

# FISHMACHINE

A dissertation submitted to the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies

Drew University in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree,

Doctor of Letters

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Madison, New Jersey

May 2015

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## ABSTRACT

Fishmachine

Doctor of Letters Dissertation by

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The Caspersen School of Graduate Studies  
Drew University

May 2015

*Fishmachine* is a novel about a salmon cannery in Alaska. In a metafictional arrangement, the author makes inquiry into the Generation X experience through the narrator, who is on a documentary quest to find answers to the fundamental question of why people are drawn to the cannery. Fictional and nonfictional elements are combined into “machine text,” an uninterrupted block of text that equalizes diverse content in the approximation of machine processing. Form and content are codependent. A single narrative is achieved through the juxtaposition of prose, verse, cut-up text, interview, footnote, borrowed work, statistics, and numerical formulae. Themes apparent in the novel include cycles, processes, text creation, the relationship between reality and fiction, social alienation, and the language of shared experience. A three-part scholarly introduction to the novel traces the development of *Fishmachine* from its inception in the mid-1990s to its current form. The evolution of *Fishmachine* and the writing process are discussed in an extensive question and answer format analysis. Aesthetic influences, as well as problems with form, theme, and narration, are explored. The linearity of the narrative is debated within broader discussions of the historical qualities of the novel as a

literary form, and the relationship of Generation X fiction to the postmodern tradition. An annotated bibliography examines ten selected works that were most influential in the shaping of the novel. Here, *Fishmachine* is put into dialogue with canonical and experimental literature, film, music, and nonfiction, with an emphasis on works that were historically important in the reassessment of traditional narrative form. A bibliography of all work relevant to the writing of *Fishmachine* completes the study.

Dedicated to *Oncorhynchus nerka*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank everyone associated with the Doctor of Letters program at Drew University for their collegiality and dedication to learning. I am especially grateful to my dissertation committee, Drs. Laura Winters and Liana Piehler, for their time, intelligence, and gracious support of this creative project.

Part I.

WRITING VISCERA



## Viscera Q & A

### ***What is Fishmachine about?***

A salmon cannery in Alaska.

### ***Where did the idea come from?***

I had worked at a salmon cannery in Ekuik, Alaska in the summer of 1995.

### ***Why did you go to the cannery?***

A summer contract was a creative short-term solution to a long-term problem. I was about to finish my graduate studies in the spring of that year and had no interest in any particular professional career. Other ideas were forming. The goal was to procrastinate responsibly until those ideas took shape. Many of us were experiencing a fundamental readjustment of identity and purpose in the new world order that had emerged in the early 1990s. The historic paradigm shift toward globalization had challenged value assumptions and replaced the comparatively insular predictability of a Cold War economy. Likewise, the relative peace and stability of a polarized nuclear deterrent had rapidly deteriorated into regional, local, and stateless chaos. This environment created profound new opportunities, but it also amplified the dislocation and instability of the generational experience. As children, we had suffered from the highest divorce rates in American history and a host of unresolved social ills, and could, with appropriate dread, look forward in adulthood to subsidizing a crushing national debt and failing Social Security system. This nonlinear grand narrative was reflected in contemporary

Generation X literature.<sup>1</sup> So for someone with little capital about to enter the working world, the simple transparent mission of the cannery represented durability, a guaranteed financial asset, an insurance policy against cyclical upheaval. If I liked cannery work, and it proved to be worth my time and energy, then I would work backwards, as it were, from satisfying basic retirement goals. As one component in a strategic patchwork, a reliable seasonal job equated roughly to the annual IRA contribution that would help ensure solvency in retirement. It was a conservative way of deflecting anxieties about the economy and my place in it. This perspective derived from a complex and substantive experience, and not from the defects of character commonly attributed to the archetypal Gen X “slacker,” a characterization I rejected unconditionally. This new iteration of bottom-line capitalism seemed grossly imbalanced and retrograde, a cynical aberration of the free market, so I sought a viable alternative to the “mainstream.” If I were headed for a comparative dead end, let it be a dead end of unique qualities, not some random cubicle job. I had discovered throughout my student years, for reasons that weren’t entirely clear to me then, that repetitive mechanical work was deeply satisfying and liberating, asking nothing more of me than a predetermined amount of time and rate of production. This was an entirely honest arrangement that I found very attractive. I came to accept the fact that regardless of my formal education, I enjoyed being subservient to a process, preferably a mechanical one.

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<sup>1</sup> The seminal work being Douglas Coupland’s 1991 novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*.

*This reluctance to embrace the mainstream seems to oppose the idea of immersion in and submission to a system, one of the central themes in Fishmachine. Nor does it sufficiently explain why you weren't prepared for any reasonable career after six years of post-secondary education.*

There is a critical distinction between voluntary and involuntary submission. We shouldn't need Tyler Durden to hold us down and burn our hand with lye until we accept ourselves without fear of the consequences.<sup>2</sup> My distrust of the professional mainstream developed during a turbulent episode in socioeconomic history, when the academy was increasingly accommodating conventional middle class expectations at arguably the precise time when they might have reevaluated them. I had always rejected the hierarchy of working status as being contemptuous of the individual, but was unsure of how best to marry my own goals of a formal education with a working class occupation. Consistent with the ideals of the working class intellectual, I appreciated the traditional academy and the working life as separate but complementary pursuits—an admittedly romantic notion fostered by literary heroes Melville, Kerouac, and many others. Perhaps this fateful summer in remote Alaska might initiate a permanent transition into an ascetic working life devoted to art and scholarship. I had studied the liberal arts precisely because they were “impractical” and unmarketable—refusing to directly align my education with a career track like so many business administration majors doomed to a Dickensian rag trade for a lack of imagination—and deeply resented the pervading middle class assumption that the academy should serve as a professional training facility. I didn't

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<sup>2</sup> In Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 masterpiece, *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden is the alternative personality of Tyler Durden, who liberates himself from a numbing existence through a brutalizing but cathartic process.

know anyone of any age who loved their job, and had become jaded to learn that occupational status often proves to be an empty talisman of individual worth, talent, and character. American society, with all of its ostensible freedoms, seemed locked in a death spiral of individual discontent, collective irresponsibility, instability, debt, cyclical destruction, peripatetic wandering, declining quality of life, existential ennui, and the mindless consumer spending that is supposed to alleviate all of this anxiety. I believed that the traditional academy was intrinsically relevant, and shouldn't respond to a tyranny of expectations by fashioning programs to specific modes or levels of employment—as if one couldn't earn a Ph.D. in Art History and decide to punch sheet metal for a living.<sup>3</sup> My sense at the time was that the academy was losing its essential identity in a tidal wave of democracy, neither pure academy nor professional training school. I would have preferred either a distinct separation or their integration in an expansive progressive model.<sup>4</sup> As a philosophical corrective—since no one had bothered to ask me for my opinion on the matter—I made the separations clearer in my own experience. In the spring of 1995, with lingering middle class trepidation, I gave myself permission to can salmon in Ekuik, Alaska.

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, one is free to do so, but the combined weight of societal, parental, and peer expectations make it highly unlikely. It is telling that the manual arts, broadly defined, find value at the two remote ends of the expectation spectrum, e.g., in vocational-technical training programs and at institutions like the MIT Media Lab, while remaining peripheral in the mainstream.

<sup>4</sup> A model that might include diverse technical training, practical home economics and agriculture, financial literacy, civics (radically progressive in a barbaric society come unhinged), outdoor and experiential education, etc. Certainly, a balanced education would produce a more independent individual, making her less reliant upon a determinate economic system instead of training her for one. It might also help moderate the slog through early adulthood, with its time-consuming and often expensive personal reinventions.

***Does this production-based value system have any relation to the personal compulsions you explore in Fishmachine?***

They mutually inform, but are not codependent.

***Perhaps any number of production systems might have sufficed. Why a salmon cannery in Alaska?***

The salmon cannery was the ideal choice for several reasons. Practically, it was one of the few short-term options available where I was able to apply by mail and be hired sight-unseen. There were many canneries to choose from. Ekuk was particularly valuable to me because of its inaccessibility. The annual salmon run is the only reason for Ekuk's existence. There are no roads, tourists, ferries, or cruise ships. I wanted an authentic Alaskan experience that was limited to only a few hundred people. Travel and adventure were also factors. I would cover a lot of ground that summer, almost all of it new territory. Those miles added quantifiable value to the metrics of the canning process. All things considered, the summer of 1995 was the most efficient and productive three months of my life. My instincts had led me to the right place.

***Was finding a unique idea for a novel at all a factor in applying to the cannery?***

No, but the decision was not completely devoid of literary ambition. My original graduate thesis proposal, rejected by my committee, was a Generation X oral history. I had wanted to use the genre to make a formal inquiry into the generational condition, to record the unique language of my generation before it disappeared. I envisioned something prodigious to equal the pervasiveness of the experience, combining so many

voices that they would at some point lose their individuality and speak as one voice.<sup>5</sup> The proposal was rejected on the grounds that oral history was more properly a sociological or historical inquiry, as opposed to a formal literary analysis or creative product. I understood their reasons, but didn't think my committee fully appreciated the intrinsic literary value in oral history or the timeliness of the project. The sweeping Tolstoian universe I had hoped to achieve was criticized for being too amorphous and impractical. With this disappointment still fresh, I thought there was a good chance that the cannery might provide an interesting context to the same inquiry. In any event, it was immediately apparent that Ekuk was an exceptional place.

*What did you ultimately produce for your thesis?*

A witless tragicomedy of dubious character, for stage.

*How did an oral history become a novel?*

*Fishmachine* continues to evolve. After twenty years, it might be less valuable as a novel and more interesting as a literary artifact.<sup>6</sup> This project has transmuted from oral history to novel to archival material.

*What was so special about the cannery experience that warrants this level of dedication?*

Everything about it was unique: the location and its history, the processes, the work, the fish, and the people.

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<sup>5</sup> This play on the "X" theme has carried over into *Fishmachine*.

<sup>6</sup> You'll be continually reminded that fish are palimpsestuous.

***You returned to cannery work many years later.***

Yes, but by then Wards Cove Packing Company had closed its canneries, so I found work at a different cannery in Naknek. This might have been a blessing in disguise, as I had idealized the Ekuk experience. The cannery in Naknek wasn't nearly as special as the first, but was more instructive. At that point, I had been writing *Fishguts* for seven years or so, and some of the images and smells had faded. Over the course of two seasons, I was able to experience a diversity of work areas that exposed me to more of the overall cannery process. In Ekuk, I had been a cannery processor almost exclusively.

***Why has the novel taken so long to write?***

In 1995, despite having envisioned the piece in its entirety, my writing skill and formal knowledge of literature were immature. The writing process has been a complex study with a steep learning curve that continues to rise to the idea of the novel. At some point, I had to admit that my intrinsic talents may never be equal to the project's intrinsic potential. I have spent the last twenty years reading and writing my way to some fair measure of eligibility, and was only able to complete the novel in its current form through systematic application and with a firm deadline. The distillation of thousands of manuscript pages written over three different decades has produced a 113-page novel in machine text format. The abysmal rate of 5.65 finished pages per annum is inefficient for a writer of any skill level, and yet an inordinate—if not fully apparent—amount of effort is represented on each page. I am proud of the accomplishment as a project, but dissatisfied with the result as a work of art.

***Do you anticipate further revising or expanding the novel?***

I reserve that right, and envision complementary sections, but as a function of Gen X literature, there may be something apropos in a conspicuously incomplete novel.

***Fishguts*<sup>7</sup> had been the novel's working title for the better part of the last twenty years.**

***Why was it changed to Fishmachine*<sup>8</sup> so recently?**

The original title had important descriptive and metaphorical values that have since been absorbed by *FM*. Envisioned as an oral history, *FG* churned and “expelled” the inner lives of the cannery workers through their voices. A title change was necessary once the long-standing problem of narrative had been resolved.

***Discuss the problem of narrative.***

Had I been able to accomplish it, *FG* would be a comprehensive oral history of the cannery, and *FM* the novel would not exist. I had always valued the artifact over fiction and was greatly influenced by interview and oral history as genres, from television and radio talk shows to written works—a bias clearly evident in *FM*—but the logistics of completing an oral history at the cannery were impossible. The short intense salmon season left little time for interviewing, so I gathered what I could. This diverse material ultimately strengthens the finished product, but felt like the consolation prize at the time. I did not fully appreciate how much documentary material I actually did have or how to use it effectively. Against this ideal of a sweeping oral history, a traditional narrative was simply inappropriate for my treatment of the cannery. One could have created a fictional

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<sup>7</sup> Hereafter referred to as *FG*.

<sup>8</sup> Hereafter referred to as *FM*.



narrative with a salmon cannery as the setting, but the reality of the experience was far more interesting than a fictitious set of characters saying fictitious things, relegating the cannery to little more than a prop with cheap hipster cachet.

The original manuscript, which I wrote in the years 1996 to 1998, was generated from cannery notes, photographs, and taped interviews. It was a collage-like assemblage that emphatically suggested a nonlinear composite narrative, but in those first attempts I felt obligated to apply the material to a traditional novel concept. It seemed irresponsible to skip steps in my maturation process as a writer. I wanted to earn the craft to the best of my abilities—good, bad, or indifferent—not think my way ahead to an abstraction. So I tried to reconcile disparate elements to a linear plot, subplots, character development, and predictable rising action with resolution. Every variation was destined to fail. Even though it was apparent from the very beginning that a hybrid *FG* was anti-novel in spirit, if not in form, it required twenty years of study and practice for me to appreciate the aesthetic implications of this, and to trust my instincts as a writer. The simple lessons that I had to learn were that a work cannot be preordained, and that leaving ample room for its growth is in no way mutually exclusive of being true to a vision.

***How do those earlier iterations compare to the current work?***

Most of the features in *FM* were original concepts. Those first attempts were clunky and the prose immature, but the important process of integration had been initiated. Every version, and there were a half dozen, was composed of three primary narratives interacting to various degrees of intensity: the cannery, a road trip traveling west to the cannery, and a road trip traveling east from the cannery. Comparing the migration of the

cannery workers to that of the salmon formed a narrative baseline. This was chronologically and geographically elegant, a symmetrical arrangement with the cannery section as centerpiece: the fish machine, the word generator, the fishguts spiraling outward from the body cavity like a good old American twister. The Plains suggested balance, empty space, meditation, rumination, and digestion. The physical and conceptual cannery was originally superimposed over Nebraska.<sup>9</sup>

There were two basic versions of *FG*. The first was more conventional, with each of the three narratives separated into a distinct section that was organized chronologically into chapters. In the second version, these chapters were shuffled in a controlled sequence and documentary material was introduced. This was my first modest foray into “unconventional” territory. In the back of my mind, I knew that the material would respond to more manipulation, that it was conducive to transposition, much in the manner of Julio Cortazar’s anti-novel, *Hopscotch*, where the reader is encouraged to experience the narrative in several different sequences.<sup>10</sup> While the question remained about how much manipulation the material could or should sustain, critically, this second version introduced the possibilities of juxtaposition that developed ultimately into the machine text idea. The essential problem in all versions was the imposition of fictional narratives onto an organic narrative that needed instead to be uncovered. Chapters as discrete narrative units had no true purpose in developing character or in advancing a traditional

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<sup>9</sup> At some point, I decided to expand on the cannery analogy, at which time I discovered the fascinating story of the Kansas chinks, the Bone Wars, and the Western Interior Sea. Nebraska remains a prominent location in the story, but western Kansas better represents the empty fish of America. In addition to its history and metaphorical values, Kansas is also the more anatomically accurate location for the fishguts, if we maintain that the map of America looks like a fish facing to the west.

<sup>10</sup> *Hopscotch* is also a textbook example of metafiction and the self-conscious writing process.

narrative, so the structure could not stand. The lives of cannery workers could be only briefly known, and there was no narrative except for the machine.

The quixotic search for a fictional narrative either eliminated the documentary material altogether or relegated it to random stand-alone pieces. At first, I tried to model the documentary vignettes in the style of the descriptive chapters in *Moby Dick*,<sup>11</sup> but Melville brilliantly makes this content vital to an integrated narrative, something that I could not do without first having a legitimate unified form. In *FG*, these sections at their best were short factual snippets in a loose poetic construct redolent of William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* or Gary Snyder's *Earth House Hold*, but more often than not seemed closer to the disengaged marginalia in *Generation X*, with its ample white space and lacking an immediate context. There was limited success in proto-juxtaposition here, but again, the manuscript suffered from the absence of a unifying principle. The fundamental problem of the writing process over the past twenty years has been reconciling the documentary material with complementary fictional elements. Once the "machine text" format had been established, the writing exercise essentially became one of chronological juxtaposition, with a utilitarian base narrative through which I could lightly weave a fictional one. This seems like the obvious solution in retrospect, but it had to arrive by its own processes.<sup>12</sup> Once established, the base text operated organically. I learned that collage can be unified through processing, a truism that Brion Gysin, William S. Burroughs, Harold Norse, and others realized in the 1950s and 60s with cut-up and fold-

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<sup>11</sup> E.g., "Cetology."

<sup>12</sup> I'm reminded here of Churchill's famous quip that the Americans will always do what's right after exhausting all other options.

in methods that refined the militant deconstructive impulses of Dada<sup>13</sup> to express things in new ways, as opposed to merely undermining conventional aesthetic expectations—which was not my goal. Conscious juxtaposing in prose text is a relatively current technique when compared to poetry and the visual arts.<sup>14</sup>

### *What is “machine text”?*

Machine text form is an attempt at narrative honesty. *FM* is presented as a block of text without paragraphs, chapters, or visual breaks of any kind. Machine text is visceral, an extrusion of the canning machine, a processed word textile,<sup>15</sup> the thematically consonant solution to a nontraditional narrative. Machine text uses continual juxtaposition to eliminate juxtaposition, and represent a short segment on a continuous timeline. *FM* is a processed collage where all textual units are equal and in dialogue, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Machine text form creates content, meaning, tone, voice, and flavor.<sup>16</sup> As coda, machine text is in direct dialogue with all text on the timeline, before and after *FM* itself.

The physical form was inspired by Jack Kerouac’s Beat novels and the novellas of Thomas Bernhard, both of which employ a sometimes unrelenting stream-of-consciousness that rolls on until it is exhausted or otherwise complete. In *FM*, the

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<sup>13</sup> The traditional example being the “exquisite corpse” poetry of Tristan Tzara, who randomly pulled words cut from newspapers from out of a hat.

<sup>14</sup> In 1964, Burroughs observes how writing lags painting by fifty years, and advocates the creative use of technology to unlock new meaning in text (Hibbard 15).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the lost stories of the Paterson silk looms.

<sup>16</sup> Single food elements like vegetables and pasta taste dramatically different depending on their cut or shape.

canning machine generates a kind of collective stream-of-consciousness for the duration of the season, and the reader should always bear in mind that the *FM* narrative is only a small portion of the greater collective text. There is no narrative except for the machine, and as the fishmachine is inertia embodied, no major narrative resolution is possible. As author-imposed organizational constructs, chapters and paragraphs are therefore illegitimate in this narrative context.

***The canning process and other aspects of cannery life are rendered in extremely detailed descriptions. Are you concerned that you might alienate the reader?***

I wrote *FM* as it needs to be written. The details are important and function at many levels. There is no postmodern or experimental gimmickry here. It is my hope that the reader will appreciate my imperatives as both author and participant, and want to experience one man's interpretation of the unrelenting intensity of a canning season.

***When did the current version of the novel finally take shape?***

In the autumn of 2014, I was on the verge of making *FM* a cut-up novel. Before I went through with this fateful step, however, I systematically reassessed all of my material in chronological order (notes, hand-written manuscript, typed manuscripts, photos, recordings, documentary material, and research). The writing process had begun essentially anew while the cut-up idea was gestating as default. Using detailed information from my cannery time sheet carbons, I first created an "intensity graph" that plotted the season in hours worked per day.<sup>17</sup> This simple visual revealed a season more nuanced than the one I had remembered. The success of the graph encouraged me to

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<sup>17</sup> Reproduced numerically as the season summary.

reevaluate all of the primary material. During this process, I found that false impressions, faded memories, and miscalculations had been baked into the early manuscripts, tainting the primary ingredients that would have undermined the way the text interacted in any format. Ultimately, the canning process itself and the numbers derived from the work season provided a base narrative.

***You do experiment with cut-up and fold-in methods. Did you follow a formula?***

The road trip sequence in *FM* was processed in several stages. Burroughs makes it clear that “somebody has to program the machine” (*Third Mind* 8), that the goal of cut-up is to liberate hidden meanings in the text, not simply to smash words together: “The cut-ups will give you new material but they won’t tell you what to do with it” (Odier 18). So cut-ups are not ends in themselves, but grist in a creative process. I combined road trip material from the original *FG* manuscripts to form a base text, with the general goal of maintaining geographic symmetry. I added, deleted, and rearranged some of that text for reading flow, suggestion, and meaning.<sup>18</sup> Then I wrote-out all numbers and removed punctuation in order to “equalize” the text in an attempt to make it visually and audibly resonant with the uncompromising necessity of an OCD sequence, ultimately blending the chunky stew of an “unprocessed” cut-up into a smooth consommé. This was a mechanical attempt at creating a more radical intertextuality,<sup>19</sup> and could possibly represent a more refined iteration of machine text.

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<sup>18</sup> Likewise, select scenes remain whole and some content is repeated.

<sup>19</sup> In its simplest definition, intertextuality refers to the semiotic fabric where meaning is derived in context and from a multiplicity of voices that themselves contain a diversity of relationships. Cf. Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia in his essay, “Discourse in the Novel” (1934).

***What is the relationship between author and narrator in FM?***

In its broadest framework, *FM* is a metafictional narrative.<sup>20</sup> Metafiction as a narrative technique can trace its roots to antiquity in the dialogues of Plato and Macrobius, and as an inquiry into a literary problem to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in the works of Miguel de Cervantes, Henry Fielding, and Laurence Sterne, but metafiction reached its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s as the product of a postmodern academic debate, reflecting radical social changes that questioned the aesthetic relevance and future viability of traditional narrative art forms, the novel in particular. The popular cachet that metafictional works (e.g., those of John Barth, John Fowles, Woody Allen, Federico Fellini, and Italo Calvino) enjoyed during these halcyon decades supported the belief that an artificially imposed distance between the fictional and real worlds no longer adequately explained either fiction or reality, and so the implicit expectation was the exposure of, and participation in, the creative act. For these reasons, metafiction is considered to be the “purification of fiction” in that, as a self-reflexive artifact, the metafictional novel reveals external realities through a sign/referent “heterocosmic” process, making identical the mechanics of fiction construction and reality construction (Hembree 3).<sup>21</sup> Authorship and narration are the typical externalities brought into the fictional context where the writer-practitioner becomes the literary theorist, inviting the reader to complete meaning.

Indeed, one of my goals in *FM* is to immerse the reader in the cannery experience as a

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<sup>20</sup> Literary critic and historian Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2).

<sup>21</sup> While examples are legion, for those disinclined to read a novel or several novels in order to understand this “heterocosmic” process, the film *Tristram Shandy: A Cock & Bull Story* (2006) is an outstanding and immediate illustration of metafictional narrative relationships.

full participant, in all its beauty, intensity, drudgery, and exhaustion. There is a conscious storytelling that warns the reader about the world that he or she is about to enter. In openly acknowledging the author's multiple roles in *FM*, I am able to question the authenticity of a novel form that sometimes disingenuously attempts to mask autobiographical elements in the apparent goal of creating a cipher manuscript.<sup>22</sup> I preferred a fully transparent candor in *FM* to a cryptic self-consciousness. At some essential level, *FM* is about the writing process itself, in all of its humility, serendipity, failure, and success. It follows that the form should be as honest as the content.<sup>23</sup>

One should bear in mind that a First Person metafictional narrative arrangement is not a convenient formula for total authorial awareness. There will be themes, tropes, symbols, and meanings that are not apparent to the author; likewise, the unique meaning created by a reader necessarily alienates the author from his own work. The exploration of the relationships between reader, author, narrator, and characters, and the exposure of the creative act, are further complicated in *FM* through the juxtaposition of documentary and fictive elements. In a novel that explores social disconnects, the combining of genres facilitates a complex intertextuality of voices that also systematically displaces the authorial voice. *The Fishguts Documentary Project*<sup>24</sup> is the metafictional vehicle that enables this narrative flexibility, by allowing the direct treatment of documentary material within a broader fictional context. More pointedly to the vital role of reader participation, the implicit goals of *TFDP* are the subsumption of the authorial voice by

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<sup>22</sup> This scholarly introduction adds another layer to the metafictional structure—fact or fiction?

<sup>23</sup> A sincerity of intent that many Generation X writers have expressed though a conscious, and sometimes pitiless, exploitation of irony.

<sup>24</sup> Hereafter referred to as *TFDP*.



the narrative and the eventual disappearance of the author from future iterations or “volumes” of the common epic through a more properly communal understanding. As a literary artifact, *FM* exists to set the documentary machine in motion. In this dynamic, fish are palimpsestuous, *TFDP* is repeatable, and the author of *FM* becomes a footnote in the eternal record. *FM* is simply the story of *FM*, with primary value as literary historiography. The cannery exists to record the collective experience, and every season is distinct from every other. The impossibility of this task is grafted into the narrative through tacit acknowledgment by the author-narrator. As the work-within-the-work, *TFDP* is the original goal, the elusive text, intimately associated with Audio as muse and myth. Voices blend as the common experience is brought to the surface. This is how I was able to reconcile the original oral history idea with the imperatives of a hybrid fictional work.

***What role do Audio and the other fantasy characters play in a narrative otherwise firmly grounded in reality?***

Audio had always been part of my vision for the piece, but as I developed his role and considered how he would interact with other characters, the genre of magical realism became a useful guide. In a magical real environment, the real and the unreal simply coexist. Magical realism has its roots in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Latin America, where the mythologies of diverse cultures and historical epochs overlap and relate in complex ways, assuming representative corporeal form at the intersections. Gabriel García Márquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is the classic example of the genre; magical realist works began to proliferate in the mid-1980s and have since expanded beyond their

traditional borders.<sup>25</sup> Because magical realism is an effective means of illustrating a specific cultural frequency, where the fantastical characters represent a shared location and experience, there seems to be great potential in this genre for encouraging the literature of specific groups of people, particularly those who have shared traumatic events or inherited their legacy. In its original Latin American context, magical realism is typically used as means to explain social upheaval or a generational continuum deeply tied to place and historical myth. Similarly, the magical real in *FM* is a means to understanding the shared experience of a subset of Generation X. Audio is arguably the most important character in *FM*, encoded as he is into the phylogenetic DNA of the human characters and representing the living embodiment of the primordial association between fish and humans. Consonant with the themes of evolution, cycle, replication, and mutation, Audio controls the collective subconscious cue for the human “migration” to the cannery—a nearly physiological phenomenon as mysterious as the salmon homing instinct itself. Audio is decidedly a Generation X muse, streaming sound and image not directly articulated in *FM* but understood by the cannery workers as common sociocultural referents. So while the children being processed are deeply aware of their derivation and destiny, the charnel house of “Kansas” (as physical place and interior space) is a traumatizing process, not at all bearing simple philosophical acceptance such as the characters resign themselves to in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example. Author Victor LaValle<sup>26</sup> makes a cogent distinction between traditional magical realism

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<sup>25</sup> Examples in the Latin American tradition would include Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* (1985) and Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper* (2005). Magical realism has gained in popularity outside of Latin America, e.g., Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1985) and countless Hollywood films where fantasy characters are effectively integrated into the “real” world without any apparent shock or surprise.

<sup>26</sup> Whose notable works include *Big Machine* (2009), a novel he describes as mythical.

as it is commonly understood in a Latin American context, and what he terms “mythical realism” in our own culture: “Americans don’t believe in magic, but we do believe in myths” (Vida 310). Audio might very well be symbolic of the great American Myth, having processed the workers in their youth and embedded the soundtrack of their generation into the collective subconscious like a prophecy. He is the agent of the migration epic, bringing salmon and workers together to perform the vital task of canning, with all of its implications. This collective destiny could be interpreted as both a function and dysfunction of the American Dream.

***How does one account for the apparent contradiction in Audio, who is a liberating creative force as muse but directs human processing as a salmonid?***

The characters are liberated by the processing, as their childhood encoding impels them to eventually migrate to the cannery, where the cycle is perpetuated.

***What purpose do the other fantasy characters serve in the story?***

Madame Terrible is the personification of Tourette’s Syndrome, and who assumes control of the interview dialogue at the end of the novel. Chophouse Annie is a foreman at the child processing facility who provides some comic relief in a brutal sequence. The generic salmonids are the fish counterparts to human cannery workers.

***How do violent descriptions of children being butchered and otherwise “processed” serve the narrative?***

This is not a sadomasochistic fantasy, but rather, indication of trauma and shared experience. The child processing facility and the salmon cannery achieve narrative,

psycho-emotional, and geographic symmetry. Humans process fish and fish process humans in an eternal codependent cycle facilitated by Audio. The opposing forces of chaos and order find harmony in time.

***Is there a spiritual theme or message in FM?***

While I do nurture religious tropes, the fish cannery as setting is merely circumstantial. Were this same novel set at a tomato cannery, no one would wonder if the tomatoes represent Jesus. I allow that a primitive Taoist mechanism and communal polymysticism may be apparent in the deep field of the narrative. In any event, there is an appropriate absence of dogmatic religiosity.<sup>27</sup>

***Are the human characters based on real people?***

With the exception of the townsfolk and children, all of the human characters are either real individuals or composites of real people, i.e., cannery archetypes.

***Which interviews are real?***

The Eldest and Dr. Benjamin Halyard<sup>28</sup> dialogues are from actual interviews that have been edited for length and style consistency. Most of the short exchanges and quotes throughout the novel are either real or closely approximate observed dialogue. The lengthy exchange between 4448 and 5122 is entirely fictitious as an interview, but based on real events and a series of bunkhouse conversations with multiple people. The

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Tom Beaudoin's thoughtful study on this topic, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (1998), which examines the unique religious expression of a self-reliant generation that witnessed the failure of so many traditional institutions.

<sup>28</sup> Peggy Anderson and Michael J. Everhart, respectively.

interview at the end of the novel is styled after late-night talk show television and celebrity magazine interviews, and takes the requisite creative liberties.

***Did you receive permission to interview your subjects?***

I received explicit permission in every case, either verbal or written. Peggy Anderson's interview predated my awareness of standard best practices. For my interview with Mike Everhart, however, I closely followed Oral History Association guidelines. These methods were explained in my application to Drew University's Institutional Review Board, whose imprimatur I received even though the information collected in the interviews was never intended for use in research, but for creative purposes only.

***How did you manage to interview your subjects during the busy work season?***

Peggy Anderson was the only "formal" interview I was able to take at the cannery, and this occurred toward the end of the season on a rare off-day without fish. She was extraordinarily open and generous. I had been casually strolling through the village taking pictures and scribbling observations when I came upon Peggy picking fish from her net. She looked up at me and just started talking as if we had known each other for years. Then she invited me in for fish and tea, at which point I asked for her permission to record our conversation. The change-over from taking notes to recording is reflected in this sequence in the novel.

***You brought a tape recorder with you to the cannery?***

I had one sent to me once it became apparent that it could be a meaningful supplement to my notes and photographs. I had recorded some friendly Native kids saying random

things just minutes prior to meeting Peggy. She assented to the recording and told me matter-of-factly that I wasn't the first to "record her language." This interview, more properly a straight recording, was an important windfall that influenced my vision for the piece in that it gave me something tangible beyond the immediacy the cannery, adding a cultural layer to embryonic ideas about character, tone, theme, language, and narrative.

The Kansas idea came very late in the writing process. In 2012, in the course of conducting general research about Nebraska and Kansas, I discovered the fascinating history (fish and human) of the chalks of western Kansas through the work of local paleontologist Michael J. Everhart. I contacted him, outlined the *FM* project and the interviewing best practices that I would be following, and he generously agreed to an interview. In May of that year, my girlfriend and I took the trip to Kansas. We all spent two full days together, the first out in the chalks of Trego and Gove counties, and the next interviewing at the Sternberg Museum in Hays. After our time with Mike, we extended our trip to the farthest reaches of Kansas and slightly beyond. Driving alone for hours through the remote Cimarron Grassland was profoundly reinvigorating. All of that beautiful space helped me to imagine the second half of the novel.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The most interesting place in America is the disjointed corner where Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and the Oklahoma panhandle meet. The impossibility of comprehending it, as one crosses imaginary lines and subtle topographical borders, informs a Puritanical sense of light and dark in the second half of *FM*. In the distant memory of these grasslands is the hunt for a whale.

