

The Dog Museum

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CHARACTERS

MAC/NARRATOR - M, 40s.

LEDA - F, late 20s

MOM - F, 60s.

HUNTER - M, Teenage

JUSTIN - M, Teenage

BUDDY - M, early 20s

DAD - M, 40s

SAM - F, late 30s

MACY - F, 30s

HALSEY - M, 40s

REBA - F, 10

Doubling is possible under numerous schemes. The roles of Mac/Narrator and Mom should not be doubled *unless* a scheme is specifically designed around maximally using one or both of those performers (having Mom play virtually all other roles, for example). Here is a doubling scheme for a six-person cast, just as an example:

MAC/NARRATOR

MOM

HUNTER/BUDDY/HALSEY

JUSTIN/DAD

SAM/LEDA

MACY/REBA

All doubling schemes will necessarily affect how we perceive the reality of the world and Mac's memory. The playwright suggests that is something to be acknowledged and worked with rather than against. What happens if you double across gender? By all means, explore that with intention.

A train whistle blows.

Lights flare and smoke billows behind a gap-toothed fence that spans the height of the scene. Outside is only light, dark, and smoke.

Inside is a reef of objects: mounds, bridges, towers, buttresses. What are the objects? Trunks, bags, cabinets; books, papers, cases; mementos, furniture, and outright junk: the disorganized matter of an estate sale, essentially, or a geography of personal artifacts as they lie in the mind.

Mac appears among the things. He takes them in with some surprise. From his pocket he pulls a small blue ticket and checks it against a chair. His seat.

He sits. The room rumbles on.

Now Mac becomes the Narrator, and the Narrator, looking out at the audience, begins to speak. He is a mask Mac wears.

NARRATOR

Going back. He was going back, Mac was. Mac was going back. Back in place. Back in time. Back in the way back, Mac. The clock has started.

He looks up at a big station clock with no hands.

NARRATOR

Take my word for it. The wheels are rolling. Steam chugs through the throat of the world. The sound of rupture. You didn't think you could sneak away in the night, did you, the room says, the windows whistling the walls bellowing. The travel-loud room. Going back.

The Narrator pats his pockets. During this speech he will eventually find a lighter, but nothing to light, an empty energy-bar wrapper, the ticket again (twice), and keys, which he flings away.

NARRATOR

You've escaped before, haven't you? You've greased the locks of your father's house. You've left a dummy made of laundry sacks and locks of your own hair or that of willing donors. Or unwilling. No judgment: you had to get out. You wore the feeble disguise of your brother's puffy athletic coat, embroidered with the logo of a professional sports team in -- I'm guessing -- Charlotte? Or you wore your sister's 65% polyester uniform-skirt, running a bit short on you -- the nuns would not be pleased. Or your dog's pelt. Or your human's sense of importance. You see I make no assumptions about who I'm dealing with here. Only that you, like Mac, have wanted to run. Maybe you're running now.

The Narrator gazes for a moment above the audience's heads. Then back at them.

NARRATOR

The empty night, the night that is a blur of ghosts, hypothetical people, conjectural towns, so many lives in theory; you've looked at their lights flickering off the interstate and thought *really? There, too?* Just what we need, you thought, another center of the universe. But then you also thought, maybe of the same lights, I could fall into them like a raindrop in the ocean. OK, a tiny backwoods pond. I could be there. No one would know me, and I'd never be lonely.

The Narrator resets, returns.

NARRATOR

The night that is neither time nor place but medium - the medium through which Mac is traveling, going back -- the night that is only a lack a friction. This is Mac. Mac who is going back, in fifty minutes. Fifty.

A female voice from a machine. The Narrator is Mac again.

VOICE

As purchaser of an Orion Package, prior to travel, you are entitled to a limited number of free consultations with past clients. Would you like me to schedule one for you now?

Leda, a woman in her mid-20s, appears.

MAC

So you're...

LEDA

I'm...

MAC

I wasn't expecting someone so young. That was dumb.

Well, technically

LEDA

Sure

MAC

In a way

LEDA

How old are you --(really)-- ? If you don't mind my asking.

MAC

Guess.

LEDA

Can I just say you look very young, and you can be flattered?

MAC

53.

LEDA

Wow. You look great.

MAC

That's the idea.

LEDA

I don't look great.

MAC

But you have before I bet.

LEDA

I forget what I was going to ask you.

MAC

You want to ask me if it hurts. It doesn't. You want to ask me if I miss my friends and family. They're all here. You want to ask me if I miss myself? What's to miss? The body doesn't improve. Maybe you want to ask what the future's like.

LEDA

Well, maybe --

MAC

LEDA
(moving in, seductive)

I can't tell you.

MAC
(nervous, consulting notes)

What's the best part?

LEDA
Confidence. How different your twenties are when you know what you want and you know how to get it. I let lifetimes slip away because I was a scared, helpless thing. Once you've glimpsed the maze from above you can't wait to run it again.

She touches his forearm.

MAC
(consulting notes again)

What's the second best part?

She takes his hand and puts it on her breast.

NARRATOR
Mac felt his enthusiasm for the process growing. In fact it wasn't until days later that he began to suspect this woman was a plant of some kind, a company employee paid, perhaps, to pretend to be from the future, and to solicit such enthusiasm as he so eagerly showed. He would have to file for a second consultation.

