Bulb, but I left it to explore the rocks that hugged the shore around the Bulb, and tried to keep my balance. As long as I kept moving, things were alright.

An old metal box, like a rusted iron fruit bin on the shore too heavy to have washed up, must have been dropped down from above when the cliff eroded, or was lower in the landfill and had been exposed by the waves. One side was covered in
graffiti; the other side was rusty. A microcosm of the Bulb: Half trash, half art, all human and slowly reclaimed.

The rusty side of the bin.

Seeing this solid chunk of minerals at the side of the ocean and embedded in the rocks helped stabilize me. I wasn’t centered, not yet normal, but closer and I didn't feel as lost. No matter how dirty and toxic the Bulb got, the sea would gnaw these things away. A man with four small dogs and butterfly tattoos on his legs climbed the bluff, and pointed the way to Mad Mark's Castle. The Castle is the high point of the Bulb, the
personification of the human/geology/ecology hybrid nature of the Bulb. Butterflies do not lie; I knew the Castle would provide answers and help stabilize this strange world.

Radioactive Tombstones

For the most part, the art was scattered in small pockets. Large tracts of the Bulb are essentially scrubland with piles of twisted steel and cement thrusting up through the grass. The Bulb has not been used as a landfill in years, and nature covers it completely. It’s an odd sort of nature, full of invasive species and weeds, anything fast-growing and tough enough to thrive on rubble and fill, but still real. The animals are the same—birds, ground squirrels, stray dogs and lizards, anything that can survive the biggest midden in the Bay Area. Flowers grow between chunks of cement and twisted rebar chokes the gullies. I wonder, sometimes, whether the streets of San Francisco will look like this after we destroy ourselves. Will the black soil come up through cracks in the freeways? Will the paintings in the Louvre and the Met be as incongruous as sheet metal growing out of trees in the Bulb? Or will the plants simply cover the dirt, and we humans keep building our monuments of trash as fast as the plants grow over them? Even the most remote parts of the Bulb, where rusty cables and sheets of tin come out of the ground like transdimensional wreckage shoved through from the past into the present, things grow between.
Paths were everywhere, black soil and plenty of water, enormous amounts of trash and bizarre statues and paintings on slabs of pavement at every turn. It reminded me of some sort of post-societal art gallery, simultaneously the peak of human culture and the fallout of decades of human pressure on the globe. Sometimes, art and landfill were the same thing. I climbed a small rise and found a series of enormous concrete slabs, like Celtic tombs, or sealed bunkers full of radioactive waste materials.
Slabs of concrete like radioactive tombs.

I wasn't certain what to make of these. They had the peaceful quality of a graveyard, and the threatening stance of old military installations that don’t like being explored. I tried to break through the sensation of oppression, like padded nerve endings. Like I was at the mercy of whatever had built these slabs. People built them, and people put them where they were, and people painted them. I leaped from slab to slab, unbalanced and heady, telling myself it was humans who built them, but something about these enormous concrete tombs growing out of the hillside spoke of a greater plan. They were so evenly placed that I knew without even thinking of it that they had not been
deposited by some diesel-powered monster piling up garbage, but placed as lids to hold down what was beneath. They were huge and heavy and nobody had been able to get inside them. I don’t think anyone tried. The slabs were painted in swirls and sunrises, but otherwise unmolested— the only thing on the Bulb that had not been assaulted, chipped, warped, beaten and broken.

Near the slabs I came across the first of several famous portraits painted on pieces of concrete. It was the skittish face of a girl from a *National Geographic Magazine* cover. The instant I saw it, I knew this portrait would haunt me at exactly the angle that I photographed it. The picture itself was too weird to freely roam through my mind, it had to be contained, tamed, staked down to a very specific angle. It wasn’t the picture on the rock that would stay with me, but the photograph I took. It took a while, but I managed to get it just right. I will never forget the girl on the rock.
Somebody had stenciled famous portraits on the rocks.