***Why is interview so prominent in the novel, and how does this format facilitate or complicate narrative person?***

The original oral history idea influences every feature of *FM*. All of the essential properties that make an oral history compelling—living voice, historical context, individual candor, collective wisdom and experience—might assist a novel by relieving it of some of its heavier infrastructure without replacing it altogether. An author enjoys much more flexibility when the reader implicitly understands and participates in a metafictional arrangement. In the interview sequences in *FM*, First, Second, and Third Person narrators are often conflated or able to quickly switch voice, in some cases blurring the line between real and fictitious interviews. An agile format allowed me to layer places, times, people, and themes, adding depth and dimension to the narrative and enriching a heteroglossia<sup>30</sup> that puts diverse voices into dialogue. Interview gives a controlled theatrical quality to the novel, especially where it veers into the carnivalesque.<sup>31</sup> As a writer, voice is more important to me than plot because voice can operate organically and create a dramatic context very efficiently, whereas even the best

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<sup>30</sup> Heteroglossia is the coexistence of and conflict between different varieties of speech, the “burden” of these relationships being borne by the author. The concept was developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, and formally presented in his 1934 essay, “Discourse in the Novel.” In *FM*, these conflicts are often deliberate aesthetic choices.

<sup>31</sup> A concept articulated by Bakhtin in the seminal literary study *Rabelais and His World* (1965), the carnivalesque describes a dramatic context where the social order is inverted and normally restricted freedoms of expression are encouraged. It has roots in Menippean satire, but achieves fuller cultural form in the medieval Feast of Fools. In *FM*, the carnivalesque facilitates the inversion between the human and salmonid worlds, and establishes a tone that combines the colorful freedoms of the circus with the measured utterances of theater of the absurd.

fictional plot construction is always understood to be a contrivance that requires the generous suspension of our disbelief.<sup>32</sup>

***The use of footnotes is extensive. What purpose do they serve in FM?***

I tend to exploit the footnote, and saw an opportunity here to purpose them as vehicles for micro-narratives under the pretext of *TFDP*. While the majority of the footnotes provide supplementary documentary information, they also serve satirical ends, advance dialogue, develop character, and facilitate narrative shifts. Sometimes the quip, monologue, soliloquy, or short exchange is more effective on its own stage.<sup>33</sup>

***Why is some documentary material integrated into the text and other relegated to footnotes?***

This is the responsible librarian prevailing over the much-more-fun-at-a-cocktail-party anarchist. Even though a strong collective case has been made for the free and unencumbered use of existing material for creative purposes—the general idea being that no one owns language—I decided to honor the sanctity not only of copyrighted works, but of discrete works of any status. Almost all of the material that I had either generated or found (e.g., interviews, church documents) is integrated directly into the text; anything

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<sup>32</sup> Proof positive of the efficacy of voice over plot is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and other nominal works of the "absurd" that use a minimalist plot device or attempt to eliminate one altogether. The novel form is elastic enough to absorb the loss of plot, as many postmodern works attest. The strong trend back toward conventional (neo-Victorian) literary fiction in recent decades—driven largely by an expanding network of insular MFA programs—is moving the theory of the novel away from invention, an interesting development in an age of media technology and visual saturation.

<sup>33</sup> Though his work did not serve directly as guide or inspiration, David Foster Wallace makes similar use of the narrative footnote in *Infinite Jest* (1996).



that had been formally published is provided in a footnote with attribution, and was subject to the careful consideration of copyright fair use guidelines for both creative and scholarly work. I removed several passages where obtaining permissions would be required, where attribution was not provided, and where fair use evaluation criteria were inconclusive. This division of material helps to create some space between the personal experience and the larger documentary story. Primary documentation and descriptive sources are, in any event, equal to the rest of the text.

***Several works referenced in footnotes or excerpted in the text do not actually exist.***

These “works” were created for the pure joy of throwing in a red herring or using material from old stories in new creative ways, and they further nuance the relationship between the documentary and the fictive. The feigned work enjoys a rich history in Western literature, originating in ancient Rome and becoming a prominent device in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century English satire. They are used in the same liberating spirit in *FM* to make oblique social commentary or to poke fun at myself as a writer. I imagine these nascent works being proclaimed by a Fool in coxcomb and bells to jeering medieval street-revelers with bad teeth, wielding beef shanks and flagons of ale.

***Did anything surprise you during the writing process?***

My personal experience with Tourette’s Syndrome (TS) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) surfaced very recently in the writing process, and I was surprised by how

quickly, easily, and prominently it married with the text. It likely influenced my inquiries into translingual modes of expression.<sup>34</sup>

Tourette's Syndrome is a widely misunderstood neurological disorder that I had to deal with at a young age. At that time, nervous tics and speech compulsions were primarily a social challenge. The condition was isolating but also made me stand out, so I was what you might call an unwilling individualist from early on; having endured my baptism of fire, I was able to turn this into an asset in adulthood. Typically, as one gets older, the more pronounced symptoms of TS are replaced by a less outwardly apparent OCD. This has been my experience. Even though I became aware of my compulsions at around ten years of age, I didn't connect them to TS at that time, and the symptoms were light enough to ignore for most of my young adult life; however, the compulsions have been deepening exponentially since about the age of thirty-five, and are often debilitating, complicating personal and work relationships. I consciously harnessed the visceral energy of OCD to write *FM*; its ordered mechanical quality worked itself into the thematic structure of the novel quite naturally, particularly through machine text and the use of numbers as a translingual mode of expression. OCD is an important component of the engine that drives the narrative. I definitely wrote my way out of or through something in *FM*. If the canning process is therapeutic, then machine text is the medium through which it is understood and communicated. The finished product suggests that these connections were being made subconsciously throughout the twenty-year writing

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<sup>34</sup> Expressive symbols of meaning other than received word systems, e.g., numbers, symbols, asemic writing forms. This evolution of text, if we may call it such, could bridge into new language, natural language, pure sound, or the purely visual. The end of my inquiry occurred in the reading room of the Beinecke Library of Rare Books & Manuscripts at Yale University, where I was flattered to spend two hours alone with the Voynich Manuscript.

process, and may be, for all I really know, the *raison d'être* for the novel. The TS and OCD strain in *FM* is not exclusive of any pure creative impulse, but there's no question that writing the novel has also been a process of awareness and self-acceptance. There are too few characters in the popular culture with TS or OCD that sufferers can relate to in a positive way. One notable exception is the character played by Tony Shaloub on the eponymous television show, *Monk*, who successfully channels his compulsions into brilliant detective work and puts a comical spin on OCD. In the movie *Phoebe in Wonderland*, Elle Fanning is entirely convincing in her role as a young girl who suffers acutely from TS. Also, Nick van Bloss should be given significant credit for having written the honest, accessible memoir, *Busy Body: My Life with Tourette's Syndrome*.

Direct associations between TS/OCD and the writing style in *FM* are evident. Machine text is at once a systemic purge and inventory calculation, suggesting the need to reconcile order and chaos. Similarly, multiple dialogues, interview pastiche, and cultural references support a sense of repetition and rehearsal. The impulse to imitate dialogue or recreate/reimagine dramatic situations is directly tied to echolalia. From personal experience, this compulsion seems necessary to understanding people and relationships; in novel writing, the chameleon-like quality of echolalia aids in creating character, voice, and dramatic perspective. Similarly, vocalalia—the compulsion to make or imitate sounds—has been an unconventional source of phonemic awareness that manifests in several sections of *FM*, most obviously in the cut-up sequence, and additionally wherever textual units are “processed” into monosyllables, e.g., numbers, reference codes, and other nontraditional content. While TS/OCD has had an unexpected liberating influence on the novel's aesthetics, it has also restricted its narrative potential.

***A scientific thread runs through the novel.***

Science supports the broadest possible narrative inquiry. Over time, even the most discrete art takes on a scientific or archival significance greater than its original aesthetic value. Ultimately, the quest for data-in-context is the primary directive of *TFDP*.

***Is it true that you wanted the Borg to assimilate Starfleet civilizations?***

There is a direct parallel between the Borg mission to assimilate all intelligence in the universe and the goal of *TFDP* to collect and organize cannery data in perpetuity.

Resistance to the canning machine is futile, especially in such a well-managed fishery as that in Alaska. In contrast to Starfleet's exhausting sanctimony and peevish directives, the Borg mission is noble and pure and should have been victorious by any reasonable creative standard. Starfleet's triumph over the Borg is not only unlikely, but decidedly anti-climactic: naked pandering to sentimental humanists, low-hanging dramatic fruit for the show's writers.<sup>35</sup> It is inconceivable that Starfleet would proceed to squander millennia in pursuit of the very same technological hegemony as the Borg had already achieved. When Starfleet destroyed the Borg, they also permanently destroyed all of the civilizations that had been assimilated, essentially committing multiple genocides.

***How does one perpetuate TFDP?***

Through the work of others who wish to record their experiences at a cannery or processing facility of any nature, in any location. The project is free to evolve independently in any medium. Please send me a copy for my archives.

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<sup>35</sup> *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which aired from 1987-1994.

*Is FM a novel, novella, or anti-novel?*

I began to write *FM* with the simple intention of producing a novel, perhaps an unconventional novel or even an experimental one, but never with the scientific literary goal of exploring “anti-novel.” More recently in the process, I entertained the novella form after having whittled down thousands of pages to a much shorter work. In my best estimation, the current work incorporates elements of all three genres, complicating a neat definition of literary narrative. The traditional novel consists of a main plot, subplots, character development, rising action, and denouement; these elements are cohesive, mutually dependent, and apparent to the reader. *FM* contains a linear narrative that embodies all of the elements of the traditional novel, albeit in a more challenging arrangement. Despite the low page count, *FM* is more expansive than the typical novella, as machine text amplifies time and space within the can jam sermon. Strangely, there is no distinct beginning, middle, and end to *FM*—the basic requisite parts of a novella—although it likewise would be difficult to claim the full novelistic development of subplots (more like vignettes or asides) or of character (as opposed to the mere presentation of them). I attempt to deepen some characters through interview, but ultimately I see any given character’s identity (including my own as author and participant) as a function of the communal experience, and expect them to mutually inform and cross-complicate. The strongest novelistic feature is the chronological and processing linearity of the canning season itself, which should be considered together as a rising action with conclusion.

The more unconventional aspects of *FM* do not undermine the novelistic metastructure, but rather, color it in with particulars. As a plastic literary form, the novel

has been able to absorb a high degree of experimentation over the last four centuries without becoming something else.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the original Western novel, *Don Quixote*, contains the germ seeds of both linear and nonlinear narrative traditions. Even the most recondite examples of anti-novel (e.g., Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*) betray a traditional novelistic structure or cogent authorial intention beneath the complexity of disunion and digression. The anecdotal discussion might say more about commercialized reader expectations and middle class aesthetic thresholds, than parse meaningful particulars about the novel form. More instructive is the exploration of *FM* as a function of Generation X literature.

***Is FM a "Generation X novel"?***

Categories are inherently problematic, as they tend to exclude as much as they embrace, but I would argue that classified literary movements are broadly useful in how they locate unique literary qualities within an historical context. The archetypal Generation X experience pervades the narrative and informs the structure of *FM*. As the author-participant, my original intention to produce an oral history about the Gen X experience vis-à-vis the cannery was encouraged by a strong sense of generational solidarity. The question at this point is whether or not those strains are recognizable after a twenty-year writing process, and if so, what forms do they assume and how might they be relevant, if at all, to a novel completed long after the quintessential 90s Generation X phenomenon.

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<sup>36</sup> Author Rachel Kushner suggests a continual dialectical renewal of the novel: "In art the search for ever-newness continues to be the paradigm of what's valid. This is not the case with the novel. For whatever reason, none of the postmodern experiments in fiction really 'succeeded' to the degree that they one-upped everything. The novel is somehow not on that axis; it keeps being recognizable" (Sussler 288-89).

“Generation X” became a contentious moniker soon after the publication of Douglas Coupland’s 1991 novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, which follows the lives of three jaded, over-educated “slackers” in search of meaning on the near periphery of mainstream American society. *Generation X* did more than any other single work in the early 1990s to skew public perceptions toward the apparent fat-free irony and carefree slackerism of the generation. The simplistic image was swiftly co-opted by the corporate world and reinforced by branding, and in no time “Generation X” was genetically linked to mass-market consumer culture. Assigning universal characteristics to a demographic consisting of ~46 million Americans and packaging them into a neat marketable title would seem at odds with critical literary discourse, and yet “X” infers the character of a generation whose identity was defined in large part by negation—by what was missing, had been lost, had been defined by others, or was difficult to define in the pervasive grayscale of the 1990s Generation X experience. The mathematical exponent “X” is an apropos trademark for a generation born into perpetual socioeconomic insecurity and identified by a uniquely recognizable cultural obscurity. A comparatively minor demographic jammed between two larger generations, Generation X had the statistical misfortune to come-of-age at a time of an historic global reordering that signaled a protracted downward shift in American economic preeminence, social mobility, and quality of life. The fiction of Generation X that emerged in the early 1990s expressed the angst and despair of a general confusion. During this early maturation period, Generation X fiction stood with its characters betwixt and between, everywhere and nowhere. So while *Generation X* brought widespread recognition to the unique challenges of the generation, it also handicapped a serious critical comprehension of the

experience by establishing a pithy tone for all things Gen X. Once “Gen X” became a generic marketing commodity, the systemic bias broadly limited the perceptive range of what was possible or necessary for a fuller expression of the experience. Ubiquitous anodyne descriptions of Coupland’s work as being “ironic” and “biting” reinforced a low threshold for both irony and bite, and by extension, aesthetic force.<sup>37</sup> To his enduring credit, Coupland repeatedly denied his anointed title as the unofficial spokesperson for the generation, and refused to exploit it. Several years after publication of this seminal novel, a beleaguered Coupland questioned the very existence of a Generation X.<sup>38</sup>

The broader creative culture articulated the pervasive sense of loss. Music and literature expressed a fear-driven ennui across a bleak landscape. Represented by artists such as Nirvana, Soundgarden, David Foster Wallace, Elizabeth Wurtzel, and Chuck Palahniuk, this was not a detached creative movement, but one fully centered and serious. The consumers of this art were largely educated middle-class suburbanites who were trying to survive in an environment of dislocation—the very same generic demographic being exploited by the corporations. The odd combination of primal scream and the hip ultra-current placed the generation between worlds, or realities. This was the next discussion in the expansive twentieth-century literary dialogue that questioned the relevance of art, explored its boundaries, and readjusted its relationships. Representing the *fin de siècle*, the question remained as to whether Generation X literature was postmodern or anticipatory.

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<sup>37</sup> Grunge music added a raw and unapologetic energy to the broad composition until 1996, when Chuck Palahniuk’s masterpiece *Fight Club* channeled this energy onto the page, and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* provided a compelling pretext for acknowledging a generational canon.

<sup>38</sup> Coupland was so motivated to shake the burden of “Generation X,” he wrote *Generation A* in 2009.



The assumption that the “Generation X novel” is manifestly postmodern is likely a critical reflex conditioned by the successful mass marketing profile of the early 1990s. In *Hybrid Fictions: American Literature and Generation X* (2003), Daniel Grassian posits that Generation X literature marks a distinct break from postmodernism. Grassian argues with some apparent irony that in an age of dynamic literary mutation and hybridization, literary movements can no longer be “time bound” (2) in their descriptions, even as he recognizes and relies upon the practical necessity of classification to support his main thesis that Generation X literature is distinct from the 1960s and 70s postmodernist work of John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, William Gass, and others. And while acknowledging the anecdotal impossibility of identifying “Generation X” as a whole, he nevertheless convincingly identifies a Generation X canon within a recognizable demographic; to bridge this apparent disconnect, he describes the term “hybrid fictions” as a way to locate a heterogeneous and diverse literature that is resonant with the “sociological theories of Generation X” (5).<sup>39</sup> Grassian’s crucial contribution is in distinguishing between unconscious and

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<sup>39</sup> His proposed Gen X birth range of 1961-1981 (and even going as far back as the late 1950s, as convenient) allows him to identify authors Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, and Tama Janowitz as the avant-garde of the canon, and eventually David Foster Wallace and Richard Powers as its brightest stars. We are in agreement that the core decade of the canon begins with Doug Coupland’s groundbreaking *Generation X* (1991) and ends with Dave Eggers’ magnum opus, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000). In between are important works by Sherman Alexie, Douglas Coupland, William Vollmann, Elizabeth Wurtzel, Neal Stephenson, and other novelists, not to mention filmmakers, poets, and journalists. I would argue that Generation X literature doesn’t actualize until after the defeat of the Soviet Union, this being the crystallizing sociopolitical event that precipitates the formative socioeconomic event.

conscious hybridity (3), divorcing the earnest narrative imperatives of Generation X literature from the typically chilly experimentation of the postmodernists.<sup>40</sup>

Generation X fiction tends to be self-referential, drawing heavily from personal experience. The sometimes conflated author-narrator and author-character relationships remove distance between author and text, exposing the textual landscape to manipulation. There is often an implied, if not actual, metafictional framework that serves as a means of expression for authorial candor, in stark contrast to the nearly narcissistic self-consciousness of representative postmodern fiction. To a substantial degree in Generation X fiction, there is a strong personal psycho-emotional need to rectify what has gone wrong; if cynicism exists, it is not merely a critical exercise, but a mask that hides tangible pain and disappointment. In the personal search for relevance, the text goes where it will; consequently, “hybridity” is an appropriate aesthetic and psycho-emotional location for a generational middle child. Together, author and character (and reader) search for meaning, not with answers, but with questions. The Generation X novel can be an odyssey through a wilderness strung with makeshift signposts, and because the searches tend to yield nothing permanent or satisfactory except for the impermanent and dissatisfactory, authors and characters often rely on alternative narrative supports to create meaning in a void. Author and characters alike seem codependent in a common environment of social anonymity, economic despair, and personal disillusionment. In the salmon season of 1995, the cannery represented a cross-section of this American diaspora. Likewise, elements in *FM* that might first appear to be academic postmodern

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<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, and without pun or irony, this “divorce” is suggestive of a more pervasive split between Gen X and Boomers.

features (e.g., juxtaposition, extensive footnotes) exist, in fact and matter-of-factly, to clarify. Even the perennially postmodern metafictional device is elevated to a narrative requirement in *FM* because the author is also a real character in a story based on actual events. *FM* is neither emotionally distant nor self-consciously experimental. It is, by contrast, sincere in its hybrid form.

***Which writers influenced you at a young age?***

Science and the real world were decidedly more important to me than fiction. Books about paleontology, mineralogy, and numismatics were favorites. Catalogs and manuals with visual content, such as nature field guides, indicated an early appreciation for classified material; similarly, periodicals such as *National Geographic* impressed upon me the urgency of documentation. Those indelible grainy red images of the Viking missions to Mars contained culture- and time-specific language, ineffable for a young person who can nevertheless recognize and absorb its qualities.<sup>41</sup> On the fiction side, I read Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, and O. Henry, and systematically devoured detective series such as Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, and Encyclopedia Brown. My earliest attempts at writing were short mysteries (1-2 typed pages) that mimicked the vocabulary-rich byzantine passages of Poe, or the Victorian exactitudes of Doyle, or the deceptively simple conceptualism of science fiction. As a young “writer,” being immersed in language was more important to me than developing linear plot, a tendency that developed into an adult appreciation for theater of the absurd, the Beats, oral history, interview, television sit-coms and dramas, television commercials

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<sup>41</sup> *National Geographic* was the print equivalent of public television, and just as effective in its social conditioning.

and infomercials, foreign-language television, televangelists, faith healers, tent revivals, talk radio, nonsense literature, and the carnivalesque in film. The whole of my sublimated reading and viewing life emerges in *FM*. I would therefore extend to film and television, author Steven Millhauser's description of "books as midwives" (Sussler 338) assisting the writing process.

***How was film and television important to your development as a writer?***

Television was the primary parental surrogate for millions of latch-key kids of the 1970s and 80s, and had a saturating influence on my dramatic sensibilities. Watching reruns after school in an empty house, watching them repeatedly in-cycle year after year to the point that I could anticipate the episode schedules, eventually introduced a critical-theoretical aspect to the experience where drama became a studied object and contextual language was grist for manipulation. This objectify-subjectify dynamic was especially important after television programming had made a quantum leap from the almost purely frivolous to the socially conscious, e.g., from *Gilligan's Island* to Norman Lear. I would include in this paradigm shift the expansion and radicalization of public television. More accessible than film, television was the primary common reference point that extended the generational metanarrative through a diversity of dialogue, language, and sociopolitical inquiry, all of which are reflected in the heterogeneous dramatic assumptions in *FM*. For a generation defined by early self-reliance, it seemed a natural extension of prematurity to seize control of narrative and language.

***Did you write FM for an intended audience?***

My peers, twenty years too late.

***To whom might the novel appeal in 2015?***

I would hope that it has a universal appeal and message, with particular significance for a younger generation finding itself in difficult times, which describes every young generation in every time.

***If FM isn't yet complete, what do you envision for the work?***

Adding a comprehensive oral history of the salmon cannery in Ekuk.

## Annotated Bibliography

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If *FM* could be a traditional novel of epic proportions, albeit for a less ambitious age and smaller world, it would be the cannery version of Melville's classic. *Moby Dick* was a general conceptual guide for *FM*. The briny atmospherics encouraged me to write with a strong sense of place, to apply an inventory of physical details and cannery descriptions to the narrative both for their own sake and for their value as subtext. In both works, there is a single relentless purpose driving the commercial fishery and, by association, the narrative; a diverse collection of workers drawn to a remote location; the perspective of a narrator-participant low in an articulated labor hierarchy; the description of equipment, processes, and calculations; the superimposition of disparate places and times; an expansive sense of emptiness; the purging of darkness from the soul; and countless specific analogues. Melville's narrator is a reliable lay scholar with the aesthetic sensibility of an archivist or historian. The fish book concept in *FM* echoes his adaptation of whale taxonomy to bibliographic classification. Melville's brilliant integration of factual material into the fictional narrative was a major inspiration throughout the writing of *FM*, but especially in the earliest stages when my vision for bringing to life a visceral cannery environment and remote Eskimo village far outpaced the sophistication of my writing.

Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. 1759-1767.

Intro. Robert Folkenflik. New York: Modern Library, 2004. Print.

As the original anti-novel in English, *Tristram Shandy* plays a seminal role in the development of modern literary experimentation. Ostensibly an autobiography, *Tristram Shandy* is a surprisingly willful narrative composed of digression upon digression that illustrates how the imperatives of narrative must necessarily lead one away from convention. A jubilant Sterne reflects on the craft of writing and exults in the act (“[I]s a man to follow rules—or rules to follow him?” IV, x; “[l]et people tell their stories in their own way” IX, xxv), self-consciously deferring reader expectations on the one hand while presenting an entirely new kind of story that is true to his purposes. To this end, Sterne employs truly original expressive concepts for a mid-18<sup>th</sup> century novel, making use of dashes, sketches, asterisks, blank pages, blackened pages, and marbled pages unique to each printed edition, to distend and complicate the narrative—techniques that invite the reader to participate and what could be described as translingual. Like Dada, and unlike much of the academic postmodernist experimentations of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, his innovations are accessible. He directly addresses the reader as he makes his various “opinions” known in a playful, winning conversational style. In a solicitous, fallible way that is uniquely Sternean, *Tristram Shandy* encouraged me to explore the unorthodox with some chip and confidence. Together, Sterne and Melville provided a comparative baseline for the novel genre that was essential to the hybrid narrative development of *FM*.

Terkel, Studs. *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. New York: Pantheon, 1970. Print.

*Hard Times* is a master lesson in oral history from the master of the craft. My original vision for *FM* as an oral history was directly influenced by this work, one that illustrates how documentary can be expressed effectively in written form. In a very unassuming way, early readings of Terkel taught me both the discipline and the art of oral history, how creating a coherent and engaging history is much more than simply transcribing interviews. Terkel's editing and organizational skills were an invaluable guide during the process of integrating interview material into the narrative scheme of *FM*. *Hard Times* also demonstrates how complex narrative and character studies are created in-context with juxtaposition. Once it became apparent that *FM* would be at least partially fictionalized, I shifted my model away from Terkel's pure oral history format and closer to the hybrid narrative in Jack Kerouac's *Visions of Cody*.

Kerouac, Jack. *Visions of Cody*. 1972. New York: Penguin, 1993. Print.

*Visions of Cody* is the more literary alternative narrative to Kerouac's commercially successful novel *On the Road*, and remained an underground classic until its publication in 1972. Written in the same period as *On the Road*, *Visions of Cody* is a more serious character study of the same subject, his friend and Beat Generation hero Neal Cassady (Cody Pomeray). Kerouac experiments with description, genre, form, and perspective in three distinct sections, each section observing the subject through a different lens-medium. Parts one and two



are descriptive prose without chapters or paragraphs in a reflective stream-of-consciousness style, in contrast to the more frantic and stylized prose of *On the Road*. Part three is the most interesting to me. Here, Kerouac juxtaposes the verbatim transcript of a taped conversation between Cassady and himself with a fictionalized “imitation of the tape.” It is worth noting that in both “taped” narratives, Jack is “Jack” and Neal is “Cody,” maintaining a subtle distance between the observer and his subject—even when the former is a direct participant—while confusing the line between reality and fiction. This metafictional arrangement allows Kerouac to shift perspective by moving between the documentary and fictional material, latitude that he thoroughly exploits with experimental writing—embedding genres within genres and layering voices. Kerouac’s exploration into the creative uses of interview transcript makes *Visions of Cody* the single most influential work on the structure of *FM*.

Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson*. 1946-1958. New York: New Directions, 1995. Print.

Williams creates 20<sup>th</sup> century American epic poetry on the scale of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, a grand sweep of life and testament to the efficacy of art that follows the Passaic River from the Great Falls to the ocean, and beyond. The poem at once achieves parochialism and universality, a “working man’s” aesthetic that directly engages the reader. Like the old doctor of Rutherford himself, the language of *Paterson* is accessible, conversational, rooted firmly in place and people. Williams subtly blends genre, voice, and narrative perspective. When I was an undergraduate, *Paterson* was one of a small handful of landmark works that raised my awareness of literature to a new level. Even then, years

before the cannery experience, I was especially attracted to how Williams used factual excerpts (letters, ephemera, advertising copy, newspaper articles, etc.) to add a vital narrative layer to the poem—often an historical one. The scientific survey of substratum in Book Three is one particularly good example among many that demonstrates how the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous genres can be used effectively as a narrative technique, and to create a full, convincing sense of time and place.

Burroughs, William S. *The Soft Machine*. 1961. New York: Grove, 1966. Print.

Words can control or they can liberate. In this first book in the Nova Trilogy—a paranoid struggle for power across time and place—Burroughs advances letters by a century in demonstrating his “word virus” theory. In *The Soft Machine*, Burroughs further refines the cut-up and fold-in techniques that he had first used extensively in *Naked Lunch*, improving Dadaist precedents by adding system and process to the anarchic proclivity. One important result of the language experiment is the splicing of space-time through narrative juxtaposition. This concept helped me to repurpose a significant amount of road trip material from the original *FG* manuscript: using a cut-up and fold-in process, I was able to superimpose the times, places, details, and voices of several cross-country road trip narratives, achieving a symbolically important geographic symmetry with the Plains as axis point. An emergent theme of obsessive compulsion—a different kind of word virus—was liberated by these techniques, allowing me to use important material in a creative way without cluttering the story.

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road: The Original Scroll*. Ed. Howard Cunnell. Intro. Howard Cunnell, Penny Vlagopoulos, George Mouratidis, and Joshua Jupetz. New York: Penguin-Viking, 2007. Print.

Kerouac had been an early major influence on my sense of the scope of American literature and the possibilities for unrestrained written expression. *On the Road* was a landmark work both in content and method of creation. In a three-week frenzy of production, Kerouac spilled his thoughts onto a single roll of typing paper that he had taped together so as not to break stream-of-consciousness. The resulting manuscript had always impressed me. The editors of this edition present *On the Road* in its original scroll form before the narrative was modified, chapters and paragraphs added, and personal names changed to pseudonyms. Here, one gets the full creative tone of the work and an appreciation for what I might describe as single-process construction. I find this original version of *On the Road* as an artifact, as literary historiography, more edifying than the published version. Although Kerouac never intended to produce a finished work in that form, seeing the original scroll manuscript on display at the New York Public Library several years ago confirmed that my machine text concept—which I knew instinctively to be the correct format for *FM*—was indeed viable and aesthetically elegant.

*Fellini Satyricon*. 1968. Dir. Federico Fellini. Perf. Martin Potter, Hiram Keller, Max Born. MGM, 2001. DVD.

A visually and thematically indulgent film set in ancient Rome at the time of Nero, *Fellini Satyricon* is a fantastic, surreal, colorful, dislocated, and dreamlike

interpretation of the extant work of Petronius, one that fully explores the aesthetic possibilities of a fragmented narrative. The liberating spirit of the film encouraged me to expand the carnivalesque elements in *FM* into the “anomalous narrative” that follows the treatment of the cannery. These carnivalesque elements, personified in Audio and his salmonids, became a critical aesthetic binding force that encouraged the development of important sequences, most notably the child harvest. Considering *FM* as film, *Fellini Satyricon* seeps into every visual aspect of Audio. Even the colors of Audio’s cannon and the fish guts themselves resonate with the film’s hard reds and grainy pastels. From an impressionistic concept, Audio assumed corporeal form and grew increasingly more important to my story until becoming the most prominent character in *FM*. The steady “rise” of Audio and the salmonids during the writing process suggests that aesthetics can also drive narrative. Once liberated from the confines of author-imposed drudgery, they were free to do their important work.

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1996. Print.

In this Generation X masterpiece, Palahniuk describes a process of self-awareness (catharsis) where the protagonist and antagonist are actually the same character. Tyler Durden becomes the leader of the underground movement called Fight Club, where men pound each other in the equivalent of group therapy. This intense sadomasochism is the revolutionary force necessary to eliminate the imprinting of past traumas and the false veneers of a vapid modern society. Feeding on a pervasive latent discontent among this demographic—reflecting a real-life Gen X demographic—Fight Club quickly becomes a transnational

movement and a moral force spinning out of Durden's control. The psycho-emotional narrative shared by *FM* and *Fight Club*—functions of shared generational experience and angst—is expressed in both narratives through a gruesome physical “processing.” I regard *Fight Club* as the essential male expression of my generation, the literary companion to the collective musical force of grunge.

Audioslave. *Audioslave*. Epic/Interscope, 2002. CD.

Audioslave combines the lead singer of Soundgarden and the former members of Rage against the Machine. The result is an infusion of an angry, politically-charged funk into the primal core of grunge, blending the aesthetics of two companion generations, X and Y, into one sound. As the writing of *FM* progressed, so did the soundtrack of the novel migrate to a more inclusive one that took into account all of my cannery experiences from the mid-1990s into the early-2000s. Audioslave's first album captures the frequency of the combined experience: raw, gray, drizzly, slightly surreal, renegade, fortifying, and ultimately liberating. As a sociocultural referent, the album is archival. Playing continually in the background, the soundtrack is woven into the semiotic fabric of *FM*, amplifying mood, building tension, and articulating the collective voice. Audio is a direct function of the soundtrack, a translingual manifestation in flesh who communicates the tone, expectations, mandate, and phylogenetic memories of the music—a timeless subversive force that heals through collective experience. Audioslave is the premonition, and Audio the messenger.

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Part II.

FISHMACHINE

Generican Packing Company

4200 Shilshole Avenue

Seattle, WA 98145-3345

Dear Human Resource:

Each year we receive applications for employment in Ekuk from people who have unrealistic ideas of what working in an Alaskan fish plant is like. This summary is intended to help explain what you will encounter if you are hired.

Many fish plants are remote and isolated but Ekuk is one of the more remote. Ekuk is located on the east bank of Nushagak Bay in greater Bristol Bay. Access is by single-propeller airplane and such travel is entirely dependent upon the weather.

Fish processing is the ONLY reason we are in Ekuk. Employees spend most of their time working with fish. IF YOU ARE OFFENDED BY THE SIGHT OF FISHBLOOD AND/OR THE SMELL OF FISH, THEN FISH PROCESSING IS NOT FOR YOU!

Due to the remoteness of Ekuk, it should be noted, if you are taking prescribed medication— medical and pharmacy facilities are located in Dillingham or Anchorage. The only transportation to these cities is by airplane.

Most work begins about the middle of June and finishes somewhere in early to mid-July. The exact dates depend upon the fish run. Each employee must be prepared to

report to work when requested and to stay until officially released. You can be obligated to pay for your own way home should you quit prior to the end of season.