Narrator stands and moves about the space.

NARRATOR
Going back, Mac, he'd packed his things. What has he packed?

He opens a duffel bag with a dozen brightly colored shirts knotted together sleeve-to-sleeve.

NARRATOR
And *why* has he packed?

He opens a box to find a *John Denver & The Muppets: A Christmas Together* record.

NARRATOR
None of these things can go with him of course. Not where he's going.

A pair of unused swim fins.

NARRATOR

Though it is a long enough journey.

A harmonica. He is surprised.

NARRATOR

Harmonica. Fascinating. Do you even know how to play?

Mac plays the harmonica. The Narrator checks with the audience. They liked it, too. Huh.

NARRATOR

Asked and answered.

He puts the harmonica away. Opens another box and finds another harmonica. Puts it back.

NARRATOR

The thing about the harmonica --

Mac's Mom startles him, appearing from behind a stack of things.

MAC

Jesus, Mom?

MOM

What a clutter. Who taught you to pack like this?

MAC

You really can't be here.

MOM

Oh, I just stopped by to say hello.

MAC

Hello. How's your hip?

MOM

What hip?

MAC

Asked and answered.

MOM

I'll never understand how can you live in the dark like this. Turn on a lamp or something. You're not a mollusk.

NARRATOR

Mother, beautiful mother. He sees her now in a photograph holding his chubby, bald sapling self, the happy bald, chubby bald little him who is not him and has never met him.

MOM

Fred Peterson, do you remember him, he was your childhood pediatrician?

MAC

Yes?

MOM

He died.

Pause. Mac says nothing. What's there to say?

MOM

So sad. They found him in the rest room of a Buffalo Wild Wings.

MAC

OK.

MOM

Do you need any money?

NARRATOR

She's his age in the picture, his mother, the age he is now, younger even, yes, younger now, and she is smiling, too, like her happy bald child, she thought she'd done something wonderful, well pleased with her child isn't that what they say, Mother? This is my son in whom I am well-pleased. She wasn't saying that when he moved in with her. A desperate belief that he could do better if only she talked some confidence into him, if only she gave him the right idea, clouded the air around her like evaporated sweat, as she struggled with what to say and what not to say. But really, what would you say to this man, this Mac? What have you ever said to someone disappearing in front of you? Did it work?

MOM

Do you need any money?

MAC

No.

Mom waves him off and slowly shuffles away, tidying a few things as she goes.

NARRATOR

She would make them dinner, talking as she cooked, bring it to the table, talking as they ate, wash the dishes, talking as she dried, then they would sit in front of the television for a round of Jeopardy before she retired to bed. And did he listen, her chubby, bald child, her chubby, balding man? He couldn't remember. Did you? And what would you have learned about her? Except that children are a way of ensuring you can be made sad in the end no matter where you've gotten in life.

She would mention women she wanted him to meet, bringing home names and numbers from god knows where.

MOM

She just seems like a good person to know. A good person to know.

MAC

Thanks, Mom. I'll call.

She waves him off again and disappears.

He discovers a ball in his pocket. Delightful. He bounces it a few times. A kind of test.

NARRATOR

Loneliness...came upon him like pneumonia in a child who played too long in the rain.

He sits on a trunk.

NARRATOR

Often, as he waited in holding areas or when he rode public transportation, he relished the contact of strangers.

He spreads his knees.

NARRATOR

He made no effort to engage it.

He brings his knees closer together.

NARRATOR

But he would not recoil from the touch of a thigh. The nudge of a shoulder. He would close his eyes and breathe into it.

He plays waiting for someone to sit next to him. Then he performs the person sitting down, resting a large weight on the bench. Returning to Mac, we see his pleasure at contact with the new seat-mate. Perhaps he uses props.

NARRATOR

What could be more human? A transfer of pressure and heat between bodies who will never meet again. Surely you've done it. No need to hide from me. Maybe you're doing it right now as you wage a cold war over an armrest with the gentleman beside you. It's not impossible you've even met Mac this way, as he tried to vampirize your bodiness or vice-versa.

The mime continues.

NARRATOR

Ah, the knee, now there's an intimacy. You feel it, don't you, even under the bundled layers of winter. Then nothing quite like bare elbows in summer-time, the gentle electric skin to skin. Maybe if we -- ? But no, the best, the best of all

The seat-mate slowly nods off. Mac is delighted as the seat-mate's head rests against his shoulder.

NARRATOR

(slowly)

What wonder, to hold a stranger in their sleep. Oh Mac, Mac, Mac Attack. There he is, ladies and gentlemen. He may even miss his stop if his precious passenger keeps dreaming. If your neighbor, the one hogging the armrest, has fallen asleep, don't wake him. Offer him a shoulder instead. Cherish this moment, this closeness. We won't be here long, as I told you.

After a while, Mac looks out to the audience.

Hunter, a school friend, enters. He packs a bong on the floor.

NARRATOR

Mac was 17 when his friend Hunter changed his life by introducing him to marijuana. They sat in Hunter's father's basement, among his Stevie Wonder records, home gym equipment, and second refrigerator filled with malt beers for Hunter's dad, Mr. Muelman and frozen rats for Hunter's snake, also called Mr. Muelman. At a certain point, Mac would never remember how, they found themselves watching a curious cartoon made with clay figures that left such an impression he would find himself thinking of it many years later as the night train bore him back into his past.