I photographed a painting of a magazine cover of a photograph of a human that was stenciled on a weathered slab of concrete in a landfill reclaimed by nature. I have no idea who the girl is, just that she was in a refugee camp in the Middle East when a lucky photographer saw her and knew he had to take her picture. I can’t imagine the photographer, or if even if he is a man or a woman, but I know that when he saw the girl, he knew he needed to get the angle just right. A human soul caught and stuck to paper, copied, seen by an artist who cut her out of paper. Somewhere, sometime else, a person built something out of cement. Maybe a bridge, or a foundation of a house, then the
cement was broken up and dumped on the Bulb. The artist came here and brought his paper with the girl-shaped hole and breathed new life into her with a spray can. The whole situation was profoundly disorienting, and the more alert I became the weirder it got. After I photographed the portrait of the girl I turned around and was confronted by a rock with a cryptic warning painted on it.

The Warning Stone

A cryptic warning.
The slab didn’t tell me what I should be concerned about, but I understood. It was we humans that had been brash enough to accumulate this much garbage, who had built an entire peninsula out of trash, and then had the audacity to throw dirt on it and call it a park and paint pictures of refugee girls on the rocks. This sort of behavior would not be tolerated; sooner or later, we will be assimilated, digested, ground up and added to the dirt. So far, this was a warning.

I climbed over the slabs and took another route back up the slope, but soon found myself in a small ravine full of bears. Somebody, or something, had built an altar to teddy bears. There were small ones, large ones, missing eyes and with plastic gems glued to their foreheads, impaled on huge spears of rotting timber, and ensconced in rusty steel cables. This had to have been made by humans, but something about the violence of the whole thing was so gut wrenching that the idea of a pack of sub-humans wasting their last vestiges of intelligence on a proto-war dance and impaling teddy bears seemed more compelling.
Gutting a teddy bear requires a callousness toward our own youth that denies humanity on a deep level. The bear stands for innocence in our culture, for childish love and thoughtless affection. To deny that is a strong statement, but to create an altar of butchered and painted bears goes beyond that and cuts to the very meat of what we are. The mutilated bears were a reveling in destruction and a disassociation from goodness that smacked of an unthinking and unfeeling need to alter the environment in a very primitive way. The altar held my thoughts completely while I tried to make sense of it. The brutality was so alien to my mind that I needed to dig down to my very core to come
to grips with the level of animal passion that had been inflicted on the bears. Animal, yes, but also so artificially arranged that only a human brain could do this.

Sometimes, when we look for reason, reason is handed to us on a platter, and that happened today. A little ways up the slope, an artist had stenciled a zombie face on a chip of rock. Zombies are perhaps the most appropriate chaperone for the Bulb and for landfills everywhere. They have ceased being human, but are not animals— they are simply inhuman. They are the mindless leavings of humanity, decayed and completely absorbed with cannibalistic survival of the individual.

* A portrait of a zombie. 
They are the ultimate human waste. They produce nothing, only mindlessly feed and replicate themselves for no apparent purpose. They have no souls, and they cannot die, they can only be torn apart, ground so finely that they lose potency and integrate into the dirt. Zombies are the literal embodiment of human attitudes toward the creation and destruction of goods. It made no sense, but neither did anything else, so I went with it. It was just a metaphor, a way for me to think about the mountain of rubble and trash that had been dubbed a park, but I considered my surroundings more carefully. Metaphors don’t impale teddy bears.

I left the warning behind me and waded through a field of invasive pampas grass, and nearly tripped into an enormous pit. It had the steep walls and flat bottom of a crater, almost big enough to be a small valley that had been entirely cleared of rubble. The downhill side was stacked high with trash, as if to make a fence to keep the lower valley out, and there was a huge fire pit in the middle. It might have been a turn-around lot for the enormous machines that once snorted and roared in a wasteland of filth, or perhaps it was a fortification that came later. It had certainly been scooped out by humans.
Something about this vast, empty space screamed *busy*, like a hive of activity had been here recently, and might burst back onto the surface at any moment. Either a huge party, or a maybe battle, but whether humans fortifying themselves or zombies rounding us up I had no idea. The only clue was the fire pit; it implied humans to me, people searching for the comfort of a fire. Then again, zombies sharp enough to create an altar are smart enough to make a roasting fire. I left the uncanny valley and scrambled down to the beach.