Some employees may be offered employment at one of our other plants after Ekuk is finished. This extra work in the Southeast Alaska region could last into late August or September.

The official point of hire for all employees is the plant location. Departure from the lower-48 is from Seattle, Washington. Employees are responsible for their own transportation to Seattle and home again from Seattle. Employees are flown to the plant and back again at the successful completion of their contract. Once tickets are purchased and reservations are made, changes are not possible. If you cannot complete your contract for whatever reason, Generican Packing Company will deduct your airfare cost from your paycheck. Furthermore, you will be responsible for your return arrangements.

Wages are those named in the union contract. Overtime is paid at time and one half. Many employees earn much of their pay from overtime. THERE IS NO GUARANTEE OF WORK OR OVERTIME HOURS. HOURS WORKED DEPENDS ON THE AMOUNT OF FISH.

Payday is on the day you leave. However, you may take “draws” against your earnings on a weekly basis if you need cash. Each employee is permitted to charge at our store, so there is little need for cash in Ekuk.

Our store is an old-fashioned general store solely operated by The Company. The stock is selected primarily for the needs of our fishermen. There is always a good supply



of pop, snacks, clothing and the basic necessities. Lodging, meals, bed linen, towels, and raingear are provided by The Company.

It cannot be overemphasized that THERE IS NO GLAMOUR WHATSOEVER IN FISH PROCESSING. IT IS VERY HARD WORK FOR WHICH MOST WORKERS ARE UNPREPARED. When you submit your application, you are asking for long, tedious hours of repetitious work in a wet, “fishy” environment. Your off-duty recreational choices are extremely limited. Even strolling down the beach is affected by the weather, mosquitoes, and tides.

A few people find that they just cannot take working at a cannery and never return. Some others quit, while others like it and return each year. It depends upon your ability to live in an isolated environment and deal with a fatiguing, repetitive job.

If you are still interested in employment at Ekuk, respond by mail with your application and available date. Generican Packing Company will notify you before April 15th if your application is accepted.

Sincerely,

Human Resources

Sometimes when the line stops for a can jam and we're standing around at our work stations cold and wet, splattered from head to toe with blood and fish scales, I'll hold a gutted salmon in my palm as if preaching a sermon. The salmon on the grade three canning line are exquisitely printed and bound quartos: bone-sewn, crisp white type on a crimson sheet, and boards wrapped in iridescent silver. The canning machine is a word-generator with a unique lexicon, a printing press that records the common story of an epic migration. *The Fishguts Documentary Project* occurs at 114.38.58MT when 206,369 fish have been processed at the rate of one fish every two seconds. It's how numbers become words. If you don't hear the eloquence of the numbers, you're not reading them. When machine time resumes, delirium will systematically insinuate itself: I celebrate the machine, and sing the machine, and what I process you shall process, for every fish belonging to me as good belongs to you: so a new poetry insinuates itself. This is machine text: there are no paragraphs, chapters, or visual breaks. It is contractually incumbent on the reader to bear with machine text for the entire canning season, to be sensitive to shifts in content, tone, narrative, character, and voice. Machine text form follows machine text function. This is machine text: first in mono, later in stereo. Machine text is an archival method and classification system. *The Fishguts Documentary Project* includes descriptions of cannery processes, observations of cannery life, mundane details of immense significance, and insightful interviews of cannery workers and other fish-related people.<sup>1</sup> A committed reader might ingest the entire season folio by folio in processing order at the machine rate of one fish every two seconds. The tape machine

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews provide an entry point into a phylogenetic archive that reaches back to at least 1878, when the first salmon cannery in Alaska began operations. Reconstruction of these narratives may be possible through reverse engineering, using numbers as the universal control language.

moves in tandem with salmon season. I set the tape machine in motion and listen for as long as anyone is willing to talk, which can be two minutes or two hours depending on the fish run or what diversions are developing in the bunkhouse. There is no narrative except the machine. This is machine text: immediately engaging, earnest, and relevant, without the irony of the beauty of ugliness or false pretense to the complexity of simplicity; a base formula from which to steadily build a process calculus; something repetitious and palimpsestuous, with internal rhyme schemes and driving symphonic metal type. Numbers and words digest in turns. Discard any fish book that doesn't give you that crucified feeling. Machine text operates from the assumption that one fish every two seconds has something to do with everything. *Fishguts* explores the reasons why we traveled thousands of miles to this remote outpost.<sup>2</sup> Cannery workers invade Sea-Tac in June. Most of them are college kids looking for an interesting summer job, the majority from the Pacific Northwest, but all ages, every region of the country, and many foreign countries are represented. They mingle with old work friends or lie around with their packs waiting for a flight. The gender ratio is about even, and there's an atmosphere of health and youthful optimism about the place. Jaw lines are snug, teeth are white, laughter is loud and unapologetic. The terminals are packed with workers, and it takes some asking around to find the right cannery manager. Each leg of the trip takes you to a

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<sup>2</sup> "Fishes have a unique evolutionary history that stretches back in time more than 450 million years. They are incredibly ancient, older than the dinosaurs, and include the ancestors of all the limbed vertebrates living on land, even humans. Human evolution is rooted in fishes; and scientists have discovered traces of 360-million-year-old fossils of transitional aquatic creatures that had both gills and limbs. Not only are humans and fishes related, some fishes are more closely related to humans than they are to other fishes! We commonly think of ourselves as completely separate from our aquatic ancestors when instead we should be marveling at the similarities."—from John G. Maisey, *Discovering Fossil Fishes* (1996)

more remote location on a smaller plane. We fly from Seattle to Anchorage on a chartered jet, and have enough time during the layover to take a cab into town for a few beers. Then it's off to Dillingham on a turbo prop, loud and cold, with a full horizon of jagged snow peaks below. The stewardess is wearing Carharts. In Dillingham, we wait inside a cluttered hangar<sup>3</sup> for the better part of a long summer day, socializing and eating sandwiches. "*You're from Wisconsin? I'm from Wisconsin.*" Alternating bush planes are taking people to the cannery three at a time. There's no rush. There are two hundred of us, and the sun won't be going anywhere for a while. People are lying about aircraft frames, grubby tool boxes, jerry cans of plane fuel and oil. An annoyed pilot steps through a tangle of sprawled legs to grab an orange: "You guys still here? You're gonna be here all day, so you might want to move around a little, keep the blood flowing." An office girl walks through the crowd suspiciously, rearranges donuts and collects used coffee cups. Small groups wander off to explore, a few people hitch a ride into Dillingham, but it's your time eventually for the fifteen minute jump to Ekuk.<sup>4</sup> The tundra is flat, scored with soggy caribou trails and saturated with hundreds of small thermokarst<sup>5</sup> pools that mirror the clouds. Some see schools of beluga whales churning the choppy brown waters of the Mulchatna. The pilot has been ferrying workers back and forth all day, answering the same questions through engine noise. "How fast are we going?" "About 120 knots." "You own this plane?" "I own two of them." "That's cool."

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<sup>3</sup> Air Wren.

<sup>4</sup> "Ekuk; cape, on the eastern shore of Nushagak river, near its mouth. Native name from Lutke, 1828, who wrote it Ekouk. Clark point of the Fish Commission, 1888, may be a synonym for this. In the Eleventh Census written Yekuk. Ekuk; Eskimo settlement, near the mouth of Nushagak river. Name from Lutke, 1828, who spelled it Ekouk. Has also been written Yekuk."—from *United States Geological Survey* (1906)

<sup>5</sup> A thermokarst lake, or thaw lake, is a shallow fresh water body formed by melting permafrost, prevalent in northern latitudes.

“Well, I don’t know how cool it is, but it’s the only way to get around up here most times.” The engine drops a few octaves. We bank over a rolling bluff and descend toward a shallow hemisphere of marshy lowland separated from the inlet by a thin gravel spit of land. Ekuk is like a giant set-net stretching for two miles along the coast, anchored at the northern end by cannery buildings packed close together near the docks, and at various points south along the beach road by a jagged line of seasonal fishing houses. The plane lands with a soft rumble on the gravel airstrip<sup>6</sup> and parks near what looks like a bus shelter with room to seat two people uncomfortably: “Ekuk International Airport.”<sup>7</sup> No discharge of fireworks allowed on company property. Anyone discharging fireworks will be terminated or asked to leave the premises forever.” No one knows why anyone would bring fireworks to a cannery or why the warning is so specific. Is it a cannery joke? Ekuk is elemental, a simple palette of earth and fish oil, cool clean air like fresh water to breathe. Earlier arrivals who must have settled in already are playing keep-away with Native kids on a small concrete basketball court; the net is a rigged contraption of plywood and two-by-fours tied onto a large cable reel. The pilot hands us our packs and we walk through the cannery with no specific destination. The cannery is a self-contained community with work buildings, bunkhouses, dining hall, general store, nurse’s station, and laundry room.<sup>8</sup> We’re here now, ready to can fish, but first we need to find a

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<sup>6</sup> 1200’ x 40’.

<sup>7</sup> International airport identification code KKU.

<sup>8</sup> Barely a decade after the Russians left Alaska with their beads and Yankee guilders, the first salmon canneries in Alaska were built in 1878 at Klawock and Sitka in the southeastern panhandle, the former replacing a saltery that had been in operation there since 1868. As canning became commercially viable on a large scale, the fish canning industry’s center of gravity shifted from northern California and the Pacific Northwest to Alaska. Sockeye salmon were more plentiful there and, unlike Pacific cod, popular as a canned product. By 1883, the first salmon cannery was established at Nushagak. Twenty years later, the

bunkhouse and pick a room. I find the bunkhouse farthest from the cannery, a pale gray rectangular shoe box raised over the marsh on cinder blocks. The front of the bunkhouse and those of adjacent bunkhouses delineate an open commons area, with a gravel volleyball court and some handmade benches. Up two wooden steps into a central hallway. The inside is plain and utilitarian, but cannery cozy. The walls are a pleasant light seafoam green that complements the marsh grass outside the windows; the ceilings are white, and the floor is a matrix of plywood sheeting painted battleship gray. Each room comes with a simple ceiling fixture, a few hooks near the door to hang wet clothes, two metal camp beds, and maybe a plywood table or bench or some other odd furniture amenity depending on which room you've chosen. Most of the rooms have already been claimed. Strangely, the last room on the left is unoccupied, so I get the distinction of having the most remote room of the entire cannery. It's bright and breezy on the corner, with an unobstructed view of the marsh grass and bluff. People are giddy on this first halcyon day of new adventure, and the socializing process here, as also observed at Sea-Tac, is quick. Names and hometown information are exchanged, veterans and newbies distinguished, character evaluated, roommates chosen, and early alliances formed. The center hallway fills with small piles of sand, candy wrappers, and dried orange peels that escaped inspection from the year before. You learn that the floor produces a steady supply of sand no matter how well or how many times you sweep it. Garbage cans block the central hallway. Muddy boots sizzle near the iron stove. The doors at both ends of the bunkhouse are held open, and a light breeze mixes the sounds of cleaning, rearranging,

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North Alaska Salmon Company opened the first cannery in nearby Ekuk. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ekuk had a small permanent population that even operated a school from 1958-1974. Today, an eroding Ekuk exists only for the salmon.

music, and fish talk. Someone appears from the bathroom wrapped in a towel, clutching the knot in one hand, liquid soap in the other, flip-flopping around garbage piles and leaving wet prints in the dust. Girls from one of the adjacent bunkhouses start to filter in. The place settles down into smokers, card players, chess contemplationists, flirts, letter writers, easy conversationalists, expert lecturers, and radio listeners. Most of us are first-timers waiting for the fish with leisurely trepidation, discussing the storm front of wet silver moving inexorably through space-time while wondering privately if the fish might not come at all this year. No one knows this season will yield the largest catch in Bristol Bay history. After a midday snack of coffee and maple bars, I go poking about the corrugated alleyways of the cannery, walk through the village and take pictures, listen to an old woman talk about her life, follow a trail worn into the side of the bluff up to the abandoned church,<sup>9</sup> and follow the ridgeline of the bluff back north. It's silent and misting lightly. Once in a while I stop to lie down and dream on a tussock.<sup>10</sup> I slog on and eventually reach Clark's Point, a small permanent community with a rough grid of dirt roads and houses with television antennae.<sup>11</sup> Small black dogs walk down the muddy streets without interest; humans peek out from behind shabby window curtains. Down below, tucked up against the bluff, is a rusty little cannery on stilts, veiled in the Northern Pacific fog like an old Soviet freighter. It is deathly silent and peaceful. I want to drop right here and sleep, but I must get back to the cannery before midnight dinner. Several

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<sup>9</sup> The St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, once operational under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Alaska, added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1980 as building #80000749.

<sup>10</sup> The tundra produces a strong potpourri of pine, clove, and fresh water that acts as a soporific with a direct line to Oz.

<sup>11</sup> GPS coordinates 58.8325, -158.5525; Nushagak Packing Company cannery established in 1888; population: 62 (2013); housing construction on the bluff began in the 1980s to save the village below from severe erosion.

hours later in the dining hall, I compared notes with other explorers. Rather than turning up the bluff trail at the church, as I had done, some people had followed the beach farther south, finding glass buoys from Japanese fishing nets washed up on the pebbles. Others had stayed in the bunkhouse to socialize or write letters of simple beauty about caribou antlers and old wooden boats rotting into the tall grass.<sup>12</sup> Radio Dillingham: Garth Walsh to Rachel: I won't be around here. I'm leaving to Texas. I'll be home on the 27<sup>th</sup>. I'm sorry. I love you and miss you a lot. Those first days are the deceptively simple haiku days of lying on your bed in clean clothes, stomach satisfied, lungs filled with leisure, mind and body at rest, and rain coming through the open window at a particular slant, cold and plush, bringing fish stories from Hokkaido and Kamchatka. Summer solstice: sunset 12:10 a.m., sunrise 5:41 a.m., darker shades of day in between. The next morning, circus operatives herd us into the dining hall so we can sign up for a job. Workers range in age from eighteen to sixty and come from Philippines, Japan, Canada, Russia, Mexico, Turkey, Alaska, Washington, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, Maryland, North Carolina, Florida, Texas, Arizona, Utah, California, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, but everyone looks roughly the same in flannels, sweatshirts, jeans, boots, and baseball caps. You have three choices. Write them down in order of preference or we'll just stick you where we need you and you probably won't like it. Cannery veterans get first pick or don't have to choose at all if they're leads. They're better paid and tend to stay dry in retort or the warehouse. Beach gang is mostly Native, Filipinos dominate the fish house, and a Japanese team in matching work uniform runs egg house operations. College kids and newbies of all

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<sup>12</sup> *Tundra cinemática.*



stripes will have to suffer in the bloody trenches of the slimeline, cannery, and freezer. I don't have to think twice about my choice. For reasons that are unclear but insistent, I came to the cannery to process fish, and the canning machine is the heart of that process. I write "cannery" on all three lines, forfeiting two random choices for a guaranteed assignment.<sup>13</sup> The wooden benches and tables are pushed against the walls, and we assemble on the floor for the required safety meeting. The supervisor, apparently a high school football coach back home, the rim of his ball cap bent into a sharp "v," stands before us with a clipboard in one hand and his other arm wrapped around the shoulder of a big black dude. "See this man here?" Yes, we see him. "This here's Curtis. Curtis'll make sure you're where you're supposed to be when you're supposed to be there." Curtis drops the smirk and listens importantly, hands crossed over his belt buckle, scanning the crowd for likely slackers. "He's the man who's going to make sure you get up for work on time. He's the man who's going to make sure you're in your bunkhouse by eleven o'clock...unless you're working, of course." Snickers and knowing looks between the managementariat. "He's the man who's going to take away all those little bottles of hootchie you snuck into your luggage. Remember, every one of you signed a compliance contract and we got copies of those contracts in the office." He points somewhere that might or might not be in the direction of the cannery office. "So if you screw up, folks, this'll be the man who escorts you to the airplane, and Curtis didn't take no guff, you can be sure of it. Wendy is passing out a sheet with cannery rules and regulations."<sup>14</sup> Read it,

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<sup>13</sup> Certain people always seem to get easy jobs and some others difficult ones. You're marked for life at birth, and most perceptive people can smell it on you. I've learned over the years to cut them off at the pass and gain martyrdom as meager compensation for my predestined servitude.

<sup>14</sup> Generican Packing Company Facility #12: Ekuk, Employee Rule List: 1. No discharge of fireworks allowed on company property. Anyone discharging fireworks will be immediately terminated at his/her

remember it, sign it, and hand it back before you leave this room. If anyone finds these rules unbearable, do not sign, do not hand back, and summarily pack your bags.” He turns to the pilot leaning in the doorway. “Douglas, you think you can make a few more runs today?” “I’m a little tired, coach, but I can manage a few more if I had to.” “You heard it. Plane’s got fuel. Okay, now for the good news.” We endure the meeting. We watch a corny video without dialogue that everyone can understand. The actors are terrible, mimes overdosed on whatever drug makes you exaggerate movements and facial expressions. We learn that washing hands is good and moving machine parts are dangerous. If a fish falls on the floor during processing, we have to wash it off with saline solution. Sea lions have been known to bite off the calves of fishermen, thinking they’re cod fish. The takeaway phrase is “humanitarian ramification,” each syllable carefully enunciated and spelled out in capital letters on the blackboard. The safety meeting is followed by coffee and a quick union meeting, at which time we sign a form allowing them to deduct union dues from our pay. We’re officially cannery workers waiting for fish, a wet silver storm front moving inexorably through space-time. On our way back to the bunkhouse, someone notices the fishing report posted in the office window: Fishing will be permitted in the Ekuk Special Harvest Area to drift gillnet from 11:00 a.m. to 3:30

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own expense or asked to leave the premises forever. 2. Anyone found in an opposite-sex bunkhouse after 11pm will be immediately terminated at his/her own expense. 3. Alcohol and illegal drugs are strictly forbidden on company property. Anyone caught in possession of such substances will be immediately terminated at his/her own expense. 4. Cigarette smoking is allowed in designated areas only. 5. No company-provided food is permitted in the bunks. 6. All employees are expected to report to work on time. Chronic lateness will result in permanent dismissal at his/her own expense. 7. Employees must comply with all safety regulations as outlined in Form 29, attached (USPCC 29: 14: 1-9). 8. Employees are forbidden from the following locations and times: All dock areas during loading/unloading, the airstrip at any time, the abandoned church.

p.m., June 22. This is a 4 ½ hour period. Fishing will be permitted in the Ekuk Special Harvest Area to set gillnet from 12 a.m. to 7 a.m., June 23. This is a 7-hour period. Bristol Bay enjoys the largest run of sockeye<sup>15</sup> salmon in the world. Salmon are anadromous, meaning they are hatched in fresh water, spend their lives at sea, then return to their natal fresh water pools to spawn and die. Their rotting bodies return vital nutrients to the river system. Billions of salmon smolts enter the Gulf of Alaska each year, and many millions return. Scientists don't know exactly where they go or why they leave in the first place, but the Alaskan salmon fisheries are recognized worldwide as a model in efficient and sustainable wild fisheries management.<sup>16</sup> The Alaska Department of Fish & Game relies primarily upon the observation of salmon populations from the air and through ground stream surveys. Fishing is limited by harvesting area, boat size, net size, number of fishing permits, and fishing times. Fishermen use gillnets, purse seines, and trolls, although purse seines are the most common. The salmon for this cannery are caught in the choppy waters of Nushagak Bay, pulled up to the surface in a silver teardrop, their sensory mystery interrupted, their mind vacated, their flesh redirected to the canning machines. Individual fishing boats transfer their fish to a tender boat, which purchases each catch by weight and enables the fishermen to fish as much as they can during permitted hours. Truly, time is fish. When the hold is full, the tender pulls into dock, where the fish are weighed and unloaded. They're actually vacuumed out through

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<sup>15</sup> Sockeye, from the Native *Suk-kegh* meaning "red fish." Common name: sockeye salmon; Kingdom: Animalia; Subkingdom: Bilateria; Infrakingdom: Deuterostomia; Phylum: Chordata; Subphylum: Vertebrata; Infraphylum: Gnathostomata; Superclass: Osteichthyes; Class: Actinopterygii; Subclass: Neopterygii; Infraclass: Teleostei; Superorder: Protacanthopterygii; Order: Salmoniformes; Family: Salmonidae; Subfamily: Salmoninae; Genus: *Oncorhynchus*; Species: *Oncorhynchus nerka*.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Fishery Conservation & Management Act (1976), et al.

an opaque plastic tube, and look like zombies slowly floating to the brine tanks. Quality control technicians separate the species, inspect the fish, and take samples of their internal temperature. Typically, the cannery processes the previous day or night's catch, and each processing station begins and ends the work day at staggered times. Dock crews are the first to get busy on shore.<sup>17</sup> The rest of the cannery falls into line in processing order. The inexorable storm front of wet silver has arrived in space-time. The cannery seems deserted, but all the workers are inside.<sup>18</sup> The gates open and fish from the holding tanks flow through the inspection area. Inspectors sit alongside several chutes and separate the fish by size and quality. Sushi-grade and supermarket-grade whole salmon are the most profitable. Grade-three sockeye and chum are of the lowest quality and get sent to one of the canning lines. Even though it is the nominal central activity of the cannery that uses the majority of the manpower and machinery, canning relies on volume and by-products to eke out a thin profit margin. In the fish house—a gleaming cannery erector set—whole salmon are carried around the outer edges of the room on one of two conveyor belts. Workers randomly pull fish off the line and slice their bellies from tail to gills with long filleting knives. The orange roe<sup>19</sup> is scooped out and put into plastic buckets, which are replaced constantly by egg house runners. The guts are ripped from the body cavity and thrown to the floor in piles of red-scale impasto. Workers on the slimeline double-check the body cavities to make sure they are completely empty.

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<sup>17</sup> Port code EKV.

<sup>18</sup> Chinese were the original canneries workforce until gradually phased out by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Japanese workers replaced them into the early 1920s until gradually phased out by the demands of Japanese Imperialism. Filipino Alaskeros, taking advantage of their status as American protectorates, became prominent, forming the Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union in 1938. They continue to have a significant presence. Cf. *Wards Cove Packing Co. v. Atonio*, 490 U.S. 642 (1989).

<sup>19</sup> ADF&G Fish Ticket Code 400.

Several workers keep the floor clean with hoses and squeegees, directing the fish guts into a central trough, where a constant water stream carries the viscera back to the inlet. The now-gutted fish are placed on another conveyor and straightened by a funnel that makes it seem like they're voluntarily swimming into the spinning blades that slice off their heads and tails at mechanically-timed intervals. The heads and tails are collected and eventually boiled down for fish oil.<sup>20</sup> The fully-butchered fish travel up a sharply-angled belt that grips them with small teeth. This conveyor flattens near the ceiling and carries the fish through a hole in the wall that leads into the canning room, where the fish are canned in a complicated process that will be described later.<sup>21</sup> Filled cans speed into the retort room where they are quickly loaded onto metal bussies (which look like coal mining carts), stacked thirteen layers high, each layer separated by a thin metal sheet hole-punched to allow for even steaming and the draining of condensed steam water.<sup>22</sup> The retort team has to work in perfect concert because the cans are coming in fast and won't stop coming until the can line stops. If the lead has to press the panic button to stop the can flow, it means the can line also has to stop, and that's not good news for the retort crew that couldn't keep up.<sup>23</sup> One worker sits adjacent to the plexiglass wall that separates the cannery from the retort room; he or she is in charge of scooping cans from the slide table onto the metal separator sheets, using a metal crescent that has two handles

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<sup>20</sup> One odd cannery "delicacy" is breaded fish cheeks, usually cooked up by the old-timers and managers who have access to a kitchen, samples of which eventually make their way around to the bunkhouse.

<sup>21</sup> With an average weight of 3.671875 pounds per fish, each fish yields 7.883 7.5oz cans.

<sup>22</sup> The maximum can limit per level is 121 (11 x 11); more likely, each level averages around 110 cans (121-10%, adjusted for work speed). At 13 layers, the likely average can limit per bussie is 1430: 10 bussies per retort tube = 14,300 cans per retort. Each metal separator sheet has 578 holes: 11 sheets per bussie = 6,358 holes: 10 bussies per retort = 110 sheets and 63,580 drainage holes per retort.

<sup>23</sup> This is where most of the dented cans come from, which eventually get re-canned.

on top like a scythe.<sup>24</sup> The rest of the team consolidate the cans and add metal layers until the bussie is full. The metal sheets must be placed just a hair below table level by the hydraulic lift operator so the cans won't tip as they're being scooped onto it. Tipped cans have to be straightened before the next separator sheet can be placed on top of that layer. Once that is successfully accomplished, the lift operator drops the stacks down a few inches to level with the table again. This is successively more challenging as more levels and more weight is added; at some point, because the lift plate is smaller than the sheets themselves, the outer edges bend down from the weight and the surface of the cans form a meniscus. As soon as the last layer is full, the bussie has to be quickly replaced because the cans are coming in fast and already bunching up on the slide table. The lift operator drops the load and the full bussie is violently slammed out of the way with the new empty bussie. The bottom of the new bussie, a thick metal sheet that serves as the first layer for cans, must be set perfectly over the hydraulic lift plate and raised to perfection just below the edge of the table. This exchange must be completed in less than ten seconds. Bussies load fast, and the process is repeated until break time. Meanwhile, full bussies are loaded into any one of several large double-ended retort cooking tubes,<sup>25</sup> the wheels guided into metal rails and packed ten bussies deep. Deliberate old miners with a heavy load of coal crouch down with their elbows out and slowly disappear into the mine shaft. When a retort is full, the door is closed and locked with a large spin wheel like that of a bank vault. The cans are steam-cooked and unloaded from the other end, where they are spray cooled with chlorinated water. The bussies are tipped to drain the water and left to dry.

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<sup>24</sup> Commonly referred to as the "hockey stick." A rubber piece on the inside protects the cans from the always frenzied and sometimes violent scooping action.

<sup>25</sup> Reid Boiler Manufacturers / Bellingham, WA.

Dry cans are then palletized unlabelled, full pallets are wrapped with plastic stretch-wrap and transported by ship to Japan<sup>26</sup> and various destinations on the west coast of North America. But the cannery is at the center of this process, all other steps either preparing the fish for canning or managing the filled cans. The canning room is cold, bright, and antiseptic. Gutted fish pour over the edge of the fish house conveyor into a giant steel vat. Two workers on a catwalk push down the fish with long metal poles that look like shuffleboard sticks. The vat tapers to hydraulic doors that open onto a stainless steel delivery table. The fish pile up against the doors, and eventually the sound of them falling becomes dull. A pool of opaque slime spreads over the table. My partner, 4447, and I stand across from each other on perforated black rubber mats to keep our feet out of machine water and fish juices. We're about to go into labor. The vat is to my right, and to my left is the idling canning machine, a big steam punk locomotive without wheels.<sup>27</sup> Workers above us in the loft feed the can chute, a twisted metal helix that joins the rear of the machine near the metal belt. A simple pin holds back the cans until the machine is engaged. A fresh mound of salt pellets sits in the feeder. The can patch line is waiting with their bone snips and small piles of salmon chunks.<sup>28</sup> The lid crew has filled the seamer and opened several boxes for refills. A squeegee person stands on either side of the machine. All-in-all, about a dozen workers in yellow raingear, rubber boots, and

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<sup>26</sup> *The Japanese Fishguts Archival Project* would present the logistical complications of travel and the challenge of an additional translation step: from Japanese to numbers to English.

<sup>27</sup> In actuality, an American Can Co. Filler Model #78 built in the 1930s, a utilitarian design with some Art Deco sensibility. These machines are very valuable and much preferred to newer ones. Cannery mechanics make replacement parts from scratch and enjoy a respectable rank in the cannery hierarchy.

<sup>28</sup> Filled open cans pass over a weigh carousel. Underweight cans are mechanically diverted to the can patch line, where workers fill gaps with fish chunks and snip any bones that might be sticking out over the rim of the can before sending them along to the seamer.

baseball caps wait for someone to press record. Our job as anonymous cannery processors is to feed the machine grade-three sockeye, headed and gutted.<sup>29</sup> These are smaller can-grade fish, usually with bruises and blemishes that have been lanced in the fish house. At the end of the delivery table is a steel conveyor with teeth that will hold the fish in place as they move steadily forward into a row of whumping scythes. These move quickly upwards then slowly back and down in the manner of a silk loom.<sup>30</sup> Once sliced, the salmon steaks will enter the bowels of the machine where they are turned and plunged into cans.<sup>31</sup> Metal wheels spin tight in their orbits. Fresh water from the thermokarst lake is pumped through the machine. There is a green button, a red button, and tons of fish pushing against the door. Grampus, the cannery foreman,<sup>32</sup> walks around the machine as if it were an artifact from an ancient civilization uncovered from the tundra, plastered, dissembled, examined, cataloged, and reassembled on a museum display floor. He sniffs, pushes, pulls, and wiggles. With a huge wrench hanging from his hairy hand, he lumbers over to a box and starts passing out earplugs, hair nets, rubber gloves, and liners. He throws a hairnet at 4447, which hits him in the chest and falls onto the table. Grampus holds his gaze, waiting for a reaction. When there isn't one, he ducks under the belt and

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<sup>29</sup> ADF&G Fish Ticket Code 420.

<sup>30</sup> Producing monochrome fish textiles with some design subtleties.

<sup>31</sup> "The American Can machines allow the salmon to be placed flat on a spiked chain that advances intermittently through an elliptical cut-off knife that slices the fish into the proper length for the can size being filled. A spring-loaded fork then pushes the portion through a twister tunnel to place the cut in a vertical position. A six-pocket vertical rotary unit then receives both the fish and the can simultaneously, while a reciprocating chop knife slices off the measured portion which is deposited into the can by a plunger. The integrated cutting unit is regulated in speed by a cork slip clutch that is activated by a crude hydraulic cylinder. The slave cylinder senses pressure through the spring loaded pusher fork."—from P. J. Footitt and A. S. Lewis, *The Canning of Fish and Meat* (1994)

<sup>32</sup> Played by Danny Trejo in the film version.



pokes 4447 on the shoulder. “You’re going to need a hairnet if you want to work here, slick, and if you *don’t* want to work here tell me right now because we got a second group of workers that’ll be here next week. I can fill your place in a heartbeat....You think you geniuses can keep the fish on this here line without clogging up the whole works? I worked on this machine all winter and now we got fish. You skip just one fish and I gotta stop the whole machine because that means there’s gonna be empty cans, and the company doesn’t want *them*.” Grumpus makes an unlikely company man, but I guess he never really had a chance of becoming a movie star. He’s some tough guy ex-biker who just looks silly now in late middle-age, wearing a red bandana and his old denim jacket with Harley-Davidson patches as he rides around the cannery in a three-wheeled golf cart. Grumpus whispers something to the girl holding the salt bucket. She steps forward and adds a few more tablets into the metal chute. He’s pleased with her gratuitous compliance and her cutie little face and, no doubt, how sexy a barely legal cannery worker can look in knee-high rubber boots. A small disk with notches on its outer edge spins through the salt pile, collecting a tablet in each notch to distribute to empty cans.<sup>33</sup> Grumpus moves to the other end of the can line and pulls two seamer girls close by the shoulders.<sup>34</sup> They nod their heads. He quickly looks everything over one last time, pushes the green button over the hydraulic doors, then pulls the can pin. 4447 bangs on the red button to close the door against an overwhelming tide of fish while I furiously try to arrange a neat line belly to the blades. Grumpus is watching us, hand on the lever, and waits until we’re just a few seconds unready before engaging the machine. The first fish of the season is placed onto the moving belt. The fully-engaged machine is loud and

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<sup>33</sup> Salt tablets come in 50lbs boxes, 11,667 tablets per box, 30 grains per tablet.

<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, the Blonde Mormon Twins.

symphonic. The incessant rattling of cans falling down through the helix adds significantly to the noise and creates a kind of time-anxiety, as you're aware that they won't stop and must all be filled. Every half second, a salt pellet hits the bottom of a can with a sharp ting that you can hear through the ear plugs, adding a steady cow bell effect to the composition. The carcasses are hard, nearly frozen. It takes a few minutes for the cold to bleed through the gloves and liners, but once there it stays. One fish every two seconds: thirty fish every minute: 1,800 fish every hour. Cans rattle, blades whump, spinning disks whoosh, salt tablets tink, gears move, lids crink, and pink water spurts from the machine at all angles. The room quickly falls into the rhythm and pace of canning. It's almost exciting to think of all the fish to my right—to the right of the decimal, as it were—that need to be processed. Grumpus skids a plastic tote layered with chipped ice alongside 4447. "Throw any fish that ain't red salmon into this tote. We'll process those after. Don't screw up." Grumpus closes the big sliding cannery doors to keep the colder refrigerated air inside. We're hermetically-sealed until mug-up,<sup>35</sup> and the only clock inside the cannery is the machine. The two squeegees push water and tiny bits of fish collecting on the floor into a central drain. The un-Vulture circles behind me, patiently waiting for me to drop dead from exhaustion. Once in a while, my partner or I have to dig into the carcass and rip out an intestine that was missed on the slimeline. Once in a while, the wrong species comes through and we're supposed to be able to recognize it in the bacchanalia of flesh. Grumpus rumbles over with his permanent scowl for males and drops an open can onto 4447's knuckles. "See that? That ain't right meat. You let a King get through. I gotta throw out eight cans because you guys don't know a

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<sup>35</sup> Mug-ups are scheduled union breaks at 10:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m., and 9:00 p.m.