Bill, a puppet person enters, along with a puppet child and a puppet worm.

NARRATOR

In the program, a confused adult man named Bill observes a child on the sidewalk slicing an earthworm in two so that each half would have a friend to keep it company. That night, when Bill returns to his bare-walled bachelor pad, he splits himself along his vertical axis.

Bill does so. Bill's two halves proceed to make a little domestic life for themselves, carrying on throughout the rest of the sequence.

Meanwhile Justin, another school friend, enters in a poorly-fitted blazer.

NARRATOR

It was a few years later, on the occasion of Mr. Muelman, the human's, funeral that Mac discovered, alongside his friend Justin, that marijuana could not only make Pearl Jam sound better and tv worth watching, it could cure his social anxiety.

Justin lights a joint. From off, the sound of a sad acoustic guitar and weeping.

The Narrator steps into a third downstage space, parallel Justin and Hunter. Packs a bowl.

NARRATOR

Now in his (optimistically) middle age, Mac still needs something daily, hourly, minutely to deal with all the beauty

The ceiling shakes above him to the rhythm of dancers and bits of plaster rain down on Mac.

NARRATOR

Especially when his upstairs neighbors, an otherwise mild couple in their late-20s, won't stop dancing, what are they goddamned professionals or something?

The smoke from all three rises and rises, clouding the space. The two Bills keep going, and the funeral keeps going, and Mac shuffles his feet in a horrible lonely dance while staring at the ceiling above.

And then...

VOICE

Your second consultation is due to arrive between the hours of 10am and 1am today. Please alert a customer service representative if you need to reschedule. We value your confidence.

Buddy, a college student, appears.

MAC

Thirty...?

BUDDY

Thirty-seven.

MAC

Huh.

BUDDY

Yeah, bro.

MAC

How do you feel?

BUDDY

Young, dumb, and full of cum. Except the dumb part. I'm smart as fuck now compared to these dumb fucks. They don't got real world experience. Know what I'm saying?

MAC

Why college?

BUDDY

Pfff. Best body. Best pussy. Meal plan. You got track team, you got parties, you got friends: you got everything man. You got the world by the ass, which is Brazil by the way. I went there for Spring Break.

MAC

Was there any...adjustment?

BUDDY

Shit yeah, kinda. No car, gotta dress like Westbrook. Gotta mash clearasil or my face is like

He imitates pimples breaking out, complete with popping sounds.

BUDDY

(pause)

You forget things. Like coach's curfew or how you're not supposed to know yet about sad adult shit like, itemized deductions. That's a real problem actually. You think you know things but you not supposed to know, like all the things people told you that they ain't really told you yet. You gotta...it's hard to sort out. I just don't say as much. Best not let it come up.

MAC

Would you recommend it? College?

BUDDY

For you?

Buddy looks him up and down.

MAC

Or generally? I mean, why did you go back?

Buddy becomes introspective.

BUDDY

Shit, I didn't have much going on...You tryna start someplace good or end up someplace good?

MAC

Both? I guess?

BUDDY

Nah, like you tryna fix something you did wrong? Or you just want outta here?

MAC

Yeah. So maybe if I can back somewhere I had a handle on things, and give it another shake, you know, things'll be different.

Different.

BUDDY

I mean I'll know where I am.

MAC

Hmm.

BUDDY

What's it like? They basically...you're dead right?

MAC

Not to you you're not. But for your people...it's like you killed yourself and at the same time like you're still out there, just outta reach. Like they should be able to stroll back in time and say hello. Open a window and shout your name.

Buddy suddenly fights back tears.

MAC

Are you OK?

BUDDY

I don't wanna talk about it!

MAC

I'm sorry

BUDDY

Ask me real shit. Practical shit.

MAC

I'm trying

BUDDY

I mean you're either going or you're not, I don't know what you need me to tell you. Everybody's going sometime, bet on that. And I'm not gonna be the last one left holding my dick in some kinda *I Am Legend* empty-ass future.

MAC

But if you came back to get ahead of an exodus from, what, (2033?), and you help convince people from right now to go back even further, aren't you just gonna get stuck alone here anyway?

Buddy looks agitated putting it together.

BUDDY

What the fuck, man, I gotta go.

Buddy exits. Mac bounces on his feet.

NARRATOR

Going back. Only thirty minutes now. Courting Freud's natural desire to return to the womb. Not so far as that, Mac. And still much farther. Into the alien body of an earlier self. Into the one who wrote 'love' into his journal nearly five hundred times in tightly bound script scoring page after page like the prayer of a missionary fearful of falling from his god. Here in the realm of the heathens, where he'd lived his life. Have I sold him out? Have I embarrassed him in front of you? What did you write in your journal...that was so cool? Get in the muck, ladies and gentlemen. That's where life is, if you can stand it. He can't, alone. The years passed and he was proved the heathen where all the rest found grace. Going back. In Freud's primal scene the child is witness too early to sexual intercourse and understands it as violence visited by the father upon the mother. Mac never imagined anything, even now. And instead longed and longed without knowing the form of his longing, until finally he accepted the thought of any form of love, even if it must be translated into violence, because then at least he would be penetrated, cut through, mingled. He would die of it, if he was lucky. But no, even if he could accept it, it was hard to imagine. No one could love him enough to hurt him. No one except his mother.