By the time I reached the beach, the sun was lost behind the mountain of debris. Bike sculptures stuck out of the cliff, savage tribal warning signs to sailors not to land here, stuck in the ground like spears with heads hanging from them. Whoever had erected them was long gone, but their signs still warned of an unthinking greed to consume.
Guardians

An enormous scrap wood dragon guarded the natural harbor of the Bulb. It loomed over the headland like a sphinx, caught in mid-stride by some long-gone artist with an eye for detail and a knack for finding just the right scrap. Despite the angular pieces it was made from, the dragon had an air of organic growth to it, as if the human who built it was an agent of nature giving the dragon life. It wasn’t alive, not per se, but it was more than the sum of its boards and held an active pose as if it was trotting down the bank to the bay so slowly that we could only see it as standing still. To the dragon, we
were less than a blink. Humans might have given it shape, but it was of the land the way the trees and grass were of the land, and would be here long after the scrap wood rotted and we went the way of the dinosaurs.

Further along, the sculptures grew, giant people with shovels and fishing poles, frozen in time. One of them had a scrap metal dog, a vicious mutt with a short tail and stand-up ears. Why or how someone had lugged a welding torch out here is beyond me, but they did. Humans will leave their marks where they can.
I became accustomed to the bizarre findings at every corner now, and my brain got used to the idea of filing everything into "nature," "human" and "(other)." While the whole place was still strange and eerie in the fading light, it wasn't as completely foreign as it had been. I felt like a guest who is allowed to see private things but isn't supposed to touch them. Separate, yet not as alienated as I was when I faced the first painted slab. The creatures on the shore were as artificial as the ones inland, but here they reveled in their shapes. This was more than paint on rocks, bright colors and incongruous angles, this was biological playfulness in forms. The human acceptance of the medium made the art seem natural, and that made all the difference.

Past the last string of beach sculptures, a massive woman with her arms raised and billowing skirts faced into the Bulb and lamented for something terrible. Like the volcanic sculptures who stare out to sea from Easter Island, she was clearly looking at something. But whatever it was, was on land.
The Howling Woman.

The Road

I came to the end of the sculpture beach, and spotted a devilish portrait. It was a red face, spray painted on a chunk of cement jutting from the sand. It was as if the Bulb had sensed my growing ease and decided to remind me just how otherworldly this place really was.
A devilish portrait.

I'm not certain what RPS stands for, but it was menacing in its defiance. The area of natural growth had ended; this devil dominated his slab completely. The red face and obscure lettering had something to say, but I did not know what. I gave up and made my way towards the center of the Bulb in the failing light.

It wasn't long before I found a flat and mindless portrayal of two faces, one laughing and one resigned to some horrible fate. It had the effect of both faces seeing the same thing- me!- and having a profoundly different reaction. One despaired and the other snapped and shrieked in joy, completely incapable of dealing with what it saw.
Two faces.

Maybe we see ourselves in the Bulb. Some of us despair, and others shriek and take pleasure in our power to shape the land. They laugh and dance and throw paint and build fantastic sculptures while others weep.

I was more stable by now, but the odd combination of art and offal, nature and trash, beauty and profound ugliness wasn't letting my brain quite find balance. Just when I got a lock on reality, it was so twisted that no matter how clearly I saw things, reality was something I could never really comprehend. My brain tried to grapple with illusions,
even though I knew that this was all grotesque truth. I was both, the laugher and the weeper, surrounded by zombies and dangerously close to becoming one myself.

The Paint of Mad Mark’s Castle

Mad Mark's Castle.

I have no idea why it's called the Castle. It was a heart-shaped bunker built out of concrete with a deck on top and a small turret. The turret had a plastic pipe sticking out of it as a flagpole with an orange traffic cone on top. A yellow Spongebob Squarepants
toilet seat dangled from the traffic cone and swayed in the breeze. Graffiti covered the entire castle, inside and out, and I snapped lots of pictures.