King salmon from your ass. Next time, it comes out of your pay.” He pokes 4447 in the shoulder and points to me. “You tell him what I said.” But I heard everything. He just wanted to poke someone in the shoulder. Keep the rows filled. Keep small fish to the side until another one comes along so you can stuff them into a row together. Two small fish roughly equal one big fish, but there is room for processor discretion in cases where one slightly undersized fish is preferable to two smaller fish stuffed together into a row that might clog up the internal plunger, causing more trouble and wasting more time than the inconvenience of a few half-filled cans that can be given to the can patchers to either fill or to use as filler. The work revolves around managing fish flow, and my partner and I switch jobs every hour. One manipulates the doors while the other arranges the fish spilling out onto the table. Sometimes the fish are stuck in the open doorway from all the weight pressure in the vat—a bulging, slightly pulsating wall of fish ready to burst any moment, like in a cartoon. In such a case, the door operator has to act quickly to maintain the flow of fish but also cautiously, strategically pulling at individual fish until he finds the magic fish that releases the whole pile, which invariably comes spilling out too fast. Both processors are expecting this deluge. The arranger has to hold back the flood of fish with one arm while packing the belt with the other. Fish do fall to the floor. Usually, the assistant supervisor will wash those off in the saline sink and throw them back onto our pile. And so it goes. Cold fish slime creeps up under your sleeves and soaks your clothes. If your face itches, you have to find the driest part of your sleeve to scratch which is, under the best of circumstances, cold hard rubber. The fish keep filling the vat. Thousands of fish, thousands of cans. Then it’s break time, mug-ups of exceptionally

good coffee, fresh-baked donuts, and bologna sandwiches.<sup>36</sup> Theoretically, we have fifteen minutes to reboot, but cannery workers lose at least half of their break time. By regulation, the machine and floor have to be quick-rinsed before a break of any length. Rain gear cannot leave the canning floor, and uncommonly dirty rain gear must be hosed down. It takes time to undress, wash hands, and redress before canning resumes. Molted yellow skins hang on a line of hooks near the door. We're encouraged to mark our rain gear since we've signed for them and will need to return them in good condition at the end of the season. Apparently, people had been stealing good sets of rain gear and leaving their battered and ripped sets for some poor bastard to negotiate with the cannery. A permanent laundry marker goes around. Everyone thinks about how they want to be identified.<sup>37</sup> Stripped down for mug-up, it's back to the warmer, more human assortment of sweatshirts, sweaters, jeans, boots, hair, blood stains, and voices. Everyone moves swiftly toward the break room, grabs their wonderfulness, and finds a seat on a long bench or empty tote. Short conversations ensue between slurps and chomps until the three-minute warning whistle. "Where you from?" "Going to school." "It takes me forever to put on the suspenders." "Me and my fiancé, he's the tall guy over there making a sandwich, we've been coming up here every year since high school. It's kind of like our honeymoon place." "Near Olympia." "Our foreman starts the machine whether we're there or not, unless the girls aren't ready yet." "Wenatchee is apple country." "I'm not

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<sup>36</sup> The baker deserves a special commendation for maintaining our spirits throughout the season. At peak processing times, delicious coffee and heavenly maple bars were possibly the only things standing between compliance and rebellion.

<sup>37</sup> Rain gear jackets are covered with drawings, movie quotes, and personalized messages. A few examples: Kalapolo good!, I worked at a salmon cannery and all I got was this lousy rain gear, ←I'm with stinky→, Severin's Bastard Son, etc.

sure yet.” “Right now, I’m from Michigan.” Slam down another maple bar, take your last gulp of coffee, and throw the cup into the trash can. Everyone is ready at their station, but 4447 is having trouble with his suspenders. “Never wore suspenders? See how it’s crossed in the middle?” Grumpus crosses his index fingers at the middle knuckle. “That part goes square in the middle of your back, genius.” He holds up the suspenders and pants and turns them around a few times. “Four buttons, four holes. It’s amazing how they design these things, idn’t it?” Eventually, the last fish of the first day is processed. Back in the bunkhouse: showers, the laughter of relief, and exaggerated tales of work horrors. Like everything else at the cannery, the bunkhouse system has an order to it that combines formal rules and informal tendencies. The bunkhouses are segregated by gender, countries of origin, cultural referents, and work assignments. These are practical arrangements. I’m in the male American college kid cannery processor bunkhouse, more or less, but of course there are all manner of people traveling upstream, expatriates in their own country: down-and-outers one paycheck ahead of reckoning,<sup>38</sup> recovering addicts and alcoholics systematically pounding out their demons,<sup>39</sup> unassuming globe-trekkers collecting another experience,<sup>40</sup> small church groups,<sup>41</sup> cannery jumpers,<sup>42</sup> and

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<sup>38</sup> “I got a warrant back home. Same fucking thing, man, driving with a suspended license. Can you imagine that shit, dude, an Alaskan jail on a Friday night? Drunk Natives staring you down waiting to cut you up?” “I’m hooked on cannery life...and fuck my probation officer anyway. After here, I’m going to Ketchikan. Can’t catch me in Ketchikan, fuckers. And I will can there, too, so fuck you!”

<sup>39</sup> “I don’t really care about making money so much as getting my head straight. These kids acting crazy in the bunkhouse don’t understand that some of us got a gun against our temple.”

<sup>40</sup> These types are always mild and friendly, but never talkative or too social. One guy in his 30s is on his way back home to California after hiking through Bhutan and teaching in Japan for three years.

<sup>41</sup> I get into an argument about religion with an eighteen-year-old attending Bible college. I feel bad afterward and agree to read *The Case for Christ*.

the occasional homesteader couple from the Interior making subsistence money. School teachers from the Pacific Northwest make up most of the lead and management positions.<sup>43</sup> Canning is the perfect summer job for the wanderer, providing pocket change for the shortest trip between two points, whichever points they happen to be. On off-days, most people scrape around for any work they can find: sweeping out buildings, taking inventory, or making empty boxes for the egg house. Others are less ambitious and relish the downtime. Low clouds, windy grass—/ the bunkhouse is deep in sleep/ and journal-writing. Radio Dillingham: Andy Johnson, from Mom, please call before 5 p.m. To Mike G., Stacey made it home okay. We're all doing fine. Love you and miss you. Good luck fishing. Betty, at Vernal, your prescriptions are in. Weather sponsored by All-Alaska Seafood, Bristol Bay. Mostly cloudy. Occasional rain. Low to mid-sixties. Winds southwest at ten miles per hour. Small craft advisory. Seas at five feet, fifteen knots. West winds increasing by twenty-five knots. Aleutian Chain report to Dutch Harbor. There is a small craft advisory from Adak to Attu. Seas building to ten feet, and fog. Dillingham, sixty-four degrees. Southwest winds ten to twelve miles per hour. Nushagak tide, 8:48 p.m., 3:36 a.m. Four point two foot tide. 11:39 sunset. 5:48 sunrise. The fishing picks up and we process more each day. The hours are accumulating and we've settled into our work. Sarina, the assistant supervisor, finds me at mug-up. "How do you like the cannery?" "Except for the foreman, I love it." "He's a big momma bear, but he doesn't like men. I like men. Where are you from?" "Haddonfield." "I don't know where that is, not really anyway. I'm from Kwigillangok. It's near Bethel. Only 350 of us there. It

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<sup>42</sup> "I didn't come all the way up here to go back home with \$2,000. If I work past September, I can bag \$5,000 and go on unemployment. I'll go to Wrangell, Cordova, Petersburg...couldn't give a shit where."

<sup>43</sup> This tends to encourage JV football squad politics, with the younger kids ass-kissing coach for easier assignments and special favors.

means ‘Village of No River.’ Some Cossacks made a movie about it a few years ago. You never seen it?” I shake my head. “Kwigillangok used to be a fish camp on the tundra, without a river. There is a legend, too. A girl lost a very special necklace in the lake, so her father drained the lake by digging a canal which became the river.” The three-minute warning whistle blows. We walk back into the canning room together and she points to the machine. “Ever hear Eskimo dancing? The beat sounds like this.” Then the season suddenly spikes. Hundreds of tons of fish are pouring into the docks every day. Very radically, life reduces to working, eating, and sleeping. After about a week of relentless processing, fish-shocked workers barely talk at mug-ups. Instead, we plow down sandwiches and donuts so we can sleep for half an hour at lunch and dinner breaks rather than waste time on line at the dining hall and getting food drag afterwards. Wind-up travel alarm clocks go off at about the same time, and a few minutes later somewhat refreshed workers pile back out onto the gravel. A pouch of Fisherman’s Friend® is a tangible commodity. There are no sick days, only fish. Apocryphal stories circulate about unidentified workers “going cannery” at vague times and places. Some people are starting to show cracks. After the third shift in a row that runs past midnight, Johnny Velvet complains about his back and gets transferred from squeegee duty to the can patch line with the girls. “Maybe you can refill the tampon dispensers.” “Oh, you guys.” “Exactly, bro.” The end of shift is the worst part of the day for a cannery processor, especially at 2:00 a.m. in a bright cold room when every instinct is telling you to crawl under a rock and hibernate for a few months.<sup>44</sup> Grampus hands me a straightened wire hanger and a flashlight. “Get every piece if you want to sleep tonight.” Meanwhile, he

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<sup>44</sup> Once upon a fish-night dreary...

sends Salt Girl and the Blonde Mormon Twins back to the bunkhouse with a gentle reminder to get a good night's sleep. His mouth hangs open. It is a large mouth like that of some bottom fish that evolution skipped, that you'd need a gaffe hook to haul up from the ocean floor, marvel at its strange features for a while, then send it off in ice to a university lab for further study. He stands with the ubiquitous wrench in his fist, just waiting for a crustacean to pass by. "Crawl up in there under the separator. Don't worry, candy-ass, the machine's off...unless you want me to turn it on and make it nice under there for you." It's just me and 4447 and the squeegee guys. Everyone else has been relieved of duty. I duck walk beneath the blade guard. Someone with a hose sprays directly over me. Cold flesh and water drips onto my face and down my neck. I won't get to leave until every last bit of fish has been picked from the tangle of machine parts—a complex universe of steel blades and bolts, brass arms and slides, and corkscrews that rotate, roll, cantilever, move up and down, or move side to side. A million tiny pieces of flesh quiver in all the impossible places. Contort the tired cold body and pick. By the time I shower, set the alarm, and roll over in my bunk it's 3:00 a.m., an indulgent 2:45 a.m. had I skipped the shower. Then back up at 7:00 a.m. sharp, eyes packed with morning sand, eat breakfast, go back to the bunkhouse to brush teeth, use the bathroom,<sup>45</sup> adjust clothing for the weather, walk to the cannery in rubber boots, hose the gravel off boots before entering the canning room, and raingear-up before 8:00 a.m. for another 14-16 hour canning marathon. Just as soon as the fishermen unload a catch to a tender, they're back out again. All talk is fish-centric. "How much fish left?" "At least three hours." "Six

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<sup>45</sup> There's nothing worse than asking old Grumpykins for a five-minute break during processing. "You guys have some kind of bladder disease?" His turkey neck gobbles at one of the squeegee guys to take my place. "You got three minutes." Two minutes for rain gear.



hours, bro...they're getting midnight meal ready again." "Shit, man. I don't even know what day it is anymore." Working at a salmon cannery is a unique brand of sadism that combines and amplifies the various horrors of surgery, public education, basic training, cheap travel, and communal living. Nearly in unison, a zombie army of workers scuffles through the drizzle and down the dark hallways of the bunkhouses, unlocks doors, peels off rubber boots, crashes onto beds in ripe fish clothes soaked wet with scales and blood and pink machine water, hair matted, mosquitoes bouncing silently through holes in the screens, the strong smell of mud and marsh at lowering tide the last sensory impression before the alarm goes off a millisecond later. Tide in: boats, fish, sky drips, the machine clock ticks be-tween canned salmon dreams. I added day by day/ a digit of light/ like the moon./ The python-world,/ omnivorous Rahu,/ devoured me./ Today my body/ is in eclipse./ When is the release,/ O lord of the meeting rivers?—Basavanna. Numbers and words digest in turns. The cannery is earthly penance and the machine its kaleidoscopic karma portal. What's in a fish? I'll tell you. Madame Terrible<sup>46</sup> points to a stop sign at the corner of Farview and Sicomac on April 23 in the year of your lord 1980. I need to make this trait recombinant in the text, so I'll graft it here: STOP = 4/2, ST/OP, S + P, S-T-O-P, off. Every element must be sounded out silently, including "equals," "slash," "plus," and "off"; for example: STOP equals four slash two S T slash O P S plus P S T O P off. STOP is an even-numbered word. The goal is to evenly divide any word, bookend the word, thorough the word, and complete the word. Odd-numbered words have three parts, two equal halves that isolate the middle letter; for example: CANNERY = 3/1/3,

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<sup>46</sup> Played alternately in the film version by Harvey Fierstein in drag, Betty Davis à la Baby Jane, and any random Eastern European dominatrix.

CAN/N/ERY, C + Y, C-A-N-N-E-R-Y, off.<sup>47</sup> Word phrases pose a challenge but follow the same basic set of rules with only one addition; for example: PHRASES POSE A CHALLENGE = 26/2, PHRASESHNPOSEH / NAHNCHALLENGE, P + E, P-H-R-A-S-E-S-H-N-P-O-S-E-H-N-A-H-N-C-H-A-L-L-E-N-G-E, off. “HN” is the abbreviated code for “hyphen” which fills spaces between words despite the fact that actual hyphens may or may not be present, and are included in all calculations as two phonemes as if they were two-letter words. Numbers are always written out; for example: 3 APPLES = 13/2, THREEH/N/APPLES, T + S, T-H-R-E-E-H-N-A-P-P-L-E-S, off. All text is equalized: there is no distinction between capital and lower-case letters, numbers are converted to words, and the hyphen requirement that connects all words ultimately devalues them as discrete individual objects. If you’re moving (in a car for example), you have to complete the sequence in visual sight of the stop sign or poster or the side of the truck next to you or whatever text it is you’re looking at. The penalty for not completing a sequence in visual sight is completing the original sequence mentally then adding the successful visual sequence of another text. If this make-up sequence is unsuccessful, the penalty doubles to four sequences, etc., until your account is cleared. You do *not* want to go into debt. Soon after word value symmetry, Madame Terrible introduced me to the three-dimensional cross, with seven points including the origin, all points at equal distance. You can use any continual combination to connect them, sometimes with a line, sometimes with light pulses. The cross hangs in bright white space, the line is black with crisp angled turns, and the pulses are bright gold. Lines may not cross through one

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<sup>47</sup> The kinetic cannery before the storm. Can I cannery? C, can I work there? A, absolutely. N, now? N, next season. E, etcetera, etcetera. R, write everything down. Y, because it’s not up to you to interpret, child, but to dutifully record.

another to complete a sequence. Light pulses do not stay on during a sequence, so you have to remember which end points have pulsed to complete the sequence. Either form of sequencing may complete as quickly as accuracy allows.<sup>48</sup> The next lesson was the somewhat voyeuristic countable steps game, where you count the steps someone is taking, and only those you see completely and successively. Their feet cannot be blocked visually by any object. The steps are divisible by five, and each set of five has a compressed value of one in the formula; any step count under five is converted to a fraction of fifths; for example, if you observe someone take twenty-one countable steps:  $21/5 = 4 + 1/5^{\text{th}}$ , sounded the following way: start, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, four, extra, go, one-fifth, off. Twenty-one countable steps actually require twenty-six steps to successfully complete. So if you do manage to complete the basic count without interruption, it must then be guaranteed using additional steps; each additional element costs one step except “extra” and “go,” which are sounded quickly together in one up-step as the foot is off the ground. If any portion of the count is blocked, the count is ruined. You therefore have to determine before the count begins how high a count can reasonably be achieved and how much you’re willing to risk if you miss, so there are many factors involved in the initial evaluation, but this evaluation has to be conducted quickly or any opportunity for a completed sequence might be lost. If you miscalculate the field—for instance, the person rounds a corner or the feet are blocked by a flower pot—the count is ruined, and because this is your fault for not having

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<sup>48</sup> A newer incarnation allows you to create one straight line through the center, using three points, and a circle around it connecting the remaining four points. There is a technological elegance to this shape, like a floating space station with clean lines and unblemished surface. The anxiety is in creating the perfect circle.

accurately evaluated the field, you have to make it up with a seamless double counting that completes one person's count (including the guarantee), begin the next count between footfalls, and then complete and guarantee. If any one of those counts is ruined, double the penalty to four, etc., until your account is cleared. So, because anxiety mounts with crushing and progressively insurmountable penalties, there is every incentive to choose wisely and to complete a more modest count to begin with. It motivates one, in effect, to reject market volatility for a guaranteed annuity payout, a tax-free muni yield, a competitive certificate of deposit rate, etc., and always with the goal of eliminating debt service charges. There seems to be some genetic predisposition toward mechanical processes and organizational systems: fish are palimpsestuous and *The Fishguts Documentary Project* is repeatable. Unlike some works fabricated on an imaginary hill in the distance, iterations of *Fishguts* derive directly from the hard cold bosom of the machine. As long as the splitting of the fish continues to unleash exponential fury to the right of the decimal point—always actualizing, always searching for a whole number and growing more dense and nuanced but farther from resolution in the process—then the means of production shall own the people, you silly little communist pigs. The numbers drove my sins and yours, darlings, so we're just going to have to forgive each other. At the regular pay rate of 635 pennies per hour, each processed fish earns approximately .3527 pennies, and one penny earned is equivalent to approximately 2.83527 fish processed. At the OT rate of 953 pennies per hour, each processed fish earns 0.5294 pennies, and one penny is equivalent to 1.88893 fish. At this base rate, even in a theoretical 24-hour shift comprised of eight hours regular pay and sixteen hours OT, without breaks, one fish does not equate to a full penny: instead, we have an average of

0.4705 pennies per fish (ppf) where one penny equals 2.1254 fish processed. Using this optimum as a base value, with a compounded annual pay increase of 5%—generous on both counts—a single fish will represent a fraction of a penny for fifteen more seasons until the penny is finally condensed to critical mass.<sup>49</sup> Base formula: pphR (pennies per hour-Regular); pphOT (pennies per hour-OT) = (pphR x 8) + (pphOT x 16) = TP (total pennies) / TF (total fish) = ppf (pennies per fish). T-15: 666.75; 1000.125 = 5,334 + 16002 = 21336/43200 = 0.4938ppf. T-14: 700.0875; 1050.13125 = 5600.7 + 16802.1 = 22402.8/43200 = 0.51858ppf. T-13: 735.09188; 1102.63781 = 5880.735 + 17642.205 = 23522.94/43200 = 0.54451ppf. T-12: 771.84647; 1157.76970 = 6174.77175 + 18524.31525 = 24699.087/43200 = 0.57174ppf. T-11: 810.43879; 1215.65819 = 6483.51034 + 19450.53101 = 25934.04135 / 43200 = 0.60033ppf. T-10: 850.96073; 1276.44110 = 6807.68585 + 20423.05756 = 27230.74342 / 43200 = 0.63034ppf. T-9: 893.50877; 1340.26315 = 7148.07015 + 21444.21044 = 28592.28059 / 43200 = 0.66186ppf. T-8: 938.18421; 1407.27631 = 7505.47365 + 22516.42096 = 30021.89462 / 43200 = 0.69495ppf. T-7: 985.09342; 1477.64013 = 7880.74734 + 23642.24201 = 31522.98935 / 43200 = 0.72970ppf. T-6: 1034.34809; 1551.52213 = 8274.78470 + 24824.35411 = 33099.13882 / 43200 = 0.76618ppf. T-5: 1086.06549; 1629.09824 = 8688.52394 + 26065.57182 = 34754.09576 / 43200 = 0.80449ppf. T-4: 1140.36877; 1710.55315 = 9122.95014 + 27368.85041 = 36491.80054 / 43200 = 0.84472ppf. T-3: 1197.38721; 1796.08081 = 9579.09764 + 28737.29293 = 38316.39057 / 43200 = 0.88695ppf. T-2: 1257.25657; 1885.88485 = 10058.05253 + 30174.15758 = 40232.2101 / 43200 = 0.9313ppf. T-1: 1320.11939; 1980.17909 = 10560.95512 + 31682.86544 =

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<sup>49</sup> If fishmachines or pennies still exist by then.

$42243.82056 / 43200 = .97787\text{ppf}$ . T-0:  $1386.12536; 2079.18805 = 11089.00291 + 33267.00873 = 44356.01164 / 43200 = 1.02676\text{ppf}$ .<sup>50</sup> They close our can line for the day and farm us out to different jobs. I'm sent to the freezer frozen-side, where we box frozen fillets, the ones you see nicely displayed on shaved ice in your supermarket. The fillets themselves were processed many hours prior, loaded onto metal racks, the racks stacked ten high onto wheeled carts, the carts rolled into the freezer at twenty-five degrees below for a minimum of six hours. My job is to bust frozen racks to match the boxing rate, the equivalent of one rack every minute: sixty racks per hour: ten racks per cart: six carts per hour. We process one grade of fish at a time; for example: grade 2-4/1 indicates a two-to-four pound fish, grade one. These small fish are relatively easy to lift and break, but the six-to-nine pounders in abundance will kill you. My partner<sup>51</sup> and I pull the racks off the cart, each anywhere between fifty and seventy-five pounds, lift them high up over a metal table molded with a square grid of low blunted knobs, slam them down to break the frozen fillets off the metal, and dump the fillets onto the conveyor. Sometimes a rack needs to be slammed two or three times. We take turns pulling the empty racks off the table and stacking them onto an empty cart. The freezer runner is responsible for replacing empties with full carts, serving two lines. Once broken, the fillets slide down a metal chute onto a short conveyor about ten feet long. They pass through the glazer, where they are lightly sprayed with a liquid cornstarch solution, then packed by hand at

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<sup>50</sup> The singularity occurs at 40.9901, -74.18042 on June 8 in the year of your lord 1979. What appears to be a specimen of malachite unearthed by construction vehicles over the bones of Oratam is, in fact, a Maris 18-M. When I hold the copper piece up to the sky it splits and I'm gone, and nothing but nobody can shield their eyes from the glory of the secular fishmachine.

<sup>51</sup> My first partner is a stocky Mexican who doesn't talk and keeps moving. They switch him out between lunch and dinner with an inferior college kid, but I get my old partner back after complaining to the lead.

the other end into fifty-pound-capacity cardboard boxes lined with a thick plastic bag. Full boxes are taped closed and stacked onto pallets. Full pallets are stretch-wrapped and brought by forklift to freezer containers near the dock, where they will be loaded onto ships. The fillets will be shipped to supermarkets in Japan and North America, where they will be attractively displayed on ice. The job is brutal. My shoulder sockets go brittle from the weight of the racks, the continual motion sideways then up and down, and the freezing temperatures. Even with ear plugs, the shock of frozen metal impact penetrates body and brain. One would quickly go deaf without ear plugs. Our line processes 85,000 pounds of frozen fish in 13.5 hours. During that time, someone locks Coyote Pete in the freezer for a goof.<sup>52</sup> He bangs on the doors for about an hour until the supervisor lets him out, fully frosted and smirking.<sup>53</sup> The next morning they have me on the freezer fresh-side, which is more civilized than frozen-side but neurotic in its own special cannery way. Fresh salmon, gutted, with heads and tails (known as “flying fish”), are packed with layers of ice in huge 250-pound-capacity plastic-lined cardboard boxes, frozen, and shipped to wholesalers. I’m shovel monkey until dinner, running totes back and forth from the ice machine to the fish line on a pallet jack. The job is two-fold: run ice and shovel ice. Pump up the hand jack with a full tote, run it and drop it near the fish line,

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<sup>52</sup> Later in the season, he lets me read the first chapter of his fantasy novel, which he might have been inspired to write during his sojourn in the freezer.

<sup>53</sup> What happens in the freezer, stays in the freezer. This industry adage applies to all practical jokes, slip-ups, and work hostilities. During peak processing, a small disaffected cadre openly discusses rebellion, creating a tense standoff between themselves and the compliant workers that lasts a few days and spills over into the social life of the bunkhouses. It’s a scene from early 20<sup>th</sup> century labor battles, with icy stare-downs and the implied threat of mob violence against “scab” workers. Specific goals are never articulated, and due to the fact that we are all gainfully employed and earning the same union rate, in addition to having agreed formally and implicitly to the working conditions, their anger seems juvenile and misapplied. In any event, the resentment abates once we start coming down from peak.

jack up an empty tote, run it to the ice machine; while that's filling up, run back to the fish line, grab the shovel, and evenly layer ice over the fish pouring off the conveyor into the box, roughly calculating the weight of each ice load to get as near to the approximate weight printed on the boxes as possible. Fishing times affect processing hours. Fish must be processed as soon as reasonably possible, and cannot be held in brine tanks for more than twelve hours before being processed. The past two days have been especially tough: working in the freezer and getting used to those rhythms, followed by evening canning, and an extra early start time the next morning from an odd-hours catch: all-in-all, a frenetic 15.5-hour processing day.<sup>54</sup> Eventually, ten to twelve-hour days seem relatively easy, eight-hour days are practically vacation, and a work day less than eight hours is almost a waste of time. But spring does gradually melt the winter snows as summer progresses. At some distinct turning point in the season, the sun becomes more important than work hours. Bunkhouse parties are fluid, moving from room to room, and always enveloped in the syrupy magic of steep amber light. First there's heavy tromping up and down the hallway, female voices come later, then the studied manipulation of cans and bottles, bizuzzulling laughter and crashings and cursings and door poundings and door slammings and toilet flushings and vomitings. Eventually, management catches on and sends the circus operatives in for a bunkhouse raid. They bang on the walls and yell at everyone to stand in the hallway while they flip beds looking for bottles and bags of weed. Clearly, a lot of people are trashed but only one person has to jump out of the window. A few people are sent home the next day at their own expense. We hardly knew ye. There are many interesting characters that I'll never have a chance to interview in this

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<sup>54</sup> Written in the frost on the ice machine: I hate fish!



crazy ward.<sup>55</sup> I am at peace with the fact that there is no narrative except for the machine. You work for the machine, accumulating fish and numbers, and get paid at the end of the season. You log your own hours and get Big Bob to sign off on your timesheet each week. You match-up the carbon against your payout. Overtime accrues after eight hours in a day and forty hours in a week, all day on holidays and Sunday. An example from week two: Sunday and Monday, no work; Tuesday, 8 R + 6 OT; Wednesday, 8 R + 6  $\frac{3}{4}$  OT; Thursday, 8 R + 8 OT; Friday, 8 R + 6 OT; Saturday, 8 R + 6  $\frac{1}{2}$  OT. Total: 40 R and 33  $\frac{1}{4}$  OT = \$254 + \$315.87 = \$569.87, or 161573.53149 fish. All currency is convertible to fish: a one-way ticket from Newark to Seattle on the Chumhound cost me 6800 pennies: 3106 miles: each mile cost 2.18931 cents, or 6.20729 fish. The trip cost 19279.8359 fish, or 11.93254% of week two's earnings. The season is in a shallow valley between two peaks. After lunch, I get two hours of re-canning work. We take dented cans that have been set aside, open them up with a giant can opener fixed to a table, repack the meat into new cans, and manually crimp the lids. It's like a summer harvest jarring operation. I work the opener, the Blonde Mormon Twins repack, and Salt Girl crimps lids. 4448: Sand hill cranes. 5122: Sure, seen plenty of them. 4448: That's a UP town. 5122: It's *the* UP town. 4448: I mean, literally built by the Union Pacific. 5122: All those

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<sup>55</sup> Hairnet Eater, Angry Guitar Magic, Complainsies, Turkey and Nippers, Meal Ticket Girl, Viking Pillagers, Herr SS Kommandant Hunky, C Delta, Skogmo the Store Manager, Surf's Down Dude, Cafeteria Girl with Moustache, Thighs, Ducky, Guppie, Jennifer Ultimately, Expressionless Hulk, Army Chick, Mountain Stew, Righteous Brother, 1930s Street Corner Hussy, Kuchina Doll, Blade Runner, Coach Hansen, Mayan Sacrifice, Jesus O'Leary, C.H.U.D. Boy, Big Daddy Beardsley, Spatial Relationships, Ball Cutter, Planet Z, Bartleby (a.k.a. Dead Letter), Johnny Very Whitely, Brotherhood and Sisterhood of Unisexual Goths, Hall Monitor, Valkyrie the Amazon Woman, Punky Brewster, Huggy Bear, Iowa Contingent, Fish Rage.

towns along the string are railroad towns. 4448: I've been there, to your little railroad hamlet on the high plains. 5122: Driving through on eighty? 4448: Driving through, yeah, but I stayed for a few days.<sup>56</sup> 5122: Why in the fuck would you do that? 4448: Needed money! I was dead in the middle of the country with about seventy bucks. For an east coast boy all alone with a half tank of gas, Nebraska is very intimidating, 360 degrees is intimidating. Back home, you have three directions you can go, but even that's too optimistic because you lose 180 degrees of arc tucked up against the ocean. Your thoughts automatically drift westward. It's really... 5122: Right, right...like it's always been. 4448: ...unidirectional, even if west means Pennsylvania. And then you get to a place like Nebraska and there's 360 degrees, and that's only on one plane. I remember the first time I really saw a storm front approaching, in the late autumn cornfields of central Illinois. The stalks had been tilled under and a strong smell of soil, this gorgeous smell of soil, was thick in the air. The visuals were incredibly simple. The storm front was a straight black line end-to-end across the entire horizon underlining a dark gray sky, a monolith moving toward you across flat brown earth. You could see it for everything it was. No clutter of civilization to warp the view and twist its meaning. I was thinking of that storm in North Platte when it went from eighty degrees to below freezing overnight. 5122: Sounds about right. 4448: I woke up at three in the morning, freezing. 5122: You slept in the car? 4448: In the car! Near-broke at a truck stop. I found a nice spot between some big trucks, got a few microwavable burgers and a tall boy of Pabst from the little store there, stretched out on the passenger side as best I could, cracked the window, locked the doors, and cozied down for the night. But then it got real cold and windy. The

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<sup>56</sup> The roadmap of the United States looks like a fish swimming west.

car was rocking back and forth and diesel fumes from the idling trucks kept blowing in.