As if on cue, Mom appears out of a trunk.

MAC

What the fuck? How long have you been in there?

MOM

I don't like it when you talk like that. It's not attractive.

MAC

I'm sorry, Mom, I wasn't expecting you.

MOM

Of course you weren't. You never think of me.

MAC

That's not true.

MOM

Well, I got you something.

Mom holds up an oversized green cardigan.

MOM

The man at the store said all the young professionals are wearing them.

MAC

You know I can't actually take any of this. Like when I get -- where I'm going -- this is all...this is all just here now. This isn't going to be.

Mac stops under his Mom's gaze. He silently puts the cardigan on. It looks ridiculous on him.

MOM

(sweetly, genuinely)

So handsome. A man like that, I don't know why he's not married.

MAC

Thanks, Mom.

MOM

Except because he doesn't try. He doesn't put any effort into it.

MAC

Mom.

MOM

Elliott Shapercotter died. One of his feet fell off.

MAC

Will you stop telling me who died? It's not information I need to know.

MOM

Oh, excuse me for thinking you cared. You might send a letter.

MAC

Honestly, Mom, I don't even remember who Elliott Shapercotter is.

MOM

He was your friend from kindergarten! You two used to take swim lessons together after school. You'd flash everybody your two little naked tushes when you were changing in the back seat of the car.

MAC

I'm sorry he's dead.

MOM

His foot fell off.

MAC

Thanks for the sweater.

MOM

You oughtta think about what that young man said. What if everyone does what you're doing? What kind of world would that be? Kill the future to live in the past.

MAC

Uh, that was *my* point. And don't eavesdrop.

MOM

You could have a whole world of people like you traveling back in time because they're lonely, only they don't say anything, so they don't even realize they're all the same. That could be right now, Macky. Right now.

She tugs his cardigan into place.

MOM

If it's the wrong size, I'll take it back. I kept the receipt.

Mom wanders off.

NARRATOR

She was right, of course. And for a moment Mac, the sky-diver in time, looked up in the direction from which he was falling, and imagined a hand reaching out for him, felt, like a phantom limb, his own hand reaching back.

He pauses. Searching the audience.

NARRATOR

Though when he opened his eyes he saw he nothing had moved.

Mac makes sure Mom's out of sight then shucks the sweater off. He's about to pitch it to the bottom of a trunk when he's struck by guilt. He puts it back on.

A shoebox atop the trunk catches his eye.

Inside he finds burned scraps of pictures from porno mags. He holds them up to the light.

NARRATOR

The lovely ladies. Speaking of sky-divers. What shoebox will they keep me in -- Mac in, he wonders I wonder. They'll still be there when he returns, these girls. A long time, they've been there.

Memory. Mac leaps into action digging through piles, as if rooting through dumpsters.

MAC

What are we even looking for?

His friends Justin and Hunter appear.

JUSTIN

Anything! There's treasure everywhere!

HUNTER

Half a pizza and tube socks! We'll make it through winter after all!

Mac freezes.

MAC

Guys. Guys.

Mac lifts up an entire stack of magazines.

JUSTIN

Holy schnikes.

HUNTER

Yup. Them's titties.

MAC

Why are there so many? Who would throw this stuff out?

JUSTIN

Our country's going to hell.

They flip through a few pages.

HUNTER

Gentlemen. It doesn't seem right to stand here in the out-of-doors furtively flipping through this adult publication. These are meant to be consumed at leisure, to be savored in the privacy --

MAC
 -- OK, my house.

They scatter to different “seating” areas, each with their own magazine. They read for a while in silence. Justin lets out a long whistle.

JUSTIN
 So that’s what that looks like.

Mac sits up.

MAC
 OK, but where are we keeping them? We need some place we can all get to, but that nobody else is going to find them. No sisters, no parents. Some place no one in their right mind would ever want to look, like the ark of the covenant.

As Mac speaks, Hunter and Justin scan the piles and piles of stuff all around them.

JUSTIN	HUNTER
Your room.	Your room.

MAC
 What?

JUSTIN
 You’ve got piles of shit everywhere! SO many hiding places!

HUNTER
 You messy as fuck, dude.

MAC
 I don’t know, dudes, I’m not sure how I feel about

Hunter and Justin hide the magazines in Mac’s piles of stuff.

HUNTER
 Just keep doing you.

JUSTIN
 Yeah, don’t clean up. Animal.

NARRATOR

(re the piles of stuff)

And he didn't. Obviously. Nonetheless Mac returns home one day along the maple-lined avenue, home with the faint smell of smoke from late-Autumn fires, dodging dog droppings as he dances between sidewalk and gutter to his door, bright cobalt blue, a signal of comfort, safety, but today...

Mac enters to find his mother crying at the kitchen table and his father pacing angrily, red in the face. Upon his entrance, his mom sniffs, ceasing tears for a moment, then, looking at him, bursts into a fresh sob.

MAC

What's going on?

Mom sobs louder. Dad shakes a magazine at Mac.

DAD

Filth. That's what's going on. Filth your mother found. In your room. Which she was cleaning *for you*, despite our agreement, because she loves you and you refuse to respect yourself enough to even see your own floor. So she had to see this.

MAC

It's not mine.

DAD

Oh, I suppose your sister put it there to frame you?