Inside the Castle there was at least as much graffiti as on the outside, so many layers that the walls were smooth and shiny. I don’t know how long the Castle has been here, but generations of spray paint artists had filled in the rough spots. At some point the inside had been coated with silver. The light reflected and refracted all over, pockets of deep shadow mixed with splashes of plastic colors and pools of bright light. I wonder if Mad Mark ever lived in his fortress on the bluff. Did he ever savor the shelter of concrete walls while the surf boomed outside on a winter night? Was he a messiah who stopped the flow of consumption and reversed it? Perhaps his castle was always a haven for pot smokers and taggers, and Mark was the king of them all.
Inside, the walls were slick with paint.

I don’t know who Mark is, or what his intention was in building the castle, or why we call him Mad. I don’t know whether he built it to keep the zombies out, or if he himself was a creature born from a mindless hunger, but from his choice to build the castle on the Bulb, shored up by waste and surrounded by seaside plants, I suspect he knew what he was up to. He’s gone now, but his Castle still stands as a testament to a person, a human being, who chose how to react to the Bulb, and then did it. Behind the Castle I found more rocks, squirted with eyetwistingly bright paint.
Sarah and Bryan, it seems, are a worthy couple.

Somewhere, somebody seemed to care enough about the welfare of two people to permanently stain their opinion on a chunk of cement on the Bulb. I wondered where these two people were now, whether they were still in love, and what had happened to the mysterious artist who had committed their memory to this artificial boulder. Cement decays quickly and paint even faster, but it might already be too late for Sarah and Brian. They might be married, divorced, killed in the SUV that drifted, overcorrected, flipped and rolled on the highway less than a thousand yards from their rock. We humans die quickly.
Near the middle of the Bulb, I found the last stenciled portrait, this time of the Mona Lisa. Despite being in only four colors, she had the same stern, reserved, unjudging look of the original. Her sadness and her knowing smile made me feel deeply ashamed. I was expected to participate in the art. If I just saw but did nothing, I gave my own mute blessing to the situation, to an entire peninsula of trash. If I built something here, I could claim I was putting the junk to use. I could legitimize our exploitation.

The Mona Lisa still smiled.

That was the difference between Mad Mark and the masses who lurched about the Bulb, gawked at paint-splashed rocks and patted themselves on the back for being
humans, the species that had transformed a mountain of garbage into an outdoor gallery. Mark had seen refuse and chose to build upon it, while I walked past the art to deride our waste.

Here and there, bits of concrete and rebar snaked out of the road, but not nearly as much as where the ocean had gnawed the dirt away. Even determined humans with machines are not as powerful as the sea when it eats the land.

The Human Animal

The sun set.
There are a lot of structures on the Bulb that look like they have been built by a people who were no longer around, and yet they keep an immediacy to them that implies constant tinkering and upkeep. I felt it might not be the wisest choice to stick around into the night. Not because of the zombies that had built the Bulb, but because of the animals who lived here now, the humans who slept and ate on the Bulb out of desperation, or disgust of the city. Creatures who tolerated us during the day, but understood that at night, the Bulb belonged to the dark and the air and the life that was growing over the scrap. Nature walked past cement and rusty cable like it walked past rocks and dirt, and at night, we are part of that. The humans who live on the Bulb are part of the ecosystem, and staying after dark means joining it.

I hiked back across the Bulb, and the broad, well-traveled road out provided a stark contrast to the winding paths and cable-infested climbs I had endured coming in. It was almost dark when I arrived at the beach where we had first deserted the road. People walked out of the Bulb now, singly and small groups. An older gentleman reprimanded his dog who wanted me to throw a ball.
Walking along the beach and away from all the psychotic art and tilted slabs, I felt whole again, but couldn't stop thinking about the strange things people do to the land. We cover it in our detritus until it can harbor no more life, and then we name it a park and walk away. As soon as life returns, we come back and celebrate that life by digging out the trash and putting it on display until we have tamed the life once again. Only when it is tamed do some of us move back onto the land, accept it as it is, and insert ourselves into the cycle of life and death and casting off that rules there.
Coda

There is an ongoing battle over the fate of the Albany Bulb: some want to preserve it, other want to clean it up and use it as a park or as fill land for an apartment complex. I'm watching the situation with interest and will hopefully be back again before it is razed and paved, chopped up, ground to pieces and tossed into the ocean.