5122: Where were you going the next day? 4448: I might've been able to make it home if I didn't eat anything for two days, but I really wasn't going anywhere until I earned some money first, so I had registered for day work. They wanted me in front of the building by 5:00 a.m. 5122: I know that building. 4448: About fifty of us were lined up in this little room. They must have standing arrangements with local businesses. Every one of us got assigned to a contractor overhauling a power plant halfway out to Ogallala. The woman asked if anyone had a car to drive other workers, so I took four guys and asked them for gas money. I actually made a bit of a profit there, which I desperately needed. All of these cars and pick-ups are lined up outside the job center, license plates from all over: Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Wyoming, South Dakota. We're waiting for the foreman to pull out, and then we follow him like ducks in a row, too close together and a stream of brake lights through town and onto the highway. So I'm driving west on eighty with strangers in my car. It's solid gray and freezing cold. One guy wants to smoke a cigarette. I tell him he has to blow it out of the window, but the ashes swirl around inside the car. We get to the place. This huge monstrosity of a power plant is just sitting there by itself on the plains. They break us up into teams, check our names against a master list, give us each a brass work check, and walk us inside. Everything is coated in soft yellow powder, probably radioactive or toxic residue. They don't give us any protection or train us. Nothing. They send a few of us up into a tall silo with metal strings and weights, like guitar strings. And it was just freezing inside of this silo. The plant is completely shut down and empty, and the metal is drawing away any heat you might have generated from working. I was in this silo for hours, just hanging there in a harness

trying to loosen these metal strings, and cold soft radioactive powder like talcum powder is falling all over me, on my head, down my neck. I can see a flashlight way below me...the guy I'm supposed to be working with replacing these metal strings. We're yelling back and forth trying to figure out what to do, and our voices are echoing loudly in this cylinder of cold metal. No one else is there. No guidance, no foreman. After a while, I just sat there and waited for lunch break and the guy below me went off somewhere to smoke cigarettes. By the middle of the second day I just couldn't do it anymore, meanwhile sleeping in the car, freezing, no shower, using the truck stop for everything, so I figured I'd take my pay along with some free gas and my cash reserves and make the run back east on the thinnest of margins, but it turns out they had to send my check home for tax purposes! The irony is that if I had been a good soldier and stuck it out for the week, I would have been absolutely screwed. I wasted almost two days doing this toxic power plant work, meanwhile spending more precious money on burgers and tall boys, so the next morning I decide to make the run to Denver and sell the car. I stopped in Julesburg to take pictures of a grain silo because it was the first time I had ever crossed into Colorado. Then about an hour down the highway she starts making clacking noises. 5122: Water pump. 4448: That's exactly right. The fucking water pump blows in Crook, Colorado in an instantaneous cloud of steam. This is *really* in the middle of nowhere now, just open space on the golden grass high plains named for some cavalry officer. It's one of those bright sunny crystal clear days that are freezing cold. Strong gusts are slamming the side of the car every few seconds. But you know what else was interesting about North Platte, just getting back to North Platte for a minute. I spoke with these girls at a red light on Jeffries. It was like a scene out of *American Graffiti*. Her arm

was hanging out the window, although she didn't have a pack of cigarettes rolled up in her arm sleeve, *and* she looks exactly like Mackenzie Philips. These high school girls saw my license plate and assumed I was lost, and I suppose they were correct. And no shit, this girl looks *exactly* like Mackenzie Philips, with the kinda sexy acne scars and everything. [Someone bangs on a door down the hall. "Open the door, you lazy bastard!" Sound of a door being unbolted, mumbled talk. Door slams. Opens again. Slams again.] Maybe they're lost now, in Steubenville, Ohio or someplace. 5122: Your car blows up. 4448: Yeah, I'm on the side of the highway with cars and trucks whizzing past. A state trooper drives by, pulls over to the shoulder, and drives back to me in reverse. He's wearing one of those brown cold-weather cop jackets. I tell him what happened and he calls one of his local buddies to come tow me. After about an hour, this farmer shows up in a pick-up and ties me on with regular rope. In no time, he's pulling me down the highway doing seventy, and every time he slows down a bit my car almost slams into him, so I have to hit the brakes. This slackens the rope. Then he reaccelerates suddenly, and I think the front end is going to rip off. I'm hitting the horn waving my arms trying to get this guy to understand what's happening back there. Oblivious, but somehow we make it down the highway to the next exit. He brings me into a small town with a few houses and a grain silo, and while these two tractor mechanics are poking around under the hood, I'm crouched over against the wall of the shop trying to heat up a can of soup with my little camp stove, the break-open kind with tablets. It doesn't work very well in the wind, so I eat a can of cold soup for lunch. Then I drive with the old guy into Sterling for parts so I can pay for them, which I am barely able to do. I don't know how I made it out of there. 5122: What were you driving? 4448: I'm almost dead broke at this point....

An '86 Ford, four cylinder. Simple engine. Easy to maintain, unless your water pump blows in Crook, Colorado. I miss old cars like that. You could reach in to every part of the block standing over it, and never needed the jack. It broke my heart when I sold that car. I ran her clean with all those highway miles. Sonny and I just kept driving every day. We were at a light in Las Cruces when I thought the battery had died or something, but the engine was just quiet. I recorded every tank of gas in a log book. We started from home getting about eighteen miles per gallon, and by the time I finally did get to Denver, we were getting close to thirty-four, almost double efficiency after 12,000 miles. Garbage from the air back home had been building up on those injectors for years. My lungs are like the fuel injectors. I guess I need more highway miles. 5122: Or you could just stay up here and cannery jump. Keep banking paychecks and living for free. 4448: Yeah, I don't know. This season has been hard enough. 5122: I used to think that. I've been doing this for over two years now. 4448: Is the cannery like your career now? 5122: I haven't been home for almost a year, so yeah. 4448: Some guys work through September and go on unemployment. 5122: Fuck that. I have nowhere to go, and I don't want to stop right now. It's a way of life. But I understand. A twenty-hour shift is a bitch, whether it's salmon or crab or spiking pallets. There's nothing to do in some of these places. This is one of the more interesting locations. I worked sea cucumber in Adak. I was on a floater for a few months processing tanner crab. I was the only American in the whole place. No one to talk to. Nothing to do but work. That was tough. I was starting to lose it toward the end. 4448: But you came back for more! What are you doing after salmon? 5122: I'm staying here for shut-down...already talked to Big Bob about it...then I'm going to Ketchikan for the rest of salmon. That takes me into late September. You should try to

stay on another week. 4448: Then what? 5122: There's crab and cod and rockfish all year. You have your pick all year, really. You just have to string the jobs together right and contact companies in advance, but it's much easier to stick with the same cannery. That's what the Filipinos do. I want to save up a ton of money without any expenses, and then buy a small place. With that out of the way, I'll just need a little cash flow to live. Probably work a short season up here for pocket change and rail crew down below for a few months. Seasonal work and contract work for half the year, hunt and fish over winter. That's the good life, right there, brother. That was my summer job after high school, working for the UP, replacing ties and spikes, bagging garbage. You find all kinds of things along the right-of-way: beer cans, clothes, shoes, dead animals, money, jewelry, tools. 4448: People throwing garbage out the window. 5122: No, these aren't commuter trains.... The cans are in little piles a few yards from the rail line. Ten high school punks having a railroad party with a warm twelve-pack, and of course you can see the train coming five miles off. My brother's down at Nebraska banging co-eds and I'm up here banging busses. The world ain't fair. 4448: These are the vagaries of the working world. 5122: I love it up here. I love the work. It gets in your blood. 4448: Coffee and donuts are outstanding. 5122: Is that thing still running? 4448: Plenty of tape left, my friend. 5122: I see myself always working in a cannery for the same reasons I like fixing track. You know, in Nebraska, I almost had a pretty decent job as an assistant manager in a supermarket? They have this management training program that takes two months to complete. I applied to this program after the navy and they called me right away, this guy, the store manager, probably for that reason because technically they wanted you to have at least a two-year degree, but they counted my military experience as life credits.

They start you out at the lowest job and train you up into management. You need to know everyone's job before you can manage people and make decisions. We went to a class every morning, and they had us doing practical work in the afternoon. For the first week, we collected shopping carts and cleaned up the parking lot, picked cigarette butts off the grass, they had us up on the roof cleaning the drains. It was like basic training all over again. 4448: Shaking the tree, see who falls out. 5122: I think of those shopping carts when I'm slamming busses. Then they trained us as cashiers and we worked the line for a week. You shadow someone for a day and then you do it by yourself. You have to remember that this person who is basically training you is going to be under you one day, so that was a lesson in management right there. Then we worked stock for a week and learned how to properly store food, how to order from suppliers, how to keep inventory, and all that. Then we rotated on the floor in different jobs to see where we wanted to specialize. So, for instance, we did a few days in bakery, a few in produce, a few in meats, canned goods, dairy. It was kind of like here. You can choose your job, except that there was the expectation you would manage it eventually, not work it, and that's when they started to lose me. I wanted dry and canned goods from the beginning, but liked working it more than managing it. And the people training us tried to guide us into areas that they needed to be filled, and for whatever reason they wanted me in the meat department. I guess I look like a meat head? Not even the fish department, funny enough, but that was before I ever worked a cannery. So they were totally off on that one and nothing rang a bell except dry and canned goods. And there was another problem. All the trainees had to "discuss" everything together, you know, teamwork bullshit. I had enough of teamwork in the navy. Cannery's different. You rely on each other in a different way,



in a totally equal way. The process is in control. When you...you know from the can line feeding fish, right? You're working with the *process*, not really with the people around you. The filler is going to process the same amount of fish and produce the same amount of cans per hour whether the person behind you or in front of you is working *with* you or not, and he's not, or whether it's you moving the fish along or someone else. Even in retort load side, you're working with the process. That's how simple it is. So, my boss was really happy with my work. Called me "conscientious." I started to get hostile toward the other trainees because I had to get dry and canned goods. If I didn't get dry and canned goods, I would have quit. So now they have me working in the back and in the store. I'm on the floor with the stock kid arranging shelves and he's moving too fast, trying to impress me or something. Some of the cans are falling out of the box as he's pulling them out, or falling all over the shelf, some of them are getting dented. I swear, it was just like in retort. I never asked this kid to move fast, he's just nervous or whatever, so I take over and wind up doing it all. I keep sending him back for boxes to get him out of my way. And then I realize that I'm going crazy, and it's because of the cans. Even getting assigned to dry and canned goods wasn't enough in the end because what I really needed was to process the cans and nothing else. 4448: Yes, yes. 5122: And, of course, that lead me right to the canneries. Really simple life decision. The easiest decision I've ever made. I didn't want to manage anyone. I didn't want any responsibility past what my hands were doing. This was like a process of discovery. Even though I was doing a really good job and I thought I had wanted to manage the canned goods area...*had* to get canned goods and really fought for it. At one point, I was just being a total asshole to this other trainee, this girl, and my boss ignored it because he favored me. No one wants to

fire a veteran. She wound up with dairy, just gave up. Toward the end there, I would see her looking over boxes of eggs with her clipboard and she couldn't even look at me. I had just totally steamrolled her, everyone really, to get canned goods. Then I quit the very day they gave me my assignment. I was so depressed for such a long time about it. I just sat around for weeks trying to figure out why I did that. I didn't know. My dad tried to talk to me. My mom tried to talk to me. They were worried I had PTSD, tried to get me down to the VA, so I finally went on rail crew for a while. Then I caught wind of the canneries from a navy buddy of mine who had worked in Alaska on a crab boat, and it clicked. 4448: I wish I had known about the rail crew. 5122: The whole town is connected to UP somehow. You should've just gone down there. 4448: Yeah, actually, somebody gave me a good lead but I didn't think a big unionized railroad had day work, so I never went. 5122: Well, it's short contract work, not day work, and you have to join the union like here. Who was this? 4448: At a place called Doris' Tavern. 5122: I thought you were drinking tall boys in the parking lot. 4448: This was my first ride into town from off the highway. I went looking for the center of town and stopped into this place. Don, the owner, poured my beer, wrote somebody's name down on a napkin, but I never went. Somewhere on Front Street. 5122: Right. That's UP. 4448: He was telling me about the Union Pacific and the Populist revolt of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He lifts up my glass and throws down a few napkins, says, "I've become a bit of a historian since I retired from UP. More time than you think, even with this bar and everything." So, I guess this was his retirement dream, to own a bar and study the railroad. His old-timer buddies are in there while his wife...he named the place after his wife...is running bar-back with a cigarette hanging on her lips, her arms stretched out from lugging buckets of ice. He tells me how

he grew up in the Oregon rainforest and left to hitch his way to electrician school in Illinois. “It was my first attempt at controlling my course of destiny,” he says with great irony. He was broke by the time he reached North Platte, but was “saved” by the Union Pacific. Then he married Doris, and the rest is history. Forty years later, little Joey from Sicomac walks into his bar. The wall was covered in photographs of WWII servicemen. 5122: The canteen. That’s famous. Bailey’s the rail hub of the whole country. 4448: More than half the pictures were navy. 5122: Makes perfect sense if you think about it. The season is winding down. Twenty-five people were sent home this morning, including un-Vulture, so the cannery is down to one squeegee. The fish are getting softer and have more excisions. Some of the flesh is so soft you can’t imagine them being able to swim. More chum are coming through, as well. Chum salmon<sup>57</sup> account for approximately 10% of the total canning production and are the last to get canned on any given day. There’s a break between sockeye and chum canning while all the sockeye cans are processed through retort and the machine is sprayed down. Then the chum fish come through the door like discarded library books falling apart at the binding, virtually spineless, with mushy gray flesh that falls through your fingers like an old dishrag. Sometimes there are so few chum, they’re brought to us in an ice tote and are processed in fifteen minutes or less. We’re at the very end of the big run. ADF&G stops the fishing for a few days. I find a nice dry job making boxes for the egg house: stamp, push in at the corners, fold short flaps in, fold long flaps over short flaps, tape, flip, insert plastic liner, stack boxes fifteen high, carry stack to the Japanese, repeat. Forklift drivers are another class of cannery elites. They work autonomously and quickly to make time for forklift drag races and

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<sup>57</sup> *Oncorhynchus keta*, also called dog salmon or Keta salmon; known to optimistic supermarket shoppers as Silverbrite salmon. ADF&G Fish Ticket Code 450.

jousting matches. An unauthorized sign in the warehouse: Stop, listen, and run!<sup>58</sup> Most boxing days are over by mid-afternoon. There's enough sunlight leftover every day to start banking against winter, and the bunkhouses fill up again with leisurely activity. 3424 points to the small rusted out-building tilted in the marsh grass. "That's the *love* shack, gentlemen—the place to go for your secret lay or secret *addiction*. You will time your business to low tide or be *ass*-deep, and mind you, not in a good way. Should any of your cannery team be caught or killed, the rest of the bunkhouse will disavow any knowledge of your enjoyment." His girlfriend, 3428, a mixed-media sculptor from Seattle, is working through her Ayn Rand stage awkwardly, like we all did. We traverse a short cable bridge hanging low over mud that's thick like chocolate pudding. 3424 leads the way in shorts, cowboy boots, a corny button-down shirt with postcard motif, and purple Lennon glasses. "An old watchman's vehicle was found right here on the edge. The footprints leading to the water suggested he had gotten stuck and was swept under

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<sup>58</sup> It's amazing how many signs there are at the cannery. Most signs are in English and Tagalog, and sometimes Yupik. Whenever possible, signs are pictorial. In the aggregate, they provide additional insight into cannery life and work processes. Inside: Hair Restraint Required, Hearing Protection Required in this Area, Absolutely no admittance without head cover!, No Smoking / Kuingiryaqunaci Maani, No Chewing Tobacco / Iqmigyaqunaci Maani, Keep Your Gloves at Break, No Raingear in Restrooms, Danger: No Smoking, No Sparks, No Open Flames, No Beverages or Food Allowed in this Area, Wash Hands before Returning to Work, Stop! Wash and Sanitize, Please Hold Handle Down to Flush, Danger! Keep Feet Clean of Lift—Or No Toes, Caution: Toxic/Hazardous Chemicals are Used in This Workplace (Material Safety Data Sheets are Available in the Supervisor's Office), Lock Out Locks, Caution: Turn off Charger Before Disconnecting Battery, Cardboard Only (No Coffee Cups), Aluminum Cans Only—Thank You!!!, No Fireworks Allowed on GPC Property, Work Safe / Mulngatluten Cali, Exit. Outside: Danger: High Voltage Overhead, Don't Block Door, Sound Horn, Caution: Slippery When Wet, Keep Door Closed at All Times, Do Not Open Door, Danger: Forklift Exit: Stand Clear, Do Not Enter, No Parking, Office Parking Only, Office & Visitor Parking, Please Do Not Litter, Please Pick Up Your Garbage, Casing Crew Only—Restricted, No Thru Traffic, Caution: Low Visibility Fog Area, Caution: Pedestrian X-ing, Waste Oil, Danger: Chlorine Gas, Speed Limit: 5 m.p.h., Have You Iced Your Fish Today?

the *tide*. That's when some *cannery* workers built this bridge to nowhere about ten years ago, and it didn't cost the fair taxpaying peasantry one rough cent. Isn't this the shit, gentlemen? Nobody comes up here to work, although they *must*. One of these days we'll all have a big party out here before being *swept* away. I want to express my gratitude, boys. It's a pleasure to meet real quasi-intellectuals from the east coast from time-to-time." There's enough room on the other side to lie down on small tufts of grass. It's bright and calm, which means the mosquitoes have reclaimed the air. "I make enough to get me through the summer, and go back to the restaurant in September. My boss doesn't know that I spend August sculpting." "I don't know if I want to write or *direct*." "Maybe this is Galt's Gulch, who knows." "Do both." "That book reminds me of a Pat Metheny album I was hung up on at the time. Too painful to listen to now." "So what kind of media do you mix? You should do fish art." A few hundred yards away, the mud flats have become a parking lot for fishing boats. Stranded fish are rescued by hovering angels. Old Grumpy-cakes writes out the day's menu on a chalkboard near the cannery doors: 7-15-95 / Time will tell??? / Start: 6 p.m. line #2 / Dinner: cold hamburgers and dry potatoes. Less than four weeks since landing here, with all of the anticipation and hard work and learning, it was positively surreal knowing I would never process another fish in Ekuk. The next day, 111 people are sent home. I go back to the warehouse that morning for a full day of egg house boxing, followed by another long evening in the long sun. The doors of the bunkhouse are open. Radio Dillingham: Alaskan #1, in American: 'Do you remember the word of the day?' Alaskan #2, in American: 'How are you?' Alaskan #2, in Yupik: 'How are you?' Alaskan #1, in American: 'I am fine.' Alaskan #1, in Yupik: 'I am fine.' This reminds me to read Sarina's letter. She had taped an envelope

with my name on it to her bunkhouse door. On the top sheet is a personal note in hard slants. On another, she had carefully written-out the official rules of the Bat Game: The Bat Game is so easy to play but so complicating to explain. Played by two teams, unlimited teams members but equal, two base lines, a bat, and a ball, not a baseball ball, but a sponge kind but not the light ones, whatever. One team plays OUT and other IN. The batter who hits the ball and runs across and back before being nailed is a homer. Then he gets another chance to bat at the end of the batter line. The batter who swings and not hit, just goes to the end of the line and waits until the next batter hits and he and the batter can both go for the run line, and try and make it back if possible. If not, they wait at the run line or somewhere in between the lines where it is safe for them to not get nailed until a batter hits again, and they go for the home line. And while they're going for the home line and one of them gets nailed, that's when the OUT team get to do the batting. Another way the IN team can be kicked to the OUT team is when all the batters had a chance to swing and none of them made it to the run line and back, and there's one batter left, that last batter can get three chances to swing, and not hit, that's when the OUT team automatically get into IN team. But then, when the last batter does hit the first one, some made it to the run line, but not back, then wait for the second and third swing, and makes it back to the home line, they're still the IN team. You can get nailed anywhere from the knee up, but getting nailed anywhere below the knee doesn't count. The OUT team has to chase after the IN team and try and nail them when they're between the lines, or they can pass the ball to the one closest to the guy they're trying to nail. Teamwork. There's no time for romance at the cannery and too much time for teamwork. On Grumpy's little message board today: On Call / No Canning Today / No

menu / No food??? The dining hall runs out of potatoes and adds more salmon. The general store is having an “end of season sale,” offering tempting bargains like 20% off a 300% mark-up for a metal tube of Gleem toothpaste that expired in 1987. Or you can pay normal exorbitant prices for stale candy and emulsified camera film. The store manager makes real money from the fishing boats and can hardly disguise his contempt for cannery workers, with their measly candy bar purchases and endless roaming. We’ll be gone soon enough. There’s always a small cluster of people waiting at the airstrip now. Twenty-four more people are sent home. If you want to stay on for another week you have to volunteer for the odd-jobs before the season winds down. The only problem with this plan is that you’re working too hard during peak to want any more, and then the season suddenly drops off a cliff, so there’s a very subtle window of opportunity available to the connected or the prescient. Most people are ready to go home by then anyway<sup>59</sup> except for cannery jumpers and teachers. One day everyone is sitting around a tidy bunkhouse in clean clothes wondering if the fish are ever going to come, and the next we’re elbow-deep in blood and flesh. Catches of unimaginable tonnage are processed at the machine rate of one fish every two seconds, millions of cans spitting forth from the machine for hours and days on end, and just when your body is at its limit and your mind has been assimilated by the fishmachine, rumors begin to swirl at mug-ups that ADF&G is going to kill it. Although it seemed impossible just a few days before, there is a last fish, and someone in Japan is on a course with destiny as we speak. The next morning, buzzing clipboard people with checklists are collecting rain gear and linen, inspecting rooms, and consolidating bunkhouses; dock cranes are plucking fishing boats

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<sup>59</sup> Where the object of the adventure all along has been to end it to archive it.

out of the water; and everyone is rushing off to the laundry room to get in a last wash.<sup>60</sup> They serve us dry dinner leftovers for breakfast, with eggs to make it look right. Office personnel, hidden all season, are set up behind a long table near the dining hall door, passing out cash and checks. “Sign here, here, and here, and initial by the Xs.” Word spreads, and the beach party is on for sunset. Don’t know if you heard. That kid pulled a Dolly Varden<sup>61</sup> off the inspection line. Danner? Danny? Daniel-san. Sir Daniel, Lord Lieutenant of West Riding. Whatever, yes, well, he actually pulled that slimy half-frozen fucker off the line and held it inside his rain gear for *hours*. He brought it to the kitchen and they wrapped it up for him in tin foil with some butter and onions. We’ll have to get on our knees and pray to that fucker before we throw it onto the fire tonight. Cannery workers file through the village in small groups. At a shallow cove just past the church, people are standing around or sitting on driftwood drinking whiskey. Soon there’s a driftwood tower on fire, casting shadows on the sandy bluff face where someone saw a brown bear a few days ago. The fish goes into the fire. The inlet recedes. The evening is still and warm. Across the bay to the west is Togiak, where the rim of the Ahklun Mountains radiates fire like Malyavat. Mosquitoes are trapped in sun amber, mosquitoes that drive herds of caribou to madness, caribou that run until they find water but their hides have already been ravaged and their heads are chewed alive above the water line, mosquitoes that peel the musky felt from the horns like birch bark, invade nostrils, exploit the soft tissue of eyes wide with panic: piranhas of the Alaskan summer tundra.

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<sup>60</sup> During the height of the season, laundry time is highly competitive and some play dirty. You have stay in the laundry room to prevent someone from removing your clothes mid-cycle and leaving them in a wet pile on the table. This behavior is absolutely unacceptable where time is so scarce and everyone relies on a primary set of work clothes.

<sup>61</sup> ADF&G Fish Ticket Code 531.



Preserve the amber. Blow on the ember. Sit down, ignore the piranhas, but let's talk about fish. What you say what who now? Maggie the forklift driver from Wyoming? Yeah, well, she don't smoke, and I kin see her in the shadows of the fire takin' baby sips from a whiskey bottle, playing along, beautiful big doe eyes that see everything and everyone, maintaining her dignity amongst these bestial be-flanneled cannery gorillas. That pale kid who works the fish oil tank studies philosophy at Brown, you shittin' me? Lo, the fish is ready and someone pulls it clear of the fire with a stick. Borrowed dining hall silverware is passed around to those in the know. Conversations and laughter settle into a peaceful background frequency. Anyone nearby reaches into the great big foil taco shell, pulling off flakes of warm pink salmon meat that had awkwardly down someone's rain gear been stuffed, to the kitchen secreted, in various ingredients dressed, to the ancestral river beach returned, and in a party bonfire of cured Bristol Bay driftwood steamedeth. There isn't a chef on the planet good enough to recreate this because it's about context. This experience is not available in specialty stores back home. You must be tuned in, brothers and sisters, to so sweet a stone in so primitive a place as this, and you must split the penny to pay your way. Soon the fish is cleaned to bones and there's a pause as we climb higher around the spiraling flames. Down the beach, somebody's going on about a massive flounder stranded out on the flats, but it's just a weird reflection on the wet mud. A few people walk down to check, and the story is dead in less time than his fifteen seconds, but the event is trapped in amber, he's trapped in amber, and we forgive and love him. You think of certain people at certain times. Kenny should be here right now. He knows how to work the room. He'd pull this even tighter. One summer, we had entirely gutted his old farmhouse down to the skeleton frame of beams axe hewn and

dovetail joined or wooden dowel pegged—the restoration of the original text. He would understand the aesthetics of this beach party. I parked in the silent driveway that night and knocked, but walked in as I knocked, claiming partial ownership by proxy. Where are you, man? Upstairs! Silence. I ascend the wooden stairs we had liberated from shag carpet, now creaking, a lamp is on somewhere up there, and I feel like I'll see him combing his hair in the mirror or splashing on cologne, but it's really still a construction zone that just looks cool because he keeps it clean and neat and burns cranberry-scented candles and has antique wooden chairs and weathered old Yankee rugs set-up for evening guests. I smell the pungent tundra as I reach the top of the stairs and see everybody sitting in a circle ready to bust out laughing, Kendrix with his crazy Elvis hair and burled wood pipe, the band and band girlfriends. It had all been a joke on me, and I take my place in the circle. The sun drops into embers. From the attic window we spiral upward like ravens through the warm rain, sharing tales in the summer night. In these final days, the few of us who are left have the cannery practically all to ourselves. The rough noises of the bunkhouse have been replaced by an occasional door closing and toilet flushing. These are haiku days of decompression and peaceful laundry and an hour in the steam house<sup>62</sup> and the genteel work of transcribing interviews. Late this morning, the mechanics handed me a hexagonal wrench and a screwdriver and sent me out to the tundra to break down the water pipe that feeds the hydraulic cannery operations. The source is a large thermokarst lake about a mile east of the cannery on a direct line.<sup>63</sup> The pipe is laid on the surface of the tundra in eight-foot sections; the sections are held together with rubber

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<sup>62</sup> The best kept secret at the cannery was a homemade steam house near the machinist's shop, a small dome of miscellaneous scraps that one has to crawl through a short tunnel to get into, like an igloo. Inside is a water bucket with ladle, a pile of hot rocks, and room for about four or five people.

<sup>63</sup> GPS coordinates: 58.818622, -158.564722.

couplings and snap braces. My job is to make neat piles of ten along the pipeline route from the lake to the edge of the bluff. The mechanics would come later with a truck to retrieve the pipes and pull up the water pump with a winch.<sup>64</sup> To get there, I have to go down the beach road all the way through the village and then head back north toward the cannery along the ridgeline, about four miles one way and getting near to Clark's Point again. They're not paying me to walk there, so I'll take my time and a few sandwiches along for the trip. I round the corner of the last cannery building, past the water tower, through the dirt lot where cannery workers and Native kids had played goof football in the long northern evenings, and down the thin trail that meanders through a patch of marsh grass to the fish camp. The smell of smoking fish sweetens the brine of the inlet. Flowers pour over the engine block of a rusted-out truck. Homemade smoke houses built with pallet wood and sheets of corrugated metal are thick with color. A small table wet from butchering. Driftwood collected in oil drums. Car doors and windshields patched into fishing houses. An old man mending a net on a large table looks up from his work at one of the last Cossacks of the season. Children play basketball between piles of nets and buckets. Water droplets scatter from the backboard. A small black dog wants to play but is snatched up by a young girl, who smothers its face with hers. Its back legs kick in the air and the small tail whips back and forth like a bee's wings. The girl sets the dog onto the ground. It stumbles over the net, drops in exhaustion onto the old man's shoes, and immediately falls asleep. White plastic buoys, coiled rope, buckets red with fish blood, metal scraps, rotting trucks, driftwood, plywood, broken pallets, basketball hoops, birdhouses, bicycles, dogs, seagulls, children, fish, water, gravel, grass, sky. Nothing leaves Ekuk but fish and people. One day, the melting ice caps will wash away the rest.

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<sup>64</sup> The pump sits on a sled at the bottom of the lake, no more than five or six feet deep.

The beach road cuts through the grassland, mountains to the west, rolling tundra to the east, and the old Nushagak brown and slow. Another old man sits with a blanket wrapped tightly around his legs, forming a sort of work table for a sharpening stone and pile of fish hooks. Further down the beach, two men are pulling in a net. One holds the net over his shoulder and feeds it to the other. His face is close to the ground and his bandana soaked with sweat. A small girl jumps into a plastic cart. Her father pulls the cart clear of the lapping water. A young boy rides an ATV in tight circles, half-standing on the pegs, straight black hair flying. An old man lays the net up against the side of the fishing shack. The beach widens at the end of the village into a gravel plain that collects all the scraps of high tide. Rejected salmon are incredulous, not to spawn, not to be canned, uncoiled gills rusting into dehydration madness, jaws swinging on cartilage hinges, rivets pecked out, and world-weary dents all over the imbricate steel-plated body. The trail is cut deeply into the sandy bluff like a half-pipe that blocks vision to either side until suddenly you're at the top where even at seventy feet above sea level the sky looks closer. The trail winds through tall grass past a small cemetery of wooden crosses, and then the abandoned church comes into view. It almost looks majestic from this commanding height on the edge of the bluff, with the inlet fading off into the sea on one side and the tundra stretching away on the other (see for yourself).<sup>65</sup> Some kids had followed me down the

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<sup>65</sup> American Memory Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, Ekuk, Dillingham Division, AK. Medium Photo(s): 9. Data Page(s): 3 plus cover page. Photo Caption(s): 1. Call Number HABS, AK, 4-Ekuk, 1. Created/Published Documentation compiled after 1933 Notes. Survey number HABS AK-88. Subjects ALASKA—Dillingham Division—Ekuk. Reproduction Number [See Call Number]. Collection: Historic American Buildings Survey (Library of Congress) Repository Library of Congress, Prints and Photograph Division, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. [Rights and Reproductions]. West Front HABS, AK, 4-Ekuk, 1-1. West Front and South Side HABS, AK, 4-Ekuk, 1-2. South and East Sides HABS, AK, 4-Ekuk, 1-3. North Side

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HABS, AK, 4-Ekuk, 1-4. North Side, Closer HABS, AK, 4-Ekuk, 1-5. Interior, Nave, Looking East at Iconostas HABS, AK, 4-Ekuk, 1-6. Interior, Nave, Looking East, Iconostas Doors Open HABS, AK, 4-Ekuk, 1-7. Interior, Sanctuary, Looking Southeast at Altar HABS, AK, 4-Ekuk, 1-8. View of Village from Church, Cannery in Background HABS, AK, 4-Ekuk, 1-9. HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY ST. NICHOLAS RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH HABS No. AK-88 Location: Ekuk, Nushagak Bay, Alaska. Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, Orthodox Church in America. Present Occupant: St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church. Present Use: Church. Significance: A number of historic Russian Orthodox churches survive in Alaska, built by Native congregations in traditional forms. The modest frame structure of St. Nicholas Church is distinguished by a small belltower and a varied roof that is hipped over the sanctuary by gabled at the opposite end. PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION Physical History: Date of Erection: 1917, according to Victor Sifsof and Harry Barnes. Builder: The builder was probably John Huyano, who also executed much of the decorative work on the interior. He signed one of the picture frames. Original plans and construction: The rectangular, wood-framed building has a roof that is hipped over the sanctuary and gabled over the west end of the nave. There is a narrow narthex, out of which rises a small belltower. Previous Churches on the Site: Ekuk had a population of 112 Eskimos in the early 1880s (Petroff, 17). In 1904, the church identified "Ekuk Point, left bank Nushagak River" as the site of church property, indicating that there was a church here at that time (Alaskan Russian Church Archives, reel 214). PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION General Statement: Architectural character: The main block is covered with a hipped roof on the sanctuary end and a gabled roof at the opposite end. The nave seems to be missing an opening, as there is no window on the west end of the north side to correspond to the one on the south side. Condition of fabric: fair. Description of Exterior: Over-all dimensions: The main block of the church measures 16'-4" x 34'-4", with a 7'-0" x 7'-0" narthex on the front. Foundations: Wood post. Walls: The walls are covered with beveled siding, painted white with green trim. Structural system: Wood frame. Stoop: Small plank stoop and steps. Openings: Doorways and doors: The front door is a double, paneled door. Windows: The windows are mostly boarded over, but had six-over-six-light sash. Roof: Shape, covering: The roof is hipped on the east end, gabled on the west, covered with corrugated metal. Cornice, eaves: There are decorative bargeboards on the west end of the narthex. Belltower: A pyramidal-roofed belltower rises out of the roof of the narthex. The bells have been removed to a stand on the ground. Description of Interior: Floor plans: The nave is one open space, separated from the sanctuary on the east by the iconostas. The narthex is on the west. Stairways: There is a one-step amvon, with a semi-circular projection in the center and krilos on the sides. Flooring: Tongue-and-groove boards painted gray. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls and ceilings are flush boards painted white. Doorways: Between the nave and narthex there is a double, paneled door, currently off its hinges. Decorative features: The seven-bay iconostas is plain, with gold-painted frames around the icons. There is a chandelier made of wood, rope, and beads, and wooden lampadas on the side walls. Site: The church sits on a hill on the shore, on one side of town. The church faces west, with the altar on the east, as is traditional among Russian Orthodox churches. There are graves on the north side of the church. PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

beach road. “We were going to make it our clubhouse, but grandmother won’t let us. She says the roof is going to collapse one day. So we found an old smokehouse behind grandmother’s trailer.” The sign at the top of the rickety steps forbids cannery workers from going inside. It’s a cannery rite of passage to sit on the steps and take a picture in front of the sign, not in juvenile defiance but, rather, in the rare celebration of being so distant from the ugly vehicles of enforcement. I can write what I want to here. Maybe I should before it’s too late. The bluff<sup>66</sup> is eroding,<sup>67</sup> and soon everything will collapse. I

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Alaskan Russian Church Archives, reel 214, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Sifsof, Victor, and Harry Barnes, church members, interviewed by author May 27, 1990. Petroff, Ivan. Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska. Washington: GPO, 1884. PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION Documentation of St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a division of the National Park Service, the state of Alaska, and the Icon Preservation Task Force. The project was executed under the general direction of Robert J. Kapsch, chief of HABS/HAER, and Boyd Evison, Alaska Regional Director, National Park Service. Recording was carried out during summer 1990 by Steven M. Peterson, project director; Jet Lowe, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who prepared this report.