MAC

Maybe.

DAD

Don't you lie to me, young man, so help me God

MAC

OK, it's mine, so what?

DAD

I'm gonna fight you, that's what.

MAC

What?

DAD

Listen mister, you better step outside now because I'm gonna fight you, man to man.

MAC

I'm fourteen!

DAD

Oh, my mistake. I thought these were *adult* magazines. Not crying little *b* magazines for perverted twerps too chicken to face the consequences of their actions

MAC

I'm not fighting you, Dad.

DAD

The heck you're not. Step outside.

MAC

I've got homework.

DAD

OUTSIDE.

MAC

Your face is really red.

DAD

I'LL SHOW YOU WHAT'S RED

Mom continues to cry.

Dad angrily huffs at Mac. Mac slowly takes a step back.

NARRATOR

Mac retreats to his room, which he admits is a little nicer since Mom came by, and lies on his bed trying to decide what height he should be before attempting to beat his father's ass.

A loud noise.

Again.

Mac climbs off the bed to look out the window.

NARRATOR

He peers out the window to discover his father's unwillingly tonsured scalp stalking the back porch. He, the father, heaves open the face of the enormous charcoal grill, and force-feeds it a hail of bricks.

Mac's Dad does so.

NARRATOR

Every movement, every muscle radiating anger such that Mac wonders the coals do not spontaneously light from proximity. *Shred!* The women, the lovely ladies, become tinder. *Whoosh!* The fire leaps up, its tongues touching places Mac had marked, like a prospective tourist, for later travel. Mac watches as one by one his father slams the magazines down on the grill, this furious chef abusing the meat of his backyard barbecue -- later we would laugh, Mac, pondering this spectacle, but now he watches in fear and wonderment as SLAM his father brings more magazines down into the fire. He wouldn't stop until the entire stack, the bounty of the dumpster, was cast into the burning maw and erased from this Earth. Unfortunately for Father, as the glossy pages caught fire, they tore away and, clinging to the thermal current, escaped that place of destruction, slipped his outstretched hands and lifted off into the sky. On the light November breeze they scattered, and soon a burnt confetti of partial pornography was snowing into all the neighbors' rowhouse yards.

Dad and Mac watch in wonder as a snow of confetti falls.

NARRATOR

And it means nothing, this incident. Within the year his dad would be gone and his mother would accept, without verbal complaint, Mac's renting movies rated a hard R for graphic nudity and pervasive sexual content. It means nothing. His father at the grill, cooking naked women. His mother crying on the couch. The boy upstairs watching his secrets parachute onto neighbors' decks. The lovely sky-diving ladies, some of whom would land, finally, back in his hands, while most would be lost on the wind. It means nothing except when he stops to wonder when or how a happy boy became such a lonely man.

He considers the box of burnt pictures.

NARRATOR

You can have them if you want. We can't take them where we're going. The younger and the less adventurous among you may find some of these educational. Or the older and less flexible. I won't judge. And as I said, depending on how far we ride this train, they may already be there. *He rides.* Where *he's* going.

No takers? He puts the box back. Futzes about. Discovers another harmonica and blows, briefly. He sighs.

NARRATOR

Indulge me, sweet faces, in a little me time. It's difficult, you can see, narrating for this guy.

He digs up a record.

NARRATOR

Sometimes you just need a good cry.

Narrator cues Emmylou Harris singing "Where Will I Be." He sits in a chair. And tries to cry. He keeps trying.

NARRATOR

It helps to look at the light. Just to get going.

He stares at the light for a bit to get some tears going. It doesn't quite work.

During this, Mom peaks out, sees him, then sneaks away.

Suddenly he looks at the audience, a thought visible on his face. He checks to both sides and leans forward as if about to say something. He can't do it. Slowly he leans back. He stares at the lights again, zoning out.

Mac's sister Sam appears.

SAM

Will you come to Thanksgiving?

The Narrator is surprised and rubs away the attempted tears. Straightening up. Getting back into character.

NARRATOR

Mac's younger sister Sam, who is far more accomplished than he,

SAM

who doesn't suffer from social anxiety,

NARRATOR

who doesn't suffer from depression,

SAM
who doesn't drink too much,

NARRATOR
doesn't smoke too much,

SAM
who isn't overwhelmed at all times by awareness of her own limitations,

NARRATOR
who is a vegan,

SAM
who farms her own vegetables,

NARRATOR
whose food makes Mac uncomfortable and gives him gas, but he's not sure if the one is causing the other,

SAM
to whom he insists that he wants to eat like her but never does because he doesn't know the names of the foods or how to prepare them,

NARRATOR
who has found religion,

SAM
whose house is abundant with plant and animal life,

NARRATOR
whose children run naked in the yard in a kind of hippie pre-lapsarian wonderland,

SAM
whose home is full of giggles and snot and shit and life,

NARRATOR
where something wet is always nuzzling him,

SAM
who smiles,

NARRATOR
who has pictures of vacations,

SAM

who speaks with reference to friends and family members in a way Mac understands there are ongoing streams of communication he is unaware of,

NARRATOR

which makes him guilty and paranoid,

SAM

who has always,

NARRATOR

always,

SAM

despite her crippled arm,

NARRATOR

been stronger than him.

Mac faces her.

MAC

Are you going to set me up again?

SAM

I promise I will never set you up again.