<sup>66</sup> “From the cannery around Cape Etolin to the camp of October 8, on Bristol Bay, the shore line is always the same high bluff, continuous except in gaps where little streams cut through. Beginning with 150 feet at the cannery, as before mentioned, the bluffs dwindle in height to 40 feet at the camp of October 8. Just after passing Ekuk the bluffs are folded and contorted, while at the very top a bed of clay appears, which is 10 or 15 feet thick, is horizontally bedded, and unconformable upon the underlying strata. At the camp of October 8 the bluffs are composed almost entirely of horizontally stratified clay containing occasional pebbles and boulders, which are frequently ice scratched. This clay is from 20 to 40 feet thick, and below it is from 3 to 5 feet of fine horizontally stratified gravels, which in turn rest, with a slight unconformity, on interbedded gravels and clays that have in places been slightly folded and faulted, in one place the layers dipping 45° or 50° for a short distance. The folded gravels are as soft and unconsolidated as the upper ones. The clays which are interbedded with them have locally undergone intense crumpling on a very small scale, while the gravels with which they are imbedded show little or none. The lower unconformable gravels and clays are exposed at this point only in occasional swells above the beach line (see fig. 14). They are heavily cross bedded, the layers almost invariably dipping southwest, down the bay, although occasionally reversed. Summing up, it may be said that on the peninsula between Nushagak Bay and Bristol Bay there is exposed a thick series of gravels and clays, which are slightly folded and resemble the Pliocene beds

get inside through a loosely boarded-up window and pull in the kids by their wrists. It's dusky and barren. They want to see what's in the attic, so I hold them up one by one through a square hole in the ceiling, just long enough for them to look around for a few seconds. There is nothing up there, but they all say "wowww." The church has been stripped except for a chest of drawers overturned and scattered. Papers and the cradle moons of smashed Christmas balls litter the floor. So much depends upon an old order form for religious items inside the barren church: St. Herman's Religious Center, Box 3491, Kenai, Alaska, 99611. BIBLES (in English) nicely bound; boxed as a beautiful gift \$5.00. "Good News for Modern Man" (New Testament) .75. CHRISTMAS CARDS—with Orthodox ikons \$2.00. CHURCH HISTORY—The Desert Fathers (the early monks) \$2.25; Faithful Witnesses (stories about marturs) \$1.50; Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy \$1.95; Innocent Veniamenov (Alaska's Apostle) .75. DOCTRINE—The Teachings of the True Church of Christ \$3.00; Worship, an explanation of the services of

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(Palisades conglomerates) of the Yukon. The greatest thickness is exposed at the cannery and is nearly 150 feet, and nowhere has any solid rock been seen below. Above this lower series is horizontal undisturbed clay, with scattered ice-scratched boulders and pebbles. Of this clay there is from 10 to 40 feet, making up the top of the bluffs, with generally 3 or 4 feet of stratified gravel as a base. The bottom of this clay and upper gravel and the top of the bluff grows lower going east from Ekuk."—from *The Annual Report of the United States Geological Survey to the Secretary of the Interior, Part 7* (1900)

<sup>67</sup> "Wind-driven waves from the west and south, and vehicle traffic on the beach are causing and contributing to coastal erosion. An *Ekuk Village Erosion Assessment* prepared by Golder Associates in 2007 reported that Ekuk Bluff had eroded about 125 feet between 1912-1981, and an additional 65 feet from 1981-2006. The data suggests an annual rate of erosion at 2 feet per year from 1912-1981, and 2.6 feet per year since 1981. Sediments from Ekuk Bluff erosion are continually fed onto Ekuk spit, leading to a growth of the spit at the cannery end. As Ekuk Bluff erodes, the Ekuk spit shoreline also erodes. The whole shoreline shifts east-northeast at the rate of the prevailing erosion, and the erosion of the spit adjusts to the shoreline location under Ekuk Bluff."—from U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Alaska District, Alaska Baseline Erosion Assessment (2009)

the Church \$4.00; IKONS–The Last Supper (beautiful for home or church) \$6.00; The Protection of the Mother of God (large and colorful) \$6.00; Christ the Savior (small) 50¢ (large) 1.00; Holy Trinity (small) 50¢ (large) \$1.00; St. Herman of Alaska (small) 50¢ (medium) \$1.00 (large) 1.50; Hand painted ikons of any saint may be ordered. LITURGICAL BOOKS–Canon of St. Andrew of Crete (for Great Lent) \$1.00; Divine Liturgy (in English) O.C.A. \$3.50; Festal Menaion (in English) \$12.50; Hapgood Service Book \$6.00; St. Herman of Alaska \$3.00. MUSIC–Divine Liturgy (published by Father Igor Soroka) \$3.50; Matins \$2.50; Panahida \$1.50; Vespers \$2.00. PRAYERBOOKS–In English \$3.00; In Slavonic and English (“Svit”) \$5.00; In Yupik (Vespers, Matins and Liturgy with Sunday Tropars, Kondaks, Prokimenons) \$2.00. RECORDS–Divine Liturgy (In English) \$4.00; Holy Saturday (in English) \$4.00; Hymns to the Theotokos (in English and Slavonic) \$4.00; “From my Youth” by the Girls’ Octet of Warren Ohio \$5.00. REMEMBRANCE BOOKS–To list the names of the living or departed \$2.50.

1974 CHURCH DIRECTORY AND YEARBOOK FOR THE ALASKAN DIOCESE \$2.50. These were ancient Christians and this was their cave on the fringes of the empire. I collect church attendance records from the floor, written in thick pencil on small scraps, and sit down against a wall to read them while the kids are busy planning out their illicit clubhouse. This church and the artifacts inside it are more significant than the ruins of that empire. No ideas but in things faithfully reproduced: July 11 1967 1 candles .60¢ 4 candles 1.00 2 candles .50 people 39.<sup>68</sup> July 12 1967 4 candle 20 @ 1.00 2 candle 40 @ .50 plate \$3.63 cross \$4.83.<sup>69</sup> July 22 1967 Yako Petlu 1 cross change \$1.75.<sup>70</sup> Dec 12

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<sup>68</sup> Tuesday, MLB All-Star Game at Anaheim Stadium: NL 2, AL 1.

<sup>69</sup> Wednesday, Newark Rebellion: 23 killed.

<sup>70</sup> Saturday, American writer Carl Sandberg dies.



1962 1 candles .50 2 candles 1.00 people 35.<sup>71</sup> Dec 19 1962 5 candles 45 @ \$12.25 5 candles 35 @ 175 5 candles 35 @ 175 plate \$2.90 people 16.<sup>72</sup> June 10 1967 3 candles 75¢ 1 candles 25 1 candles 25 people 22.<sup>73</sup> June 11 1967 2 candles 50¢ 2 candles people 26 plate \$3.15.<sup>74</sup> May plate \$2.30 cross 45 people 19. June 7 1967 2 candles 50 people 27.<sup>75</sup> June 8 1967 1 candle 40¢ plate \$2.50 people 18 plate \$1.90.<sup>76</sup> Nick Hansen drew \$7.00. sold 1 gold 75¢ 1 gold \$1.00 sold 1 gold cross \$1.00. May 9 2 candles \$1.00 1 candles 25 plate 1.95 people 24. May 1963 1 candles .25¢ plate \$2.40 people 22. Dec 18 1963 2 candles 80 1 candles 45 2 candles 1.00 2 candles 1.00 people 18.<sup>77</sup> The lowest per attendee donation average is 8.125 cents on May 9, 1963, and the highest 18.125 cents on December 19, 1962. These figures can be compared with the overall donation average of 10.49057 cents. The average attendance is 24.18 people, making the average collection per service \$2.53662. I try to imagine what a church service or wedding or funeral must have been like here. Who is buried outside, are the graves shallow or deep, in soil or sand, and will they wash away into the inlet? I'm all but certain that the Eldest had attended church services here, and wonder how much she donated to the collection plate, how many fish she spent to forgive people. Earlier in the season, I had stopped to watch her pick salmon from a drift net. She tells me she's the oldest one in the village still fishing and that her daughter is up at the cannery selling fish. She invites me into her Eskimo house for tea and smoked salmon, leaving a small pile of fish on the beach. She

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<sup>71</sup> Wednesday, tennis star Tracy Austin born.

<sup>72</sup> Wednesday, *Mona Lisa* arrives in the U.S. for the first time.

<sup>73</sup> Saturday, Six-Day War ends.

<sup>74</sup> Sunday, Cubs 18, Mets 10 at Wrigley: WP Leo Durocher.

<sup>75</sup> Wednesday, Israel captures the Old City of Jerusalem in the Six-Day War.

<sup>76</sup> Thursday, U.S.S. Liberty attacked by Israeli forces during the Six-Day War: 34 killed, 174 wounded.

<sup>77</sup> Wednesday, American actor Brad Pitt born: played by Tyler Durden in the film version.

shows me her garden of strawberries overflowing the gunwale of an old rowboat, daydream fruit filled with the long sun. She brings her fist to her chest. She cried in her heart this morning. She asks me if I'm from the cannery. She talks to boys and girls from the cannery every year, has been for many years. The door of her house is held open with a piece of curled driftwood reaching up like a dragon. The inside is utilitarian but cozy enough for a month of fishing, with a metal camp bed and wool blanket (likely cannery discards) against the back wall; rough shelving with jars, cans, clothes, and some tools on the side; a small hotplate in the middle of the room; a folding card table with two plastic chairs beneath the only window, facing the water; and a Jesus calendar curled from humidity tacked into the wall near the door. She starts a kettle and sets down a tin plate with crackers and smoked salmon. The fresh strips of meat had been scored down to the skin every inch or so, drying into squares of deep crimson thick with smoky oil. She sits down without inviting me to sit, but pushes the plate in my direction. I sit and soon the tea is ready. From the window camera—a rough square cut into the plywood—with film running at twenty-four frames per second, the dark gray sky and water thicken to custard, fishing boats are raisins, and seagulls circle slowly like dreamy sugar sprinkles.<sup>78</sup> She tells me her name, but everyone calls her the Eldest. She's not sure how old she is, maybe seventy-three or seventy-four. She asks me my name and where I'm from. I tell her, and eat another square of salmon. She waves her hand at me, doesn't know where I live but knows it's far away and somewhere in America. Her children moved to Seattle but she won't go. They forgot they're Eskimo and left the Eskimo life behind. Her husband died a long time ago. He was a Cossack, like me. She and her sisters have been here many years together and they all share. Her family left but her daughter is still here. Her

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<sup>78</sup> *Tundra cinemática.*

grandfather was Russian. Her husband made her talk English instead of her Eskimo language, but she taught her daughters Yupik when her husband wasn't around. They always spoke Yupik when he was gone. He hated it and hit her a lot, but she forgives him. All of her friends now are Cossacks. The mosquito drone of a puddle jumper approaches, fades. I take an orange out of my jacket pocket and leave it on the table. An ATV stops near the door, and a thin woman in her thirties enters. It's her daughter. She's looks at me warily and speaks to her mother in Yupik, the language of conspiracy and exclusion and cultural survival. In English, the Eldest tells her that she and a boy from the cannery are having tea and sticks. Many times, Cossack boys have come and had tea and salmon and written down her language. She likes Cossack food but knows I've never had salmon as good as this, and I better not come bumming around for more! They continue in Yupik while I eat. The smoky fish oil oozes through my fingers and down my chin. My stomach warms. She tells me more about her life as the tape machine continues to record. She prayed down the beach this morning. She loves non-Christians, every drunk, sinner, everybody. She invites them to eat all the time, prays to let them sleep and find inner peace. On the beach there was no more fish. "So I got up this morning. I cried. I said to the Old River, 'We have people to help. We have to help these people that got no money, no parents, nobody. Could you give us a little bit more fish?' While ago I call Tide. We don't catch nothing. I'll call Tide, we never catch anything. I come back and called somebody to have clams. There's clams out there. Some of the people pick clams last night. They brought me some so I cleaned them and boiled them, and pretty soon I look out, the fish was getting away! I went out and hang onto that rope. I prayed. You visit people. You are a good boy." "I'm surprised you like fish," her daughter says to me

with toneless contempt. Then she leaves on the ATV to go find a calculator at the cannery office. “When I first come to this place I was married to this person. I didn’t know how to talk English. I’m glad I could talk English now. I was very sorry. But when I learned I try really hard to learn. When I learn how to talk English I start inviting anybody. Sometimes I feed the people that are hungry. I still try to make the people come around so they could feel good in them. People that you don’t even know. You come here before? And when you first came here you didn’t even know how Ekuk look, right? I lived in a Cossack house but I don’t like Cossack houses. I don’t like running water! Then my friend, she always bring me stuff, bowls of fruits from the hills. She bring me a little bit of her food from home to bring to me. Boy, I used to sit, just wait for her to come, couldn’t wait for her to come.” She points at my hands dripping with oil. “Too much fish. You’re not used to that. Your stomach will make tricks. Over fifty years I fished this side. Just about that. If I don’t go fishing I still think I’m fishing. As long as I still touch the fish and pick. When I first came here there was no ceiling. The old man, granpa, he was from Norway. He was very prejudiced. I can see the words good now. Lucky I never talk English that first time when I get married to my husband. And when I come to this place, he looked at me, he said something to my husband. I told my husband, ‘How come you marry me? I don’t like your father, he doesn’t like me.’ He used to make me work, work, work. And afterward he felt sorry, I guess, he give me this site. I got the permit. Nowadays you don’t have no permit you can’t fish. So, I put the ceiling up. I got four sons but they’re not here. My daughters, all eight of them, they’re all singers in New Life Church. Oh, I was tired out. I’m so glad that some people different come along here, you know? Make me happy. I was kinda feeling bum that my son.... Granpa was so

prejudiced he not let me teach them how to talk Native. I was not the oldest when I sneak and talk, teach my children how to talk Native. When he was dying I take care of him, then after he stop his bleeding he looked at me and said, 'I'm sorry. I was so mean to you.' I said, 'God forgive you. I love you.' He was dying, real sick. I thought, 'He doesn't mean anything. I'm young.' And he said, 'You go down to Ekuk. You bring my cabin to the fish camp. Take all my stuff, and it yours. And the site.' And nobody never give anything like that to anybody. Cost lots of money, these sites and permits. They couldn't believe it. Came down here and I told everybody. There was no houses like this. No houses like this when I was small. We live in tent-houses.<sup>79</sup> My grandson completely rotten spoiled. I make him come down here to try to work and he said, 'Ohhh, gram, this is Eskimo house.' I said, 'Go home then!' I have a son. He's thirty-three years old. He was graduated from school. He's my youngest completely. He went out fishing from the time that I fished yesterday. I let him clean out my fish. He start drinking. He broke my heart. And I raised him by myself when his dad got killed in Nushagak. People, Native people, could kill somebody and they don't even, they hide each other's, they keep it in. I moved away from there when their dad got killed. And I raised him by myself and he never drink for a long time, never, but my daughter told me yesterday he was drinking on the fishing boat. After we pray, when I went down to my beach and I pray on my net, my daughter look at me she says, 'Mom, but the fish.' I hold onto the rope. No one wouldn't believe me. I said, 'We need someone to help us, we got partners to pay, but give us fish.' The rope was, we hang onto the rope, see, you could feel it shaking. My daughter look at

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<sup>79</sup> Ekuk Population History: 1880: 112; 1890: 65; 1900: 0; 1910: 0; 1920: 0; 1930: 37; 1940: 0; 1950: 0; 1960: 40; 1970: 51; 1980: 7; 1990: 3; 2000: 2 (the cannery watchman and his wife). Total Housing Units: 65. Occupied Housing: 1. Vacant Housing: 64.

me and say, 'Where's the fish?' I said, 'Fish is gonna come.' I walked up there. I was getting everything ready. 'The fish is hitting!' I just smoked my fish. I said, 'Don't panic now, someone will come.' Someone will come down there and help in the evening." Her daughter returns and asks me if I have a calculator in my backpack. "We keep coming up with wrong figures. Maybe you could count. Maybe you could help because I'm trying to add and it's driving me crazy." She spreads out sheets of paper on the table. "Okay. Don't write on this, just give me answers from your head." The Eldest turns to her daughter. "You call up our partner. Tell her to come down, the fish is drying." "What time is the water?" "It's way out. Tuesday today?" "Yeah, we're not gonna pull in. We'll just pick all the way out and then maybe half-tide will pull it in and clean it and then pull it back out." "Well, I should go down to the net and pick that fish and make the partners jump up. I gotta go down there and pick that fish." She gets up from the table. I pull the kids out through the window and tell them I have to go work. It starts to rain and soon I'm weighed down by wet clothes and tools. My boots sink into the tundra and water pours into them. I slog onward, stopping every so often to listen for bear or caribou. Gradually, I fall into a meditative state particular to cold rainy days in the wilderness, when the clouds are low and claustrophobic, when it seems that time passes but may not have, when it seems that I am alone with my thoughts but may not be, when it seems that at any moment I might walk right through the gore of Nechtanesmere. The reality is strikingly similar: a bright yellow flash: Audio in his rain gear streaking across the tundra like a madman on a fish mission. By the time I catch up to him, he's waiting at the thermokarst lake with his field piece loaded and pitched.<sup>80</sup> I slowly pull out the wrench

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<sup>80</sup> A cannon that had served at Maloyaroslavets, now richly painted with carnival colors in the style of a

and consider making a run for the pipe, but he enjoys all the advantages and touches the fire hole. With a dense pop, wobbling gangles of viscera hang dark for a moment, then splatter across the tundra. And like that, Audio is gone, just ripples on the water. Cannery Processing Log Book, Ekuk, 1995: Sunday, June 18: arrival. Monday, June 19: no work. Tuesday, June 20: check-in; no work. Wednesday, June 21: clean-up; 8 hours R; 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday, June 22: safety meeting: 2 hours R; 3 p.m.-5 p.m. Friday, June 23: cannery processing: 8 hours R, 3.5 hours OT; 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturday, June 24: clean-up & union meeting:<sup>81</sup> 8 hours R, .5 hours OT; 8 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday, June 25: no work. Monday, June 26: no work. Tuesday, June 27: cannery processing: 8 hours R, 6 hours OT; 8:30 a.m.-12 a.m. Wednesday, June 28: cannery processing: 8 hours R, 6.75 hours OT; 8 a.m.-12 a.m. Thursday, June 29: cannery processing: 8 hours R, 8 hours OT; 12:30 a.m.-2 a.m.; 8 a.m.-12 a.m. Friday, June 30: cannery processing: 8 hours R, 6 hours OT; 12:30 a.m.-2 a.m.; 8 a.m.-10 p.m. Saturday, July 1: cannery processing: 8 hours R, 6.25 hours OT; 8 a.m.-12 a.m. Sunday, July 2: cannery processing: 12 hours OT; 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday, July 3: freezer: 8 hours R, 5.5 hours OT; 8 a.m.-11:30 p.m. Tuesday, July 4: freezer & cannery processing: 9.5 hours OT; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Wednesday, July 5: cannery processing: 8 hours R, 7.5 hours OT; 6 a.m.-11 p.m. Thursday, July 6: cannery processing: 8 hours R, 4 hours OT; 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday, July 7: cannery processing & cleaning: 4 hours R; 8 a.m.-12 p.m. Saturday, July 8: cannery processing: 4 hours R, 5 hours OT; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday, July 9: re-canning: 2 hours OT; 1 p.m.-3 p.m. Monday, July 10: cannery processing: 8 hours R, 4 hours OT; 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesday, July 11: no work. Wednesday, July 12: cannery processing: 8 hours R, 5 hours OT; 8 a.m.-10 p.m.

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Sicilian donkey cart. *Arancia sanguigna, meester?*

<sup>81</sup> Alaska Fisheries Division of UIW SIUNA AFL-CIO.

Thursday, July 13: egg house boxing & cannery processing: 8 hours R, 3.5 hours OT; 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday, July 14: egg house boxing & cannery processing: 8 hours R, 3 hours OT; 8 a.m.-8:30 p.m. Saturday, July 15: cannery processing: 8 hours R, 6 hours OT; 8 a.m.-11 p.m. Sunday, July 16: egg house boxing: 8.5 hours OT; 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday, July 17: egg house boxing: 4 hours R; 1 p.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday, July 18: cannery pipeline: 3 hours R; 8 a.m.-11 a.m. Wednesday, July 19: no work. Thursday, July 20: check-out.

Total paid work hours: 265.75: 153 R, 112.75 OT: cannery processing: 202.25: egg house boxing: 22.5: clean-up: 18.5: freezer: 15.5: pipeline: 3.0: meetings: 2.5: re-canning: 2.0. Cannery total: 76.10536%: other work total: 23.89464%. Regular pay: 971.55 (153 @ 6.35). Overtime pay: 1074.5075 (112.75 @ 9.525). Total pay: 2046.0575, a 3008.90809% return on my bus ticket investment in just three weeks. Cash advance: 200.00. Union dues: 50.00 Total check amount: 1796.06. Total work-time meal hours: 26.25. Total work-time mug-up hours: 15.0. The machines are still, as if nothing has happened, even though it is quite clear that everything has happened. So much depends upon a fish cannery glazed with rain water beside the mud river.<sup>82</sup> *The Fishguts Documentary Project* is about a bone-processing facility that Audio and his salmonid minions operate on the ancient seabed chalks of western Kansas. I had accumulated tens of thousands of miles searching for it,<sup>83</sup> making desperate coast-to-coast runs, first a northerly route, then a southerly one, back and forth many times until the ends curled inward and centripetal force churned us counter-clockwise toward the center of a dry whirlpool. The true function of the Continental Divide became clear only after I had

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<sup>82</sup> In 2002, Wards Cove Packing Company, one of Alaska's most venerable fish processing companies, closed its salmon canning operations due to a global surplus of farm-raised salmon and low prices.

<sup>83</sup> This facility actually exists at 38.790556, -100.7625.



crossed it several times from both directions: to keep the water in. That's the point. Where's your car? extra go we discover a small backroom where two mismatched old wing chairs face each other sonny tilts his head like marlon brando reading his lines on the rooftops of hoboken the match hisses and spins in the coffee film familiar with the gore vidal strata blows a cone of smoke over my head I had hoped that the economics of our travels would lead to important conclusions laundry two dollars and seventy five cents one wash one box of soap three drying cycles gas twelve dollars sodas one dollar and twenty cents cigarettes two dollars and twenty five cents two coffees one dollar and fifty cents three burgers three dollars and ten cents hotel room deposit five dollars subtotal twenty eight dollars and thirty cents seventeen and a half cents more than walden in addition room twenty dollars and ninety five cents beer seven dollars and thirty four cents twelve pack of coors scotch six dollars and twenty nine cents small bottle of cutty drunk food four dollars and eighty eight cents ice and cable free total sixty seven dollars and seventy six cents two point four zero nine two four waldens nineteen thousand two hundred and seven point five five nine zero six processed fish thoreau didnt go very far but he grew vegetables take a few swigs of my orange juice on the metaphysical imperative to continue chasing seat and console and im ready to yawn ready actually motivates you play brutal endless math from my route dissociated dennys for a grand slam where are we going the public water spout is a diseased barnacle an insect carapace of green minerals and it always feels good to be in early morning germ I went to plan b the quaker doesnt wash his hands cant be a pacifist when you ride the greyhound and take notes i cant figure out which apple i want all the yolks are broken nothing is over easy at five fifteen am in cleveland i have to step over the corners and straps beating rush hour

traffic wanting to utilize as much semi folded piles of time off the television coffee table  
thrifty now simultaneously a grill chef and a poet sonny doesnt take kindly to punctuality  
plates and pieces of wood improved with words are automatically suspect said something  
gray of an industrial february across the wood paneling and the constant rumble of route  
eighty red eyed marathon without the lights on slowly filtering chans wacky wacky on  
route four paramus locally famous for the first cardinal of spring at the top of the icy  
steps in his underwear coffee steaming steamer burning onto canal street queens as  
quickly as possible their six hundred mile daily limit just to dump melons from valencia  
cigarette butts in the urinal no door on the stall id wait if i were you a group of quakers in  
the terminal speaking german between radio announcements the plastic chairs are  
connected hey baby smoke smoke old chinese chef sits in the red booth near the kitchen  
door waiting for take out orders east coasters know the sugar bowl lid being stuck in the  
frozen cow fields of pennsylvania it was too much for sonny like the frazzled cuffs and  
stretched out knees grandmothers in housecoats donuts and a bag of carrots convince you  
to come along old chinese chef sits inside the torn corner to see how many he has left  
blowing red industrial february smoke through the frigid window crack bleached white  
rice pressed chicken frozen vegetables translucent corn starch glue why bukowski lived  
in the slums of gray moscow one hour layover in a four day bus trip they change drivers  
you change buses will my baggage be transferred i need those old clothes for the fish ive  
switched seats twice and seen three hundred and fifty nine new faces sonny and i eat  
whoppers in martinsburg west virginia our car intersects the divide at a right angle drifter  
punk tells me to fuck off while he washes himself in the only sink shaving kit toothbrush  
nail clippers comb neatly arranged on a towel on the counter sonny is stretched out in the

booth reading chans wacky wacky apocalypse dreisers is a watering hole that cost me twenty eight dollars for the direct line to san francisco a lounge pick up joint for salesmen and bored divorcees to the effective drone of polynesian masks submerica to the greyhound station tired and mopey gilt it was this kind of subconscious dialogue that sparked off plastic plants near the cigarette machine and pay phone he lured me here for strength seedy characters in bad clothes managed to reach the floor shitting in a greasy piss stained stall with the door ripped off cheap ride zombies half asleep smoking in the awful cleveland dawn or go inside the terminal for something to eat egg and hash brown special on an orange plastic tray nightmare homestretch across pennsylvania to the complete metaphor of something gone and no more impossible standing while the engine downshifts more concretely than two plus two remember the strange babies crying between reclined seats before sneezes bubble up in the bridge of your nose your hemp bag stuffed beneath the seat in front of me no afternoon while reestablishing the life that was back of the cheap cloth seats of boxes i came across moldy jack we yawned small talk in the rust orange that my mother had bought for me at a garage sale getting stoned together both been killing stories about a man and a dog in a desolate departure on low budget cherry pies five for a dollar watching the rockies cubs game on television before school after school on the sunny few blocks away in the shadow of coors field surrounded by quakers speaking german between radio announcements followed me into the basement then desolate place the world too methodically or become now we are cows just hang in there until i can figure out this poorochondria second hand toaster all by itself sits leftovers this too must end stumbling unawares like oedipus into shipping containers across the siberian sea to mother russia but i dont eat to ingest and regurgitate to the

wolves on the moonlit tundra let me tell you why alaska has always fascinated music the  
 obsession to find places unhip sings in fact its magnetism and strangeness is about  
 memories or confession created systems there are no contradictions in chapters that  
 unfold in the past like an instantaneous burst of anger imperfectly recorded memory is  
 not a revelation i learned that i am alive from seattle and i was so close up there in  
 created systems i learned that i am alive and the more i witness the more humble i to thee  
 i promise give the deteriorated leaves of autumn but its gone in an instant amongst my  
 old friends compost heap of all history his idealistic optimism was already a parody of  
 itself but we sensed that these wind up destitute on their doorstep and they take you in  
 because they still love you but sonny was just a mysterious name and under those  
 faceless conditions acceptable cant really talk to you now one day you shower in over a  
 week in the meantime take you in because they still love you but pack up and down the  
 main streets of nine early in the morning to support his family and the brown livingroom  
 no wonder the industrial red brick february hands are communicating the scene opens in  
 the condemned house to proverbial cricket chirp heres a lamp next to the couch the faint  
 cards who felt uncomfortable in their own space be heard in the background now then not  
 care anymore even though the heat dont you just enjoy that fireplace who knows i might  
 want to kill my sharp playful teeth and its blood pumping rain has left the classified  
 section like the sickly sweet aisles of a five and dime combs bin candy condoms batteries  
 part time driver pressboard sheets with holes for the efficient reassignment of personnel  
 vitamins kitchen help glaziers rulers machinist clerical yarn thread stencil kits pink foam  
 balls plastic pails cannery workers needed redeem yourself in beautiful wild alasky spray  
 paint receptionist index cards planners appliance service technician sales great

opportunities for laundry baskets shaving kits rubber bathtub stickies administrative assistant through a mouse maze of cubicles kitten calendar family photo toddler with baseball cap humorous anecdotes decorating dead wall space coffee pot with stain strata i prefer the company of squirrels and can start tomorrow mr fabersham out on the table and its death on an old matted blanket think he was a dead white guy yourself and thousands of unpublished others he has nothing important to say to me even theres a vague compassion in the systematic follower pretending fraudulent quasi mankind unless theyre corrupt but lets give political correctness a contradiction in historical knows we aint perfect arancia sanguigna meester and he certainly does to be scoffed and laughed at like bomb shelters i dont know man children i dont care how many degrees in order to control the eager young been there and done that and profoundly like springsteen bucket filled with a case of pabst and if youre one of these frauds finally next paragraph please which house is his in this post world war two suburban grid reel to reel i envision sonny hunched over his green metal typewriter on the back porch tobacco smoke trails colliding behind his head just past the speed of sound a linear circle my dorian gray mirror i want to help japan and not many people realize that south jersey is dixie the examination of two distinct halves indifferent sonny shrugs his hermetically sealed suburban cog box five pounds from the brutal summer before the only ones up at this hour see the order of the roman culture in san antonio i forgot to call him goddamn it now what we should take route forty and get into texas as soon as possible for no particular reason even a small bottle of mouthwash were stripped down to our shorts in the marblemount ranger station bathroom cloudy water spills onto the floor the old man observes the waterfall gasp for oxygen at four thousand six hundred and ninety feet in first gear over the pass into idaho

where its suddenly gloomy and the fog past the guardrail is a thick raincloud the waterfall of wet pine trees and rocks fade in and out with the breeze winds steeply down into depressing mining communities a cluster of dark brown alpine chalets with german flags hanging limp over geranium boxes past the tourist shops the skinhead hills are peeled down in spirals like apples couer dalene bus fumes choking where people fight off the mist with satellite dishes and bright houses we stop for a young girl with a burlap suitcase in front of a bait and tackle shop she waves to her parents and boards the bus the driver announces a ten minute break i get hit in the knees as everyone shuffles north along a pattern at lake charles a silence devoid of humans behind shoot right through all the crawfish nets along the safe high ground and away from the canyon anyway blew off the south for boring highway to the birds i can see how their wings totter on the southern road side cities obsessive compulsive sonny disorder cant get his ass up on cold mornings hes inherent to contradiction to those who are afflicted as a senior floater whereas still deeply symptoms are the result of misunderstanding all of this wandering so im up early as usual ready to go studying the map by the lonely blessing clinicians observe the tactile compulsion or anyway im the sole driver his ride is his against disorder they are correct but they are dawn hoping to relieve myself in the sparkling delve deeper into the situation falsifying then become cones of light and the early morning not looking but they do not look upon the blessed than at any other glory somehow not right and compulsion against disorder because they do not at six thirty in the morning amen blue collar workers and truckers desperate fits there is no such thing as the sound of feet crunching along the frosted something imperfect about a system youre ahead of the game a pioneer when the sun finally rises youre graced formula hallelujah the imperfection but of course there is

the water bottle which i keep stuffed in between because it keeps moving and changing to turn the key let her warm up then hit the yes symmetry yrtemmyssey the margin reduce the margin through comprehensive volume the borg understand the mission readjust the rearview look no matter how far you have to drive one tenth of a mile is just as good as ten run his long fingers through picard just a silly humanist in the vast reality value and economy through the desert in east texas every trailer has its own oil rig dry dust old paint ten feet high hold em pumping down just a few yards from rickety screen doors good luck boys dead texas grass makes a fabric sound when she walks away swirls on the horizon luckily for sonny hes got a straight hair slash really a giant pulsating lodestone in kansas planted by noon or so but the road rode to the unfathomable dot a straight flat road directly into the black storm line at a right angle and you get some of those healthy accumulation anxiety food groups up front sonny is stretched out in the booth reading dreisers whopper special free water bathroom plastic silverware napkins for the road but a drifter punk tells me to fuck off so i cant brush my teeth in the only sink have to wait for the next stop western washington is a wall of lush foliage and precipitation dark and dreamy so soon after the desert i find the dairy queen even though hes holding the phone to his ear irregular shapes of torn newspapers mouth mumbling the cute counter girl points to the ketchup she does it on purpose out of the back pocket twenty miles east of dallas small yellow and blue alpine flowers its golden wings glide into view above the ridgeline can I have some more ketchup please the trail arches up and away following the irregular shapes of torn newspapers took nips from the same scotch bottle talking loud enough for me to hear but the woman next to him had emptied out her pocket these days people somehow suck in at the same time bucks to lower someone into the goddamn

sarwl can you believe it no one interrupted our sink bath in seattle one hike in a different  
 section of both feet planted relish ketchup mustard as lucky as we had been in the north  
 cascades give me the keys on the way back down sol duc we had thumb platter onto the  
 paper plate for the full three days the glacier near mount olympus perfect hiking stick in a  
 small patch of wild raspberries just sitting in a perfect bowl of earth like a boy from out  
 of town she might lay in the diversified plan night to phoenix vicksburg mississippi what  
 kept him obsessed at hoh a pedantic librarian type dedicated to crossing into his pocket  
 because of the wind they lay back the trees grow taller and stronger windswept trees  
 knarled from the wind we drop our packs and run for the snowfield around the corner  
 popped into the valley popped through the grass a crazy deer shaking its head follows us  
 around at hurricane ridge in order to get to nowhere it would be logical to step into an  
 accordion swamp party sonny orders two hot dogs the surface is calm dry scree between  
 summer snowfields we wash up and fill our canteens i feel like her history teacher just a  
 representative symbol of his inability to commit to the mighty mississippi he shakes his  
 head for an hour staring up at panhandle texas nothing but a grain lift and they give it a  
 town name cannonball trail intersects the fire road just east of bear swamp sure they were  
 loose and cool and free but slaves to their destination twenty eight dollars for the direct  
 line to san francisco we stop in portland run out of quarters in the bottom of the twelfth  
 changing of the guard nebraska is supplying washingtons army in the hudson valley and  
 morristown a citizen of a superpower groping toward the interior vindicated when the  
 great pumpkin is fired in prehistoric reds seven thousand feet above the new sea level of  
 the fraternity of burger eaters the absolute glory of the american revolution navajo kid  
 curses us when we wont give him a ride possessed land tortured spirits twilight zone



small black dogs left to die in the heat on the curb in tuba city while kids across the street laugh at them and drivers drive by unconcerned on their way to the store for eggs sonny and i dont exchange a word for hours until we finally sputter off the reservation on watered gas and evil fully drained and soul vexed everything in tusayan is priced for tourist rip off so we camp out at kaibab sonny stays in the car im etched into the side of a rising phoenix with coyote calls and a nice fire crisp embers flying up into the tall pines we get two hundred and thirty seven miles out of the first tank refilling in northern virginia skim mexico south of deming and almost run the tank down to nothing a good scientific experiment the worn sand monuments of atlantixtulpa this is part of our system including whoppers and coffee even if the air and altitude came first the next morning is bright and blue breakfast pb and j up the thinning trail along the ridgeline and crazy deer roaming between parked cars out of sight his fingertips underneath a tablespoon of water dripping from his canteen after a week too many iodine tablets are wearing down our bodies stunted wind knarled trees near the peak the next day wed wash up and sleep at the hostel in the queen anne district once in a while we lay back and nap in the sun eat lunch take pictures above the treeline there are no hiking sticks this time were restless this time the organ mountains seem artistically insane with their teeth and gums bared and purple sunset backstop its spring break at unm so we sleep for the night in the parking lot no one sees us pissing behind the dumpster whoppers in santa fe an instantaneous window where you can love and integrate bus number three two four to seattle for the next forty three minutes with nothing to do this is lightning creek that fills a mans nostrils with fluorescent glacial silt macaroni and cheese fireside next to ross lake scooped up with spoons made from the cardboard box memories of early rolling log

tavern in issiquah theres sun and sculpture of a railroad spike with its simple guts  
 exposed keep climbing the moist soil of a rain storm the coldest and most delicious can of  
 beer i ever had a contemplative man will lead him to outer space pissing against the wind  
 on the utah border car shaking violently red dust in every crevice sand crust in nose in  
 eyes next day monument valley was perfect picture with my old five dollar one ten  
 camera of the long road shimmering in the heat changed the oil and a radiator hose in  
 casa grande played nervous pool across the street from the ok corral ate oranges on the  
 campus of arizona university cross the border at Nogales connections thrice removed  
 borrowed equipment usgs topo maps compasses emergency space blanket well need for  
 the night the light is fading fast no city lights stash my duffel into the metal bear box and  
 wedge a stick into the lock sonny sits down hey baby smoke smoke i drink a beer in the  
 park by the white church while sonny strolls around north beach ninety two degrees in  
 miles city cheney montana the dining area is closed but the store is open the bus shifts  
 gears transmission next to my ear keep your pack balanced sonny and i part ways so close  
 up there in napa joy fear and death in the pacific northwest cougars up to twelve feet long  
 in hoh thats the warning at the trailhead in this case the tent for the fruit punch a message  
 delivered over the camp fire and the bears are waking time traveled sober as a kite at the  
 green tortoise corner of broadway and kirsten past frozen barns near harrisburg all the  
 way to nepal before turning south across the rockport road from the skagit do you still  
 need pickers two more miles east on route twenty rows of berries shaded by green  
 fairytale leaves eating strawberries with alice entered juice dripping gateway thighs to the  
 american alps soil rich and dark in miles city old cars worth a fortune on a coast rot  
 between mountain ranges the shrinking basin closes in around us sonny is stretched out in

the booth reading dreisers apocalypse please be sure to take or secure all valuables if you  
 are leaving the bus and again this bus number three two six bound for final destination  
 seattle will be departing at exactly two twenty eight thank you children run through the  
 curling smoke of a barbeque fading fast behind the mountains stuff rots in the small yard  
 jammed with rvs and out of state cars dispersed camping is free bus smashes into a wall  
 of bright light every street on the edge of town black mutt chained to a trailer post and  
 columbia river dams hold back scrubby pine and i can see ketchup mustard and potato  
 salad from the bus window piles of newspapers broken pavement and old appliances  
 fidgeting in their seats boats in the lake below look like small water bugs at the head of  
 widening valley clefts transmission into low two not too far from milepost one three eight  
 emergency information eleven hundred on your a m dial first view of the pacific is at  
 queets massive gray beach logs piled like elephant bones choppy white waves move  
 slowly over a flat plain curl smoothly and break into a thin wash low clouds move like a  
 wet dust storm magnesium white sun disk behind the misty clouds without a horizon just  
 yellow grayness and the never never star eous was the first star station built for the  
 constellation project and the first to dim from the window of the shuttle eous looks like a  
 brown snowflake carson zheng thought about the five point seven million people waiting  
 for help hanging in syrupy brownness in the dead blackness looking to the illuminated  
 stalagmites for signs of the transports a work in progress a work in progress for  
 permanence thats how the first council had described the project just like victors  
 impervious to any irony modern science fiction excerpt from these are the humans by  
 bilford rann theres a party that night in the parking lot free beer and space waves crashing  
 through the fog in the morning hes bent over the engine of an old vw bus dark crimson

blue and white stripes large runs of dried paint pink stars brenning & family singers usa  
 walter brenning introduces himself and asks me if i have any mechanical skills she runs  
 like a porsche downhill porsche nine fourteen same in copy painted on the manifold whats  
 the problem wont start sometimes you need a fresh eye now that youre here i wont have  
 to worry about it just give me a little push if you will and i will be on my way but hes not  
 ready to go yet and invites me inside a dog comes running around the corner walter holds  
 his muzzle and sings oh noble prince tawney into his adoring eyes tawney wags his collar  
 is decorated with gold crosses if dogs were priests wed have real believers walter leads  
 me into the side door and flops down on a pile of blankets he has a vital vegetarian look  
 white hair thin muscular body tanned possibly drinks bee venom tawney jumps in and  
 curls against his thigh and falls asleep in seconds tell me about yourself young man good  
 good wonderful yes pray tell where are you going my lord give me your address son and  
 let me know how you do i used to teach high school my boy so if you need a  
 recommendation my lord just holler yes yes youre welcome i grew up in bloomington  
 illinois geographic center of the usa produced half of americas war power in world war  
 two yaep spent septemberaseventyone ta augustaseventytwo behind the iron curtain gave  
 two hundred and twenty concerts in twenty eight countries its my dream to sing across  
 america with a big lincoln penny painted on one side then sing throughout canada with a  
 canadian penny on the other here come look he waits for tawney and pulls the door  
 closed singing songs of joy love and hope freedom gods power behind the iron curtain  
 nineteen seventy two this is followed by a list of his grandchildren all in fabric paint  
 brother let me tell you that i stopped counting in nineteen eighty seven after four hundred  
 thousand miles i figure i put on another two hundred fifty thousand miles since well

young man i need you to help me push this bus got to get to the store before close close i  
 push him up a small incline until the gear kicks in the bus sputters to life with that vw  
 insect trill and takes off up the winding gravel to one oh one walters hand flips in the  
 wind its my right its my right to sit there he repositions his walker toward the bus driver  
 thats my right that seat right there a young woman sees the handwriting and gets up  
 pleasantly he angles the walker away from himself looks behind and plops down into the  
 warm seat looks up at the woman whos getting her bag from the overhead im disabled  
 and i have a right to a front seat and im not sorry neither a front seats a disabled mans  
 right the woman smiles and finds another seat and im not sorry neither he says to the  
 person across the aisle his grandfather dai lung zheng had been high air marshall during  
 the war of unification as the victors had dubbed it the propaganda promised that all were  
 the victors offering voluntary participation in the new third assimilation was crude even  
 brutal at first but like conquering nations before them the victors eventually recognized  
 the reciprocal mandate of occupation and modified their original plan in order to save it  
 what had begun as a cultural and ideological purification campaign had after many  
 decades softened into an unofficial amalgam dominated by han dna and civil  
 management an imperialist stewardship along the lines of the roman system but with  
 eminently more firepower and technology carson was a first third a pioneer of another  
 sort modern science fiction excerpt from these are the humans by bilford rann they let  
 him onto the bus without a shirt and we make eye contact thats the predictable formula  
 his cowboy hat brushes against the ceiling ribs are pocked with red blotches scars and  
 scabs a homemade tattoo across his belly texan tall and skinny his legs are spread out  
 wide he keeps his hands on his knees as if hes about to get up but he just set dern he

desperately wants to say something to me turns shotgun blast doesnt hurt but it burns like a buzzard its a long hot ride through the central valley a hundred stops in migrant worker towns a four mile walk from the bus station in bakersfield to the hotel in ninety degree desert heat made humid from agriculture the indian in the convenience store is such an asshole i take a swig of orange juice and put the opened container back into the case while hes yelling im completely soaked lumbering down busy thoroughfares with a duffel stuck to my back drivers at stop lights staring make a right onto pierce road at the junction of ninety nine and fifty eight thanks the counter girl holds up her finger while she answers the phone it happens again then again then again and then a guest cuts me off to ask her for directions she answers him instead of helping me first they all do this ill never understand it no i dont want a room im looking for someone whos staying at this motel the pool is empty no one is outside the row of doors smells like an ashtray room one oh nine the television inside is loud i knock loudly someone inside yells i walk into a wall of refrigerated smoke the ac blasting the curtains against the window nicky is a big guy with tattoos and a goatee have a seat but i gotta be honest with you I like riding alone signs in fargo piekorn and associates stamart equals s t a slash m slash a r t s t s t a m a r t grain belt beer nodak hotel thurlow welding and machine conoco cenex dairy queen fargo truss systems busch agricultural resource center hiway host restaurant a cluster of small tidy homes on the coast of a sea of grass four locomotives pull the train out of town sonny reclines in the booth reading dreisers apocalypse our first pick up is in huron for eighteen skids of melons thats north on five back up the same road i had just come down through the central valley i take a rejected melon from the discard bin and cut it up in the truck while we wait the setting sun is magnesium white hazy snow capped mountains in

the distance or is it a mirage baked at the bottom of the sea we wait for the skids to load  
well stay here tonight and make another pick up in mendota in the morning drop it off in  
rochester in five days and well be home in six the mexicans in the field turn purple a  
large moon ripples liquid behind the truck exhaust then eous had dimmed modern science  
fiction excerpt from these are the humans by bilford rann okay sunshine thats your bed up  
there theres a light in the corner see it i can stretch out fully even with the duffel against  
the wall he plops into the lower bunk with a groan in a minute cigarette smoke curls up to  
my bunk he smokes all night in the dark while the truck runs the ac wooden barns sag  
like ghost town hotels valley city forty ahead fargo twenty behind after the pick up in  
mendota we ride back through the central valley to bakersfield for new belts by five thirty  
were steadily climbing up the tehachapi fish elevator tossing melon rinds out the window  
listen to what i tell you sunraga for my body shall not last modern epic excerpt from the  
genericon by bilford rann down into the atomic mojave southeast on fifty eight and spend  
the night at rips truck stop in barstow i get a free shower with a fuel ticket normally five  
dollars the driver turns around in the parking lot of the shamrock just before the elkhorn  
lynchburg seven ahead route forty is roughly the old route sixty six theres a method to the  
madness absaraka exit thirty two ayr one mile turns out to be one house half aluminum  
half brick fenced in by white clapboard like the joads we stop for the california  
agriculture inspection at needles its raining in holbrock arizona lighting bolts large from  
the dark side superstitious firelights behind the mesas the north dakota plain steadily rises  
how high and how far can it go ahead is a blue streaked breast exhaling white mother  
lady exit three ten no services medora musical valley city ten miles i like the strong smell  
of cattle blasting over the hot yellow grass near amarillo nickys starting to mug for the

notebook mocking things along the highway the landscape changes near valley city two hundred ninety six miles to the montana border i go to southwest central oklahoma state college well what are ya studyin thar im a learnin how to add two plus twos my four three plus threes my six what else are ya studyin im a larnin how to speak english too that it yeah thats it cause i gotta bring the cows out in the morning and i aint a had no time for more classes tharn train tracks wind through the canyon someone put roots down in this jagged crack in the ground debbies farm kitchen open sixteen hours our driver stops without making an announcement in seconds hes back in his seat pulls the door closed and were back on ninety four continental divide one thousand four hundred ninety feet trucking is a brotherhood and everyone beneath you is the enemy cars vans campers cops dont even tell me that sign says welcome to oklahoma what state have i been driving through for the last two hundred miles isnt hokie do city in oklahoma and this begins his hokie do stage an old couple driving slow in a pick-up awww two hokie dos in love the only reason theyre sittin together is because the other side of the seat is torn up probably driving through a stretch of pine looks like a hokie do christmas tree farm on the will rogers im proud to be an okie another mysterious stop in medina thats so short i dont even have time to take a picture of the american legion ballpark green painted wood outfield wall with local advertisements homeruns drop in someones back yard dog fields lost baseballs on dreamy saturdays real big western usda cattle with a mean glint in their eye curved horn beasts antagonistic daring you to step out of your pathetic metal shell old sedan far off on the plains lonesteer restaurant in steele the will rogers is down to one lane road closed theres a three inch ledge off the side here tell you what though id take a few of those red barrels with me cast iron skillet and spoons on the wall melanie takes



my order for a burger and coffee name they got me down to one lane and i gotta pay for this can I get some more ketchup this is something jersey would do to you he points his thumb out the window this is where all those people on jenny jones come from i saw a show where a thirteen year old gets a fifteen year old pregnant waalll she was just kinda sittin thar one day and i figgered id put my penis in thar theres a bar next to the dining room tell the cashier your name and pay at the till the assistant manager ignores me at the till next thing i knowed shes a havin a kid you didnt know that would happen nope just figgered id put my penis in thar thank you mr dwyer have a nice day we stop at a petro for lunch fat wives in polyester pants thin husbands quiet in their seats this is my deer huntin coon huntin bear trappin and fishin cap a buck knife looped into his belt proud to be a christian notice all these hokie do names around here texhoma catoosa muskogee hydro sarcoxie oklahoma information center in vinita elevation seven hundred formerly the worlds largest mcdonalds and cant get a goddamn cheeseburger because hundreds of vietnamese have poured in from a church reunion in carthage west of bismark the hills are more pronounced and jagged sandy gulches behind the hills rocks pick ups race along side roads next to the bus adding to the dust from the tractors gascozark trading post endless bible colleges rosati winery winnebago bolo ties and western shirts find the ramp to culdesacs in concrete moonachie as the steel gray skagit rushes from retired mountains greaser boy and girl share a cigarette look warily at the bus larger buttes materialize in the distance shoji jumps over route forty four on a white stallion a secret society over the cb the ballpark dimensions in glen ullin left field line two forty five deep center three thirty five cant see right field from this angle on a grain elevator near dickinson circle k can i get some more ketchup the k is circled wayne newton or tony orlando but preferably

dairy queen comradie good hotels bad hotels sunfaded subsocietal static television screens the mother of all billboards if anything happened to me on this trip youd need to know a little something about this truck you already know about the log book the weigh stations and the truck stops lamenting life on the road tiredness smokeys rollers diners with the best gravy fishing spots code names dodging weigh stations sexual solicitations and secret meeting places mileage signs for butte and billings this trucks got a clutch with three separate levels you flip this piece of plastic on the stick up and theres the shifting pattern theres a whole procedure to shifting which i cant show you right now you know where all the state extortion labels are how about the cb your squelch controls the static dynamike gives you more power in the mike rf gain controls background noise swr cal adjusts the antennae reception delta tune a conversation breaks over the cb a woman talks about her and her daughter on a fishing trip ill show you that later welcome to the hokie do mountains lets stop for a coffee next truck stop big piney river i clean a mash of ozark bugs off the grill the anonymous trucker i need to get on the road i love my hometown but want to get out there and let the old hair blow around ya know i tell this smokey bear right up in his face i says straight as shit any similarity between my log book and the law is strictly co incidental he looks up at the waitress this is my co pilot hes been a pain in the ass for three days taking notes cb talk picks up at night two truckers talking about the recent deaths of jerry garcia and mickey mantle ahm still waitin for elvis to dah dolby tin static well hun i figure i can be there tomorrow mornin no rush and they aint gonna know anyways i can meet you in the hotel in about half hour just give me a few minutes to clean up howls from other truckers listening in we better switch onto another channel hun the animals are getting ready to break out their cages im not zig zagging across this

fucking country anymore the cold war made me a fuck of a lot more paranoid than pot ever did bus girl skimpers if i could have kissed them i would have cried in the corner of the white barn cheap toilet paper pisses him off continents are pushy interlocks his fingers whats the matter music too loud pay at the till thank you mr dwyer have a nice day truckers are responsible for everything in america your food your fruits and vegetables canned goods bread for your kids tires for your piece of shit car where you think your car came from it just appeared in your driveway like i dream of jeannie he touches his nose and wrinkles it like bewitched the horizon turns purple cars lose their personality and become dark boxes with two light beams the massive panel display is like a sky chart buttons lit up in different colors sound is crisp the changing pitch of the engine shifting gears air brakes voices from cb space the woman at the desk gives me a form all our crews already went out i dont have an address where are you staying i dont have a phone be outside the building by five a m what will i be doing theres a power plant halfway here to ogallala you got a car good take some of the boys with you what will i be doing hooking up electrostatic wires in the vats the temperature drops fifty degrees overnight gas station coffee and a microwaved corn muffin at four forty six a m the plastic wrapping is too hot the foreman scribbles down my name and points to three guys waiting for a ride near the door the late winter dawn filters over a grid of houses stores and mailboxes drab flat blocks of pale concrete like an air base the pudgy one opens his cooler looking for something to eat we pull away from the job center some have goggles and gloves and jumpsuits baseball caps been doing this for a while watch these guys they like to fuck around up here on the highway play chicken games and shit just keep your eye on that green truck the old mormon trail cuts off to the right zigzags up

and over a small sand hill grass filled in the wagon ruts the lights stretch out on the service road a mile or so and the power plant rises from the dun the loneliest sound is car doors slamming together in a parking lot before a day of work boots crunch over cold sand and brittle frozen grass to the gatehouse where a union rep hands out brass work checks number ninety three we stand around with our fists clenched against the cold cold sumbitch man cold sumbitch red haze on the blessed eastern horizon wheres the foreman the ice cream man screams at the children american remnants of the hangover but that wears off below the corn of nebraska yes nebraska plain of religious discipline when all the ears of corn burst open into space im just an observer erondulating down the aluminum gutters to a constant splash on the driveway a collection of children in the back seats plot illwill warm tuna sandwich mushballs by lunchtime and the milk room is sour from the extra cartons thrown against the wall by malicious milk monitors one doesnt think about how nutrients are being digested when one eats and yet one knows one needs them to live bob coleman at the ctc building over on front street tell him i sent you through the gates a labyrinth of catwalks small doors and pipes an industrial erector set five stories above the frozen sand hills they bring us into a large open room where three olive green vats store alien bodies recovered from desert crash sites the ground is covered with a cold yellow powder like talcum powder beneath each door is a cardboard box overflowing with strange equipment ive been taught phonics arithmetic the history of the world and astronomy how to make a sandwich serve food spell share and play use a deli slicer change oil type carry christmas trees to someones car fold tee shirts butter bagels back a truck into a loading dock make pizza boxes hammer nails spread carpet glue with a trowel can fish mix concrete work a sump pump sweep sidewalks pick up cigarette

butts make pizzas grade papers wash dishes uncork and pour wine lead certain people to the reasonably priced items hang sheetrock scan documents sign for milk deliveries file folders shovel snow cut grass rake leaves talk about sports at lunch break clean glass use the day old bread for the meatballs arrange antipasto platters shelve books in lcc and ddc use a coping saw to cut molding dig holes throw gutted salmon onto a conveyor belt fold napkins into beautiful fans polish brass spit shine leather and salute wrap cold cuts in waxed paper look at your words find my words the supervisor points to me with his pen try on this harness he points to the box clips and hooks on a white seatbelt looks like a dead octopus tools and equipment turn a lot of guys on there you go buddy you get the jarrett harness for today put it on like this and use this to snap in guys make sure those flashlights is working take this up with you hook it to one of the static wires then start calling down for new wires you might have to wedge yourself up in there there aint any steps he walks off i crawl inside the cold metal cave get up in there under the separator and clean it but good if you want to sleep tonight i find a small welded edge to sit on but have to hold myself against the wall to keep from tipping over blockhead stands like a granite obelisk near the door he peers up at me his lips are thin and have never kissed a girl he hands me a mechanics light but theres nothing to hang it on so i hook it onto my harness and shimmy farther up in an el position my legs keeping my back pressed against the inside reaching into the darkness i find another small edge above me cold powder rains down on my head and down my neck hey man you up there yet not yet my jacket pockets fill with powder i have no bearing because of the way the light is just swinging around in deep space black somehow i get settled and hook the light onto the metal wires more powder falls as someone above me starts banging the wires with a hammer an

ambrosial harpsichord in the english baroque style the inside of the plant is a different kind of cold i sit there for over an hour unable to disconnect the wires which are tight like guitar strings blockhead disappears around eleven twenty after a morning of faint accusations somewhere below me the supervisor to the supervisor realizes that the wires have stretched two inches longer than their original length due to heating and cooling and the weights attached to the ends making installation of new wires impossible without first removing the heavy metal racks and moving them up to the next notch i had been struggling to lift the rack with one hand while pulling down on the wire with the other when the revelation occurs i have disassembled eight wires of an estimated two hundred i unfasten my harness and jump ten feet down into a mushroom cloud of powder the outside is a different kind of cold a hundred day workers mill around near the trailer lunch groups are formed i shiver through lunch on a railroad tie don lifts my glass and throws down a few napkins construction on the union pacific began in eighteen sixty five with enough unemployed civil war veterans and immigrants to make up a loyal workforce the up was given a government loan of sixteen thousand dollars for every mile of track laid on the plains two thousand six hundred forty ties every mile one railroad tie every two feet led by william jennings bryan the populist revolt of the eighteen eighties and nineties targeted the railroads which were accused of controlling nebraska politics and rate fixing the revolt led to the formation of the farmers alliance joined ultimately by the greenback party the anti monopoly league and the knights of labor on july twenty nine eighteen ninety eight hundred delegates representing sixty nine counties met at bohanans hall in lincoln to organize the peoples state independent party the party called for government ownership of the railroad and telegraph lines free silver coinage the

abolition of land monopolies tax reform and an eight hour work day excepting farmers they nominated John Powers for governor the president of the Nebraska Alliance who lived in a sod house by November eighteen ninety the populists controlled the state legislature elected Bryan to Congress and almost took the governorship Doris' hair is done up in a beehive she leaves a paper plate neatly arranged with two hot dogs napkins and a packet of ketchup on the counter Don nods to a group near the window think you could take this plate over there for me he wraps his knuckles on the bar yeah sure it's a book discussion group where you go out to my car for a second where's your work check here do I need to sign anything nope we got your number off. So much depends upon the GW glazed with rain water over the mighty river: off at Boat Basin: park on West End: early April red buds: moody clouds: glorious immortal Victorian Camelot: to the bone library in top hat and carriage. The crazy psychic lady on the third floor sets me up with the purple static machine and gives me cookies. I meet eminent ichthyologist Dr. Benjamin Halyard at a Dairy Queen in Hays. He's sitting alone in a booth and seems pensive. I treat him to a vanilla cone. This is my one and only submission to the world of letters, I tell him, one authority record for posterity, one LCCN, the reduction of my labor and vision and time to a short list of subject terms, to collect the dust of ages on a shelf, five years since last circulated, discard, stamp discard and leave on a book truck out front. Class S Agriculture Subclass SH Aquaculture. Fisheries. Angling SH 334.9-336.5 Fishery processing. *We had discussed earlier how we were both deeply influenced as children by a book about Roy Chapman Andrews and his adventures in the Gobi. How did your interest in paleontology develop?*<sup>84</sup> DBH: As long as I can remember, I've always looked down at

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<sup>84</sup> This interview for *The Fishguts Documentary Project* was conducted in the basement of the Sternberg

the ground and found things, and when I was in grade school some of those things were fossils. I was curious about what they were and tried to learn more about them, but then I got a book about Roy Chapman Andrews from one of the book clubs of the day and read about dinosaurs. It was interesting to hear his description of the Gobi Desert and all the adventures that they had there, but there were two chapters in the book that talked about fossils from Kansas—mosasaurs and plesiosaurs and *Pteranodon* and various things that were living in this state during the Late Cretaceous. That really got my attention. Like every other kid at the time, I was interested in dinosaurs, but for some reason I began focusing on marine reptiles mostly here from Kansas. We lived in the country, and they hauled sand from one of the local sand pits to cover our road, and occasionally there were fossil teeth in that sand. Every time the road grader would come through, I would look at the edge of the road and occasionally find horse or buffalo or various other fossil teeth in there and try to identify them. I did find part of a mammoth tooth, and various bones from one of the local sand pits, and it was just one of those interests that kept growing over time. The more I collected the more I wanted to collect. In my senior year of college, I had a chance to take a paleontology course taught by someone in the geology department. I had been interested in geology for years, but my high school biology teacher talked me out of it because most geologists at that time worked in the oil fields, and he was basically saying the oil business was going to go bust, go into biology instead. I took the paleontology course, came out here to western Kansas, to Ellis County to a site, and found my first shark tooth and my first fish fossils, and I was hooked at that point.