MAC

Good.

SAM

Unless you ask me to.

Beat.

SAM

I saw Macy at the store today.

MAC

(playing dumb)

Who?

SAM

Macy. Macy Saunders. The girl you almost married.

Macy Saunders leaps from atop the highest pile of junk, straight onto Mac, pinning him to the ground.

MAC
(startled)

Fuck!

They roll over and over together.

MACY
Macy Saunders. The one he thought he could have married. You all have those don't you?

SAM
A woman made of lobsters fighting in their tank. A woman of obscure violence and alien intelligence.

NARRATOR
Macy Saunders.

MACY
The first girl in her class to get a bra and the first girl to experiment in not wearing one.

SAM
Macy Saunders, who, I've heard, once won KWMU Classical Radio's call-in trivia contest for two weeks running under the pseudonym Hannah Snell, earning nothing but a t-shirt and the right to repeatedly request Schubert.

Macy and Mac lie coupled on the ground.

MACY
He could dwell here for hours, for days. Enveloped in my skin, smothered in me, gross, his world reduced to a pinhole view of my belly button, his only choice what to make me for breakfast.

Macy jumps up, and Mac pursues her. He pushes her gently against one stack.

SAM
She was committed to radical gestures, a way of progressing through life by leaps, the way you might take stairs two at a time.

MACY
Divorce frightened me less than a bad haircut.

SAM

She told him she loved him every morning in letters on the fridge or fog scrubbed on the shower screen.

MAC

Or with her eyes.

SAM

But then one day, out of nowhere

Macy hurls him against another stack. They go back and forth, wrecking the place, until they suddenly come to a stop.

MACY

I can't come to Alaska with you. When I was visiting my parents last week I saw one of my exes. This guy I've dated on and off. And we've always had feelings for each other. And he wants to move here to be with me. He wants to move in with me. And I just feel like if I don't do it now, I'll spend the rest of my life wondering what could have been.

MAC

What about us? Won't you wonder what could have been with us?

MACY

I can feel him here now. I can feel how happy we'd be. As clear as the present. Realer than a shadow. Closer than my own breath. Maybe it's a mistake, but I have to make it. I have to know.

SAM

Is this what you're going back for, Mac?

While Mac answers the earlier question, about Thanksgiving, Macy draws slowly away, Mac's hand absently reaching out for her.

MAC

I said I'd think about it.

SAM

Yes, weeks ago. So have you thought about it?

MAC

I'm still thinking.

SAM

What is there to think about? Come. Eat. It'll just be us, there's nothing to worry about.

MAC

I'm not worried.

SAM

Then why, Mac?

MAC

Why.

SAM

I know you're spiraling. I've seen your Facebook posts. You look like shit. Even Mom's noticed.

MAC

It's just a tough week. My coffee shop closed. Now I've gotta walk...

He trails off. Sam nudges.

SAM

Thanksgiving.

MAC

Turns out it was a front for the Serbian mafia. So there's...trust issues.

SAM

Sweet potatoes.

MAC

Plus it's being replaced by a Chik-Fil-A so I gotta process being fat again.

SAM

I don't want you to disappear.

MACY

One night lying in bed

NARRATOR

-- in his mind they were always lying in bed --

MACY

I told him my theory that souls switch bodies in the night. They inherit their bodies'

memories but are unique each day so that we're never, in a sense, the same person -- we're ever, in a sense, changing.

NARRATOR

He imagined evening on Earth, the silent witch hours, a great spirit mass, an aurora of souls sliding past one another in search of new homes. Of course half the world was in day-time...were souls confined by time-zone? I don't really get how it was supposed to work.

MACY

There's a system.

MAC

So we'll be different people tomorrow?

MACY

Our souls will be, yes.

MAC

And we're different people today? Our souls have never been here?

MACY

If you can call them *our* souls. We're here for the first time. The only time. Souls don't know history except what bodies tell them. It's the body that holds memory, the body that has age and past. And for two bodies it's the relationship that ages and has inheritance.

MAC

That's what you want, isn't it? You want to be new every day. To know every day there's something in you unconnected to the day before, to what anyone remembers you've been.

SAM

She said she didn't know. But the thought soothed her with fear.

MACY

I don't know. But the thought soothes me with fear.

Macy grabs a cord and lifts away during the next speech.

MAC

That night --

NARRATOR

-- That night he dreamt his soul got lost, was bewildered in the nocturnal traffic and found no home. He woke with his legs pretzeled flush against the cool wall.

Then he dreamed again. He dreamed of that aurora, not of unique, persistent souls, but a spirit pool, a world-soul out of which elements emerged and into which souls fell again. And one day, one hour, perhaps during this very dream, he would fall again, fall again.

Sam rushes to hug him.

SAM

Mac! I'm so glad you're here!

MAC

I'm here.

His brother-in-law, Halsey, comes in for a hug.

HALSEY

Mac attack! All right, man. How you been?

They come down to the fore-stage. Mac offers weed. They smoke.

HALSEY

Aw, thanks, Mac.

MAC

Thanks, Dr. Vogler.

HALSEY

Thanks, Uncle Sam. You gotta come over more often. I always say that don't I? Don't I?

SAM

You always say that. But it's true, you should come over more. The kids love it.

NARRATOR

She and her husband live down the bottom of the lane from where he grew up, a place he had been afraid of, a place one rode one's bike *around*, a place one was dared to trick or treat. Mac could not remember it in sunlight, only in a veil of dense ivy, wrack of painted wood signs cresting the leaves. Bodies lay there. He asked her

MAC

When you were planting the garden, did you find any?

SAM

Bodies? Of course not. God. It's not like the gothic hellmouth we imagined.

MAC

Why did you move here?

SAM

I always loved it here. It's near Mom. Lots of kids, the huge lot. I lost my virginity here. Oral.

MAC

Really? Here?

SAM

Don't act shocked. I was only following your footsteps. Everyone knows you fucked Jana Vo here.

MAC

I didn't. I was too scared.

Halsey, now in an apron, shouts

HALSEY

Dinner!

They come and hold hands in prayer.

SAM

Thank you for not laughing this time.

MAC

I never laughed at you.

SAM

You did. He did.

HALSEY

I've laughed at her, too.

MAC

No, I wish I was, you know, I wish I believed, too.

SAM

No, you don't.

MAC

Yes I do.

SAM

If you did you would.

MAC

I don't think it works like that.

SAM

You wouldn't make fun of me anyway.

MAC

I didn't make fun of her.

HALSEY

I make fun of her all the time. Maybe she's confusing you and me. Babe, are you confusing me and your brother?

SAM

I'm not confusing

HALSEY

Cause that's a disturbing thought.

MAC

I'm just saying it'd be - comforting, to believe I had someone, something looking out for me right now.

SAM

You have lots of people looking out for you.

MAC

Right. For all the good it's done. That's why a few friends higher up might...

SAM

They're there. Everything you need is there.

MAC

Everything I need --

SAM

But bitterness is not going to help.

MAC

I'm not bitter.

SAM

I'm sorry, I'm not criticizing *you*, I'm trying to point out *obstacles*, and bitterness

HALSEY

Can we stop saying bitter in front of the chef?

MAC

I'm not bitter.

HALSEY

Gah!

MAC

And so what if I was? Maybe I should be. Has that occurred to you? Maybe that's hard for you to imagine because the road is paved for you. It always has been.

SAM

Oh really? My road's been easy.

MAC

Maybe not when we were little, but you've forgotten, you've been on this path so long

SAM

I work, Mac. I work at it

MAC

You don't work. You don't know what work is

HALSEY

Hey, she works. Can we

SAM

I don't know what work is? I pulled this food out of the ground for you. Everything around you, everything you claim you like so much, I made that.

Halsey coughs.

MAC

With Halsey

SAM

Yes, with Halsey, with a partner, which you could have had

MAC

How? How could I have--

SAM

Mac, I don't want to get into your dating life again. I've tried and I've tried

MAC

You think I haven't

SAM

Of course you do. For a little while. Just like with work. You put in hours, sure. You're at the bar. You're at the coffee shop. You're there. But are you doing anything?

MAC

What did you do? You met in school.

SAM

Yes, we got lucky. So what is that all? We're lucky, and you're just spectacularly unlucky

MAC

Yes. And you don't even know how much yes.

SAM

How much? How much luckier am I?

MAC

You can live. You don't have this thing. This thing stopping you. That you have to fight against all the time, and you keep losing and losing. Every day you're losing.

SAM

Mac, I'm sorry I got the bad arm and you got the bad brain chemistry, but I've learned to live. I've practiced. What are you practicing? What are you learning?

HALSEY

Should I get dessert?

MAC

Fine I'm weaker

SAM

You're not

MAC

It's not so fucking easy for me

SAM

It wasn't easy for me

MAC

Well which is it? It's either worse where I am or I'm weaker than you are, there's no two ways.

HALSEY

Maybe that's not the healthiest way to look at it

MAC

Shut the fuck up Halsey. Don't reframe

SAM

Don't talk to him that way

HALSEY

It's OK, I was just gonna offer

Halsey, who is standing behind Mac, starts to give him a shoulder rub.

MAC

It's not my back, dude. It's not my fucking back

SAM

Do you feel like leaving?

MAC

Are you kicking me out?

SAM

I'm asking you if you feel like leaving because you're acting like you don't want to be here.

MAC

I don't want to be here. I don't want to be anywhere.

SAM

That better not be true.

MAC

No, you're right: I want to be home on my couch, where I would've been right now if you hadn't dragged me out here.

SAM

You're right I'm sorry for giving a shit about you

MAC

You don't know how.

SAM

What does that mean?

MAC

You made all this to trick yourself into having to care about something, but I know how little your feelings really are because I guarded them like my life when you were little, and they fit into a fucking mason jar. Thanks for dinner.

Mac stands there and Sam and Halsey are the ones to leave. They clear whatever things were brought on.

Mac sobs once (or twice) tearlessly. Narrator speaks, this time with little separation from Mac.

NARRATOR

Mac woke up the next morning, and it was Thanksgiving. He couldn't remember if his guilt was a dream or a memory from some year before, but he was afraid to talk to his sister. He didn't show. He spent the next ten hours constructing an email excusing himself, apologizing for his absence, apologizing for many things, their entire relationship these past several years, explaining it all, then unexplaining. Stuck on a punctuation problem deep in the paragraph about their divergent university experiences, he trashed the whole message.

Something breaks in the Narrator.