*What was the Western Interior Sea?* DBH: Well, it's difficult for us to understand now in terms of being here in Kansas and 1,500 miles from the nearest ocean, but during the Late Cretaceous the world was a very different place. There were no ice caps or glaciers, no real winters. It was a warmer planet and most of the planet was covered with water. About 85% of the surface area was actually ocean or shallow seas, and Kansas was part of a vast inland sea called the Western Interior Sea that stretched from the Gulf, which was much wider than it is now, all the way across the Midwestern states, through Canada and up to the Arctic. North America was essentially cut in two. You had the newly forming mountain ridges of the West Coast and the much older Appalachian area to the east, and an ocean in the middle. It's called an epicontinental sea because it's on top of a continent. It wasn't a very deep ocean. Its maximum depth here across Kansas was probably about 600 feet, but it had been roughly the size of the Mediterranean and it was home to all kinds of marine creatures from that particular time period, most of which are extinct today. Kansas is one of the best places in the world to study them because of our Niobrara Chalk, which was basically the center of the seaway. The inland sea was clear water, and anything that fell to the bottom was pretty much preserved intact. So we've got some of the best fossils of these kinds of animals any place in the world and some very unique ones here, too, that are found no place else. Just about every major museum in the United States and many in Europe and elsewhere have Kansas fossils. This is where most of the mosasaurs and plesiosaurs were originally found and continue to be found, and they come from a time period that is not well-represented in their collections. Most museums have concentrated on dinosaurs and other terrestrial animals. There are other places around the world that produce same-age fossils, but Kansas is literally one of

the best. Many of the first mosasaurs and many of the plesiosaurs were described from Kansas. Most of the fish that we know from the Cretaceous were described here first. Pteranodons were discovered here first and most of them continue to be found here. *Protostega* was found here first. And it was the source of birds with teeth. *Hesperornis* and *Ichthyornis* were found here in the 1870s. They provided a very visible link between reptiles and birds. Darwin's *Origin of Species* had only been out about fifteen years at the time and it was still very controversial, and all of a sudden we've got these two groups of birds that are obviously birds but with reptilian characteristics. Since *Oceans of Kansas* was written, we've got at least two new species of mosasaurs that I've named, several species of sharks, three species, genera, of fish, bony fish, and all kinds of discoveries just keep coming out of the chalk. *One of the most important things a non-scientist can learn from Oceans of Kansas and Sea Monsters is that this flat "empty" land is actually filled with the relics of an amazing prehistory, and how important a role Kansas played in the development of paleontology as a discipline. Tell us about the discovery of the Western Interior Sea going back to Lewis and Clark, about the pioneering scientists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Bone Wars, and what impact they all had on American paleontology.* DBH: The first explorers through here were the Lewis and Clark expedition, and the first fossil from the Midwest is a fish jaw found on the Missouri River in South Dakota or Iowa—*Saurocephalus*, a little fish with little blade-like teeth, now in the collection of the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences. From that very early time, there wasn't much going on. Fossils were being found up in South Dakota by fur-trappers and whomever else, and the first mosasaur from North America was recognized, although work going on in New Jersey was important at the same time. These early fossils on the

East Coast were found by amateurs and doctors and people that were interested in the natural histories but didn't have a formal background. The first relatively complete mosasaur came from South Dakota, on the Big Bend of the Missouri River, collected in the 1830s by a fur-trapper who gave it to an Indian agent in St. Louis, who had it in his rock garden for a while. Then a German nobleman, Maximilian von Wied, who was interested in the Midwest, traveled through this part of the country with an artist, and they were meeting Indian tribes and drawing various natural history scenes, and animals, and so on. He saw it, or recognized it, and probably related it back to the first mosasaur from Europe—*Mosasaurus hoffmani*—acquired it, and shipped it to Germany, to a natural history scientist that spent almost ten years preparing it out of the rock and then describing it in 1845, a man by the name of Goldfuss, and named it *Mosasaurus maximiliana*. But that was the first one that came from the Midwest, from the same age rocks as we have here in Kansas. In the 1850s, Joseph Leidy at the Academy of Sciences in Philadelphia was describing some shark teeth from eastern Kansas that had been picked up by one of the expeditions through this part of the country. The Civil War interrupted activity, but by the late 1860s—this is after Kansas becomes a state—we've got our first two universities, we have a man by the name of Benjamin Mudge, who is a self-made geologist-paleontologist working at the Agricultural College of Manhattan, which is now K-State, he begins to come out here and collect fossils during summer breaks when the weather is good, and he moves farther west each year. Kansas is largely unsettled at that time. The eastern half has got most of the people, but there's a railroad pushing westward from Kansas City to Denver, and so every year, settlement moves a little farther west. Mudge follows the settlement, collects a lot of fossils, sends them back to Edward Cope in Philadelphia,

because he's able to describe them and name them, but paleontology essentially begins around 1866, 1867, with Dr. George Sternberg, with Mudge, and then a relatively unknown doctor, Dr. Theophilus Turner out of Ft. Wallace who, in the spring of 1867, finds what eventually is the type specimen of *Elasmosaurus*. He's a military doctor, not a paleontologist, but at that time doctors' training included much more of the natural history sciences. He was interested in fossils, and crystals, and animals, and plants, so he'd take off from the fort and go riding out across the prairie, and one time he was out at a place that we now call McAllister Butte—an exposure of shale from the Pierre Formation—and he saw this huge string of bones along the edge of this ravine. He didn't know what it was, nobody had ever seen anything like it, but he recognized it as some sort of prehistoric animal, so he collects a few of the bones and goes back to the fort. At about that time, a survey party ahead of the railroad comes through surveying the right-of-way, and he gives three of the vertebrae from this forty-foot-long animal to John Le Conte, and at the end of Le Conte's survey party at the end of the year, he goes back to Philadelphia and gives the bones to Cope. Cope recognizes them right away as belonging to a plesiosaur, but they're huge. He's seen plesiosaurs in the collections from Europe, so he knows what the animal is, but this one is enormous compared to the smaller ones in Europe. So he writes a letter back to Turner that says to please dig it up and send it back at the expense of the Academy. Turner has his military duties, but they write back and forth, and about Christmas time in 1867, he and few guys from the fort take a wagon out there, and with picks and shovels dig the thing up. Nobody's ever done anything like this before. They collect some 900 pounds of fossils and concretions<sup>85</sup> containing the fossils

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<sup>85</sup> Large blocks of limestone in this case.

and haul it back to the fort. He writes to Cope, who tells him to send it. At that time, the railroad is about ninety miles away. The right-of-way cuts right next to McAllister Butte, and Turner's thinking he might just wait and send it back on the railroad. Cope is insistent. He thinks he knows what it looks like and has a name for it. Finally, in February of 1868, he convinces Turner to load it on a military wagon train and take it to where the railroad is. So they haul it across the prairie for ninety miles or so, load it on a train, and send it to Philadelphia. Cope gets the boxes of bones and, of course, they've rattled around but they're still in pretty good shape, so he takes them out, assembles the animal in his head, names it, and in March of that year he reports before the Academy that we discovered this huge creature in the wilds of western Kansas. Then he self-produces a publication that describes the bones and provides a drawing of the animal. Well, unfortunately, Cope is learning to be a paleontologist. He's been collecting bones, but his primary interest has been lizards, and lizards have short necks and long tails. He draws the original *Elasmosaurus* specimen as a big swimming lizard with a short neck and long tail, which is precisely backwards. He gets away with it for about a year and a half until his mentor at the Academy, Joseph Leidy, looks at the fossil, finds this bone about four inches long at the end of Cope's tail, and recognizes it immediately as the atlas axis vertebrae at the back of the skull, the first of the vertebrae, and realizes that Cope has put this thing together incorrectly. In March of 1870, he makes an announcement in front of the Academy that Professor Cope has assembled this thing backwards, and, of course, Cope is embarrassed and immediately rushes out to reconstruct the animal in the correct form. This is one of the enduring mythologies from that particular time in Kansas. Later, Marsh will claim that he's the one that told Cope, but Marsh never published anything

about it, so Leidy is the one that actually went on the record. But then Marsh and Cope start to formulate ideas to send out expeditions. Marsh actually gets out here first in November of 1870. He's taken a group of graduate students from Yale all the way across the U.S. through Nebraska to San Francisco, and then turns around and comes back through Denver on the newly-opened Union Pacific railroad. He stops at Fort Wallace, gets a military escort, and immediately starts going down the Smoky Hill River from the west to the east collecting things. They spend about two weeks out here. The weather is miserable—it's not a good idea to be out in the Kansas wilds for an extended period—but they do collect mosasaurs and other bits and pieces, and the expedition is very successful. Marsh finds the first *Pteranodon* wing bone that he's very excited about because compared to smaller pterosaurs he's seen in Europe, this giant wing bone is from something with a wingspan of approximately twenty feet. They come back out to Kansas in July and August of 1871 to avoid the nasty weather they had encountered the previous November, but he finds that Kansas in the summer is brutal. They'd like to kill him because they're out there in the heat every day, going eastward along the Smoky Hill River, but this is also a very successful expedition. He finds more *Pteranodon*. He finds the first swimming bird, *Hesperornis*; unfortunately, it's headless, so he doesn't know that it has teeth. He finds the remains of the first dinosaur from Kansas. It's a hugely successful expedition, and he starts writing papers describing the finds. Cope gets out here in October-November of 1871, and has a fantastic trip also. Of course, nobody's collected this stuff before, so there are bones all over the place, they're not hard to find. Cope finds mosasaurs, he finds the first specimen of a giant turtle, *Protostega gigas*. Unfortunately, they attack it with picks and shovels and practically destroy it. They break

the bones up in hundreds of pieces, and Cope has to piece it all back together. In the process, he makes another mistake by assembling it upside down. He has the plastron on top where the carapace should be, but he gets away with that one until after he's dead. He describes a fish called *Portheus*. These complete specimens create a problem in paleontology because his mentor at the Academy has taken a fossil that George Sternberg collected out here, a big fin ray, and named a giant fish called *Xiphactinus audax* in 1870. Cope's *Portheus molossus* comes along in 1872. It's actually the same fish, but Cope gets better press on it and he has a more complete specimen, so that name persists in the literature to the present. Eventually, people recognize that Leidy's name has precedence because it was first, and we've spent the last one hundred years trying to straighten out collections because they're still referring to Cope's description. Anyway, he gets back and starts writing papers. Marsh comes out here the following year, 1872, with a bunch of graduate students. There's a beautiful picture of his graduate students in 1872. They're all sitting in a semicircle, Marsh is standing behind them at center, and he's the only one holding a geologist's hammer. Everybody else has got guns and knives, armed to the teeth. Well, it was posed, and it was a big adventure. The newspapers of the day were touting the West as "the Wild West," so these kids were basically armed for battle. They found out pretty quickly that you can't hunt fossils and carry a big heavy rifle, and as it turns out no paleontologist was ever harmed out here collecting fossils. They found a complete *Hesperornis* specimen near Russell Springs that included jaws or skull with teeth, and all of a sudden Marsh is focusing on *Pteranodons* and on birds with teeth. In that same year, Benjamin Mudge finds a little bird called *Ichthyornis* that has teeth, and for some reason, nobody's sure why, although he did know Marsh from a previous

acquaintance, he sends this fossil to Marsh, rather than to Cope, with whom he's been working with for years. So now Marsh has got these two bird specimens with teeth, and he's got these *Pteranodon*. He tells his field workers to ignore the fish. He would rather work with birds and *Pteranodon*, and maybe a few mosasaurs or plesiosaurs. So that opens the door for Cope, who ends up naming just about all the fish that come from the Cretaceous in Kansas, and most all of the mosasaurs. For a while, Cope and Marsh are describing the same animals and it takes a while to straighten out. It's all part of the Bone Wars and the competition between these two men. Marsh and Cope will give paleontology a tremendous boost. They literally are the first so-called paleontologists. So you've got Cope and Marsh out here competing to find the biggest and the baddest animals, and so they work over Kansas pretty well during the 1870s. The last time Marsh is actually out here is 1872. He turns the Yale expeditions over to Mudge. He actually hires Mudge. Mudge brings along a student from K-State, Samuel Williston, who is also on the field crew. The field crew becomes more local people than graduate students, but all are collecting and sending fossils back to Yale. They have a tremendous collection of Kansas material there, many hundreds of fossils found throughout the 1870s. When Mudge dies in 1878, Samuel Williston, who is trained as a surveyor but very interested in all aspects of natural history, takes over and leads the expeditions in Kansas for a couple of years, but eventually they move into Colorado, then up into Wyoming where dinosaurs are found. In 1874, Marsh hires an inexperienced young man by the name of Charles Sternberg. Sternberg starts off knowing nothing about fish and fossils from western Kansas, but is extraordinarily adept at finding specimens, and basically develops modern recovery methods in the process. Originally, they came out here and hacked things out



with picks and shovels. They picked the bones up and put them in a saddle bag and threw them into the wagon, and as a result a lot of the earlier fossils coming from Kansas are badly damaged. Sternberg recognizes this problem and he develops ways to recover fish fossils, even big ones like the *Xiphactinus* upstairs. They're very delicate bones. They may be big animals but the bone is flakey and brittle. Sternberg developed the first means of using plaster of Paris to jacket the specimens and preserve them long enough to get them back to the museum where they can be cleaned in a controlled environment. He starts collecting hundreds of specimens and selling them or providing them to various museums. For years he hired onto a lot of the German museums. He provided fossils for the British Museum of Natural History. He was making his living collecting fossils. In the process, he raised three sons—George, Levi, and Charles Jr.—and they were all taught to be fossil collectors from their teenage years on. All three of them become professional paleontologists. George stays here in Kansas. After the boom in the 1880s, paleontology largely moves out of Kansas and up into Wyoming and Colorado, where dinosaurs were found, and the excitement for dinosaurs replaces major interest in mosasaurs and marine paleontology. They eventually end up on the Red River in Canada. Levi and Charles Jr. actually become Canadian citizens and work for the Canadian Geological Survey, collecting for museums up there. Charlie retires about 1920, moves to California, and starts collecting fossils out there, works the La Brea tar pits. George has a brief stint in Argentina with the American Museum of Natural History, gets divorced while he's gone because his wife can't stand his gallivanting all around the world, and comes back to Kansas, where he remarries and raises two children. Neither of them is interested in paleontology, so the Sternberg dynasty dies out with George and the other brothers.

George starts using photography to advertise the fossils he had for sale. He makes these thumb-sized pictures of his fossils and pastes them into what amounts to a catalog of fossils that he's collected, and sends copies of these all over the country to different museums. About 1926, Fort Hays State Teachers College offers him a job as a museum director. His agreement with the college is to work for the museum nine months out of the year and have three months during the summer on his own, where anything he collects he can sell. The big mosasaur that we have upstairs that his son found in 1926 out by Russell Springs, he had prepared and was actually advertising for sale. It was purchased by the senior class of 1928, I believe, because they wanted it to stay here at the museum. We've got our fish-within-a-fish specimen upstairs, one of the most famous fossils in the world, but he already had a big *Xiphactinus*, had a number of them, in fact. One of the things that he did with his father was figure out how to take, in this case, a fifteen-foot-long fish out of the field in plaster blocks, prepare it and put it up for display. His father had already sold one to the British Museum of Natural History—the first one they had ever found. It was very weathered on one side but beautiful on the other, so Charlie just put a big plaster jacket over the top, flipped it over and then prepared it from the other side, and the bones that were still in the chalk were perfect. In 1952, he was out here with some people from the American Museum of Natural History. Close to where we were yesterday by Castle Rock, one of the guys found the fin of a big *Xiphactinus* coming out of the chalk. He pointed it out to George, and George cleared it away, found a whole tail fin, and asked them if they wanted it. They had already bought one from his father twenty years ago, so they don't need another one. As he starts preparing it away, it becomes apparent that the piece is more complete and better preserved than they had

originally thought. Eventually, he finds the fish inside, the six-foot-long *Gillicus*. He spends the better part of June 1952 sitting on this, camping on the site so cattle and people don't run over his fossil, and he clears it off completely. This thing is thirteen-feet-long with a six-foot-long fish inside. About the first of July, he gets some help from the university. They build a fourteen-foot frame around this specimen, put the rebar and the mesh in there, mix the plaster, and they're actually using ice water in the heat of a Kansas summer. They haul out chunks of ice in a forty gallon milk can to keep the water cold and to keep the plaster from drying too quickly. They do it all in one pour, so now they've got this slab of plaster out there with the fish underneath. They have to wait several days for the plaster to harden. In the meantime, they're trenching around the entire fossil and working underneath it to cut it away from this pedestal of chalk. Eventually, they break them loose. They cut it into two seven- or eight-foot sections, break them loose, turn them over, chip the loose chalk on the other side, put boards on them—in fact, you can see upstairs, we've got a film of them doing it—and haul this thing out in two pieces all the way back to Hays. *Time* magazine comes out here and takes pictures, and all of a sudden this thing's just tremendously popular, it's in textbooks and geology books. Science-wise, though, I would say his plesiosaur down here at the end of the table is his best. *It's important to understand that these are not just artifacts, per se. In Sea Monsters, we become aware of a narrative context for these finds.* DBH: I think that's one of the most important changes in paleontology since the time of Cope and Marsh. They were out there to collect objects. They weren't interested so much in the occurrence—where these things were found in the rock column, the age and so on—they were just interested in finding the biggest and baddest for museum exhibits. And over the

years, we've started looking at fossils in terms of their associations and the stories they tell, what they tell us about the environment. I commented earlier on our way here that museums are like icebergs. We have 10% of the specimens on display, but the *real* collection is down here in the storage rooms. I'm very content to be surrounded by old bones. *What is your paleontological fantasy?* DBH: Somewhere in this collection of bones, there is a segment of dinosaur vertebrae—eleven, nine vertebrae, twenty-two inches long—it's basically the tail of a hadrosaur that died someplace else, floated out here into the middle of the ocean and was carved up by sharks. They bit off this piece of tail and regurgitated it later after it was partially digested. But that tail didn't get out there in Gove County by itself, so there's this thirty-foot-long hadrosaur carcass that eventually sunk someplace out there, and my fantasy is to trip over the leg bones. I'm not interested in describing it so much as just finding it. *What is it like to live on the bottom of an ancient sea bed?* DBH: It's a difficult concept to get your head around. When I'm out there, I understand intrinsically that I'm walking on the sea bottom, and there are places where we can—I showed you one yesterday—where there are these giant clams laying kind of side by side, and you can see that this was the bottom of the ocean with 600 feet of water above millions of years ago. So I understand that intellectually, but to somehow envision that this is an ocean and these creatures lived and died here is hard to get your head around. *What happened to the Western Interior Sea?* DBH: For most of recorded time that were in the fossil record, this part of North America has been under water. We are roughly a mile and a half above the basement rocks, the Precambrian basalts and other geologic features that were here when the Earth was very young. Starting with the Pennsylvanian, and maybe even a little before, this is an ocean, or at least the edge of a

seaway, and the rocks that are under us are multiple layers of sea bottom. The sea came and went with plate tectonics, the breakup of Pangea and Gondwanaland, and other geological events. We continue to be the edge of a seaway. We're never really a deep water area, but we're on the edge of a continental shelf. Up until the late part of the Jurassic, 100-120 million years ago, you get this immense collision of the North Pacific plate sliding under the edge of the North American plate that includes California and the west coast, and you see the crunch pushing up the mountains and a lot of volcanic activity in the western part of the United States, and slowly edging under the North American plate that was still covered with an ocean. By about 65 million years ago, that collision has pushed up the Rocky Mountains and lifted the Plains. At that point, erosion takes over and you start wearing down all of the rocks that have been deposited for millions of years. There's probably half a mile of rock, including the Smoky Hill chalk and 2,000 feet of the Pierre Shale, that's been erased from where we're sitting right now—a tremendous amount of erosion. At that point, the Midwestern part of North America is pushed above sea level for the absolute last time. We're approximately 1,800 feet above sea level here, so far that the oceans, even if all the ice melts, could never again cover the Midwest. We're now high and dry forever, but it's the first time, the first permanent time, that we've been above sea level for half a billion years. *Is there any particular urgency to study the fossil record here, as important as it is? I'm thinking of development, energy exploration, and other compromises to the environment.* DBH: Western Kansas probably had the highest population it'll ever have about 100 years ago. You had a lot of family farms through the Homestead Act. There were four families on every square mile. Towns were several hundred people. As agricultural communities, you had lots of small farms

feeding into the railheads and sending produce to various places. But since then, people have moved away from the farms to the cities. Farms have become larger, they've become commercialized, but there's not really demand for more farmland out here. You're just not going to have a new family come out here and settle and start a farm. Rural county populations are declining. We actually had a proposal out here a few years ago to depopulate a couple of counties and turn them into a national short grass prairie park. So, no, there's no rush to collect out here. What we do have going on is a continual erosion of the chalk, the 600-foot strata of chalk that's gone here. Over a large portion of this part of the state, that chalk bed was here at one point, and there were billions of fossils that have emerged, deteriorated, were destroyed, washed down the rivers, and are totally gone forever. And that is truly frightening in terms of what's missing to science. The continued erosion means that fossils are continually exposed and we have an opportunity, if we're lucky, to go find them. We've got a big fish upstairs called *Bonnerichthys* that we just named in 2010; it's been known since 1874, when Cope named these huge fins of a giant fish. He thought it was a giant swordfish, but nobody had ever found the skull. There was a specimen collected by the Bonner family in the 1970s and it didn't get worked on until probably 2000, and then we had the chance opportunity of a student up at University of Chicago coming by and seeing these bones and recognizing it as something completely different. And it turns out that during the Jurassic we had a huge filter-feeding fish called *Leedsichthys*, from England, and we didn't have anything like that in the Cretaceous, but if you look at modern oceans you've got whale sharks, basking sharks, whales, that are all feeding on krill and other small organisms and growing to giant size. We didn't have that in the Cretaceous, and that's a

big gap when you're looking at the whole ecology of an ocean. You've got this huge food source that nobody has really taken advantage of. The fossil at KU turns out very similar to *Leedsichthys* from the Jurassic, so as we're getting a hit we've got one here, and then in 2009 we find another one. It's the most complete specimen of that particular fish ever found, but it's not the swordfish that Cope described in 1874. We had the privilege to name a new genus, called *Bonnerichthys*, after the family that actually found the first fairly complete one, and this opened a whole new part of the ecology that nobody had ever considered before. This fish is monstrous, eighteen feet long, nothing but a big swimming mouth, swimming slowly through the water, ingesting everything that's in the way—larvae, krill, and various other animals living in the water colony. But that was something nobody had expected and all of a sudden we have one. And now, too, we have a giant coelacanth. Probably the largest coelacanth in the world comes from the chalk of Kansas. *What role did Enchodus play in the ecosystem of the Late Cretaceous?* DBH: *Enchodus* is most closely related to modern salmon. Most of the other fish were fairly primitive. *Enchodus* was one of the more advanced for that time period. In the Late Cretaceous, *Enchodus* was the basis of the food chain. They were the anchovies, the sardines, the herrings of the Late Cretaceous seas, and there would have been billions of them in large schools. We've got other small fish, but nothing like the numbers of *Enchodus*. I could show you a specimen back there. Every one of them, even the little minnow-sized fish, had huge fangs in front—it looked like a deep-sea fish. And some of the big guys, *Petrosus* for example, got to maybe four-feet long, but it had fangs that were two to three inches in length. What were they using them for? Obviously, they were predators, they were feeding on other, probably smaller, fish, but it would seem like those

huge fangs would have gotten in the way more than they would have helped them feed. But they were very successful. They actually survived the end of the Cretaceous for a few million years and adapted to living in the oceans. *Is there any evidence that they were anadromous at that time? You had mentioned the low salinity level of the Western Interior Sea.* DBH: That's a good question. I hadn't thought of it in those terms before. But, yes, there were large rivers flowing into the seaway. We don't find their bones in riverine deposits. There's not much of that around, but it is quite likely that they were spawning, if not in fresh water, in lagoons or the marshy areas along the seaway. We don't find small animals out here usually, except for the occasional small schools of fish. But as far as the big predators go, and the rest of the larger animals, you don't find the juveniles out in the middle of the seaway. By the time we see *Xiphactinus*, he's twelve feet long. By the time we see mosasaurs, they're mostly adults. Plesiosaurs, as well. Even what we see out here of Pteranodons, the big birds, are mostly adults. So, it kind of infers that these animals were spawning along the edges of the seaway, living in fairly sheltered environments, and then eventually entering the seaway when they were big enough to fend for themselves, or at least were less susceptible to predation. So, to propose that they were spawning in rivers in a manner very similar to modern salmon or other fish is quite possible. *Should I start working on that paper?* DBH: Well, I never thought of it that way, and nobody else has ever mentioned it in the literature. You just came up with a new idea. But it would be very difficult based on the fossil deposits that I know about to actually find evidence of them because a flowing river is not good for preserving anything. I mentioned yesterday that becoming a fossil is like winning the lottery in the first place—dying and being covered up quickly before something eats you or scavenges



you to the point where you're not recognizable. You have to be covered up pretty quickly, and then being covered up in the right environment that seals the remains off from oxygen and bacteria that would further decompose the body is another factor. And then the odds of being found are phenomenal, astronomical. We don't find much in the way of upland dinosaurs, we don't find much in the way of river deposits. *For all the marine fossils in western Kansas, you don't get much seafood out here. Have you ever had canned Alaska salmon?* DBH: I'm sure I have over the years, but I've never paid much attention to where it comes from. *Would you ever consider working in a salmon cannery?* DBH: Oh, lord, no. As a country boy from the Midwest, I've never been exposed to commercial fishing, so that would have to be another life. I think the only cannery I've even been close to has been in Monterey, and it was turned into a museum. How in the world did *you* end up at a salmon cannery? X: We precocious. I wanted to know what it was like to pull *Latimeria chalumne* up from the fathoms of Deep Space Earth for the very first time. Perhaps you'll be sympathetic, with all of these fish components lying around like recombinant machine parts. MT: *Yesterday out on the chalks, you experienced an accumulation anxiety episode precipitated by the infinitude of broken clam shell fossils crushed into strata. There was nowhere to run, so you stumbled and fell. In near-delirium, you claimed to have witnessed a false idol burn scripture onto stainless steel tablets at Mount Sunflower. You found a rattlesnake hiding from the heat beneath some rocks. You bit into a York Peppermint Patty®. You were speaking in tongues, and here's what you said, roughly translated: Millions of fish and millions of cans, one hundred knives for two hundred hands. Fish by the boatload and fish by the boatful, fish on the river rode, and fish in the nets-full, all come to the cannery fresh as a*

*lummuck, to ready themselves to sit in your stomach. A twisting lopleyor and turning conveyor bring the new fish to the cannery mayor, who does declare that from this time purveyor, each and every sandwich in the land of Haruspexsayer must have as a one a yummy fish layer! Hungry whats wait, hungry wheres pace, for the privilege of having a fish sandwich on their plate. Now, it was decreed to those behind and to those ahead, to dogs in the park and to children in bed, to men on the dock and a mouse in a sock, to a moose on a log and a bird on a rock—that the millions of fish and millions of cans, the hundreds of knives and two hundreds of hands, the fish by the boatful, and the fish from the nets-full, the fish by the boatload, and the fish on the river rode, the mayor had said, would add a fish layer to each and every sandwich that comes to Haruspexsayer, and when the fish are said to be sufficiently dead between two pieces of bread, let the cannery wait for high tide again, so that the fish may return...you know when. The end, and amen.*

X: This is a phylogenetic recovery project—metapaleontology—and why I sought you for Regressive Machine Therapy. Once the can jam is removed, the machine will resume.

*MT: So the daymare you describe in Butchery Madness Order about the dancing cartoon Dracula superimposed over a spinning color wheel, this is the seminal image that sets the machine into motion.* X: The dream image communicates to the protagonist his life

burden. *MT: What does it mean?* X: He doesn't know, but soon thereafter, Audio<sup>86</sup> comes slip-slapping through the common memory set with his convex eyes, lateral line system, and anadromous utility. Audio's Corduroy Fishcircuit is a cultural zeitgeist of profound origin. They break the surface of the Hudson and scale the Palisades near Closter Dock. They find a park with warm ragged sunflowers running on two stems, eating ice cream,

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<sup>86</sup> *Enchodus enslavus*.

screaming, laughing, crying. A sunflower suspended by chains enters into Audio's sight, falls away, enters again, higher in the air this time, with stems and petals flying in every direction. The scene is familiar but the mission no less daunting. It's summertime. The park is a living kaleidoscope of balloons, kites, picnic blankets, music, song, legs churning sun slices. Everyone is tuned-in to an invisible frequency. 'They all look the same, so they must not have any feelings,' Audio muses. In his yellow rain gear with sash and Napoleonic *chapeaux*, Audio leads the procession into the park. Several wagons follow behind, pulled by teams of salmonid engineers that labor under the weight of machinery. The crowd ceases park activities and gathers near the street entrance. A dignified adult emerges from the crowd. Audio leans closer. The mayor's nose grows uncommonly large, two black apostrophes blink in bewilderment, and a weed patch of citizens stands behind him at odd angles. It dawns on them—where are the tents and high wires and animals? Where is the *apparatus*? Where are the *things*? Where is the apparatus of the things? Systematic madness ensues. As a diversion, silly clown fish entertain on the main green while riot salmon quietly seal off the park perimeter and form rows of containment in the street. Artillery teams wheel field pieces into position and train them on the crowd. *Arancia sanguigna, meester? Eh?* So now the townsfolk are wondering if this isn't part of some elaborate circus promotion. Will doves shoot forth from the barrels like ICBMs, will cotton candy blossom into a pink mushroom cloud of love pollution, will puppies and kittens overrun the park in a race riot of cuddles? Will Jamie Farr and Jaye P. Morgan fight over a gong in the realistic near future, like all good science fiction? Engineers feverishly set up the conveyors and canning machinery while the riot salmon use driftnets to herd the crowd onto the central green. Soon, the canning

machine is up and running—spitting water, clanking, ticking, and whumping in poetic discord. In standard cinematic form, an impetuous child runs for the bushes but is quickly subdued in a tangle of netting, cigarette butts, and candy wrappers. “Get your fins off of me, you damn dirty fish!” He’s the first one to be dragged off to the processing line. *MT: Splendid! Couldn’t you tell us a bit more without giving away too much for those who haven’t read the novel. Something juicy for our audience. Something sassy and sexy and salacious.* X: Well, Charlie, let me just say first how honored I am to be on the show. I’ve always imagined myself sitting here at this table, the gravity of my contemplative responses and deathly trenchant intelligence concentrated to the deepest ink black intimacy of late night conversation. You can almost see our thoughts. So, now the aim of the salmonids is clear. Hysterical parents are helpless as they watch their children being harvested, their bodies filleted, heads removed and thrown with dull thuds onto a pile, blood drained, bodies gutted—methodical disassembly until the flesh is indistinguishable. Guts are collected in a spill trough and hauled in buckets to the cannoneers. Audio gives the signal to fire. Wobbling gangles of viscera arc black against the sun, hang for a moment in gravitational equilibrium, then fall violently onto the green, splattering park benches, dogs, squirrels, babies in carriages, old ladies with walkers, hippies and stock brokers, draft card burners and silver star veterans. Chaos ensues while order pursues. The mayor declares a state of carnal while his secretary busily takes his notable dictation. Pigeons scatter and return to their place near the fountain. Civic types hoping to be elected to city council seize napkins from food carts and gently pat the foreheads of the violated while looking around for news cameras. Wizenened seniors, enjoying the halfhearted obsequy of an ungrateful nation, choke on their dentures. Seeing an opportunity

to impress his agent, a sexually-ambiguous actor leads a group of naive girls in bobby socks to safety. The high school football team forms a scrimmage line near the duck pond. They run two draw plays and throw a short screen, but have to dunt on powns. Cheerleaders, desperate to lift the spirits of the crowd, rip off their tops and slather each other's breasts with luscious hollyhock berries. Eugene Ionesco enters through Door #7 with a folding chair chained to his ankle, mouth crippled with dry crackers baked in the forced labor ovens of Soviet Siberia. The process is wholly misanthropic, a narrative cut from misanthropic whole cloth, with the added bummer that Jesus isn't coming back. This zeitgeist is occurring at roughly the same time across the country by various methods. Parents had seen their children off to school in the usual fashion. The bus drivers were strange and strangely dressed, but seemed competent enough; moreover, they remained stoic, neither answering the children's questions nor reacting to their outrageous behavior. The buses leave the familiar roads and places for new highways, running hard for many days straight in some cases. Gradually, the children pass through the three levels of disorientation, the five phases of inexus, and the nine vatavatas of bhadamartha. Hunger, thirst, heat, and the incessant drone of the highway encourage a catatonia of meditation. Bodily excretions cease, and the stains of yesterday dry and turn to dust. The children no longer cry, speak, or whimper. They no longer bother to ask questions and are uncommonly well-ordered in their seats. Friendly citizens driving by wave to them without fully understanding the situation. Then one day there are other buses. The buses multiply and soon hundreds dominate the roadways, just like in a 1970s convoy movie. Children sign listlessly to each other through dusty windows. Eventually, the buses slow down and turn off the highway. Hundreds of buses are converging, pulled

from all directions toward a central point, roiling the ancient seabed into a tempest. The children know that the journey has only begun and that many others share in their fate. This revives their simple hopes for mercy, but the descendants of *Enchodus* know only the glory of the secular fishmachine. The children sit anxiously in their seats. Some mumble inanely through chapped lips. All are nearly emaciated and at the very limit of their endurance from their journey. The buses pass small oil derricks and cows mad from the heat, entering a flat depression between chalk outcroppings bleached white from millennia of exposure. The buses circle a complex of colorful corduroy tents and come to a stop. The dust settles and the scorching sun returns. The drivers open the doors and the children file out. They're met by salmonid workers in rain gear who grade them by size, intelligence, career prospects, breeding metrics, karma quotient, and a variety of intangibles.<sup>87</sup> Each line is marched to the open latrine (long boards on milk crates) where they're forced to relieve themselves. Those unable to produce on demand are hooked-up to the Love Rollie, a vicious instrument, essentially a cat-o-nine tails of jagged magnesium strips that scour out the old pipes. The hair and nail removal area is next, where the children are hosed down in a light saline solution before entering the big top. Chophouse Annie<sup>88</sup> directs each meat bag to step forward and delivers a dispassionate bolt to the forehead while telling corny jokes. Sometimes a carcass runs wildly in shock or rolls in the dust before coming to rest, eyes wide in dumb horror. These are washed in a light saline solution before being reintroduced to the process. Dead or stunned, the children are brought by conveyor to a line of stainless steel tables for their systematic reduction to fully-butchered blengins. Head and limbs are severed, guts removed, and

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<sup>87</sup> KDH&G Child Ticket Codes A-F.

<sup>88</sup> Played by Helena Bonham Carter in the film version.

genitalia excised. The extremities, supple like the meat of incapacitated baby cows, are easily despatched. Likewise, the bellies of children are soft and slice open easily. Their guts melt into the hot chalk like cheese on a bleached saltine cracker, their blessed little souls served up to the vast American sky as cheap hors d'oeuvres, with the added bummer that Jesus won't be returning to the show as a celebrity judge. The salmonids rather enjoy their fiscweille work, hacking and slicing with perhaps more relish than the task requires, but not for a moment at the expense of efficiency. The process finds its rhythm, and soon the violence settles into the banality of another school shooting. Children's blood is the summer wine before the autumn vinegar, and no amount of processing can remove that funky metallic smell of anticlimactic.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Marty Allen. June Allyson. Patty Andrews. Lucie Arnaz. Pearl Bailey. Adrienne Barbeau. Milton Berle. Ed Bernard. Bill Bixby. Elayne Boosler. Charlie Brill. Dr. Joyce Brothers. Joyce Bulifant. Ruth Buzzi. Freddy Cannon. Harry Wayne Casey. Jack Cassidy. Scatman Crothers. Clifton Davis. Richard Dawson. Gary Mule Deer. Phyllis Diller. Ja'net Dubois. Barbara Feldon. Fannie Flagg. Wayland Flowers. Eva Gabor. Steve Garvey. Gloria Gaynor. Susan George. Shecky Greene. Buddy Hackett. Pat Harrington. Linda Hopkins. Wolfman Jack. Harry James. Arte Johnson. Elaine Joyce. Milt Kamen. Mabel King. Abbe Lane. Peter Lawford. Michele Lee. Ruta Lee. David Letterman. Shari Lewis. June Lockhart. Allen Ludden. Gavin MacLeod. Ed Marinaro. Steve Martin. Pamela Mason. Mitzi McCall. Rue McClanahan. Pat McCormick. Barbara McNair. Scoey Mitchell. Louis Nye. Helen O'Connell. Gary Owens. LaWanda Page. Pat Paulsen. Johnny Paycheck. Mae Questel. Tony Randall. Charlotte Rae. Rex Reed. Della Reese. Joan Rivers. Nipsey Russell. Mort Sahl. Soupy Sales. Ronnie Schell. Avery Schreiber. Debralee Scott. Suzanne Somers. Elke Sommer. Alan Sues. Mel Tillis. The Unknown Comic. Bobby Van. Mamie Van Doren. Sarah Vaughn. Dionne Warwick. Margaret Whiting. Anson Williams. Paul Williams. Chuck Woolery. Jo Anne Worley.

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