NARRATOR

I CAN'T BE HERE. I CAN'T.

He can't be here. Please God somewhere else but here.

There's nothing for him here.

A little girl, Reba, appears. Georgia accent.

VOICE

This will be your third and final consultation. For additional benefits, please ask your customer service representative about the Perseus Membership. Have a wonderful day.

They look at each other.

MAC

Is it like it was? Is it fun?

REBA

It's fun. But it's not like it was.

Mac holds his head in his hands.

REBA

Time isn't what it was. It still moves too quick. More like now. The days are slow, but the weeks go by so fast. The years sneak up. Somehow things keep happening.

MAC

But you're happy?

REBA

Lord, so much happier. All the dumb shit I thought I wanted, I didn't want at all. My own place. An investment account. A husband.

She spits. Smiles at him and laughs.

REBA

Giving up's the greatest thing I ever did. Now someone tells me what to do and where to be. My friends live next door. My life is planned out, and it's awesome.

MAC

Maybe that's what I need.

REBA

Try seven or eight. Give yourself a break, man.

MAC

A break.

REBA

You work so damn hard, trying to cut your own path. Let someone else hack a while. Focus on the bigger picture. Focus on you.

MAC

Do you worry about the future?

REBA

Ugh.

MAC

What about high school?

REBA

Yeah, I'm really looking forward to dealing with high school boys again. Christ. Let me enjoy no one leering at me for a while.

MAC

But won't you grow out of it?

REBA

Maybe. I got a piggy bank. By the time I'm a teenager I may have saved enough to go back again. That's what the rich people do. They just keep looping back to live forever.

MAC

Peter Pan.

REBA

It's not like it was but every now and then there's glimmers. The smell of a long summer day. Sitting down to Dad's pot pie. The dogs rushing in to wake me up on the weekend. The feeling of mom's red sweater against my cheek. Last night there was a thunderstorm, and I sat up in bed feeling so small.

MAC

Me, too.

Pause. He drifts into his own reverie. The Narrator sounds even closer to Mac.

NARRATOR

Certain fall colors fall colors just imagining the harvest corn the broad palmate maple leaves the pumpkin patches and plastic costume bags in the five and dime just imagining he's back he's back, and he begins to sway, yes, I'm swaying on his feet can you see me, so minute his movement because I am swaying in his soul to the sound of some autumn barker to the sound of electric guitar and leaves gathered in the front yard and Danny Tambarelli wearing Holden Caulfield's cap, a world saturated, saturated in oranges and yellows saturated, the true colors of the leaves, how they look like fire when they are the fuel.

REBA

If you're gonna do that, can I watch TV?

Mac snaps back to present. He looks at Reba.

MAC

How did you get here? Are your parents...?

Mac looks outside.

REBA

They think I'm at a friend's house. You have any more questions, before I go? They're not expecting me til six, so I'm serious about the TV thing.

MAC

Sure. It's over there.

Reba goes off to watch.

NARRATOR

Going back. Not long now. Five minutes? Ten?

He checks watch.

NARRATOR

Unless...

He looks at the audience for a long moment.

NARRATOR

That night Mac struggled to sleep. He knelt, trembling in the court of the night-mind.

The light shifts, and great shadows erupt from the mountains of Mac's things.

A wind rises from a whistle to a howl. The mountains rattle. Objects tumble. The (handless) station clock ticks.

LEDA

(shouting above the sound)

It told him he might as well kill himself. A common piece of wisdom.

HUNTER

Because if he went back looking for connection, thinking that a do-over would negate his anxiety and helpless uncertainty...

JUSTIN

he would only find that the lack of those feelings set him further apart from the people he sought to join.

BUDDY

How could he feel at one with them, knowing he was an invader in their time?

REBA

A forty-year-old man hiding among children, trying desperately to be less alone.

SAM

The mind assured him the control he longed for would bring him only grief.

MACY

Falling back was not falling into that great spirit pool. It would bring him no closer to what he wanted.

The sound dies out. Dawn arrives, mercifully.
Mac looks around, as if verifying that the
monsters are gone, that the shapes he saw were
only shadows of his possessions.

NARRATOR

When he woke he was alone. He missed Trooper, his childhood collie. He missed Esteban, his half-blind foster dog, who had both the tragic tenacity and the dental hygiene of a wild Sioux stalking the last of the buffalo ranges. He had thought when a home was found for Esteban he would simply call it a wrap on his disappointing but basically well-intentioned attempt at a life. Instead his mom convinced him to move in, and things had pretty much dragged on to the point you see here.

A breath.

THE NARRATOR

The best substitute for a human in your bed is a large dog. They're warm. Their bellies rise tremendously. They dream, they fart.

(homing in on a couple in audience)

Everything he does, am I right?

(to himself, more or less)

...crowd work. It's come to this.

(pivoting back)

Mac thought about how easily he could be back there lying abed with Trooper. Paw on paw.

A trunk begins to shake its way across the floor,
then another, then another. All barking like dogs.

NARRATOR

In the city of his youth there was a small gallery of the American Homestead, a museum set in a true Victorian, the last of its neighborhood, rising unaccountably purple out of the shadow -- what's the opposite of rising?

He constructs the setting of his story out of junk.

NARRATOR

See, they'd knocked the other houses down to build offices and things in brick, a kind of suburban main-street that over time became its own walkable district of a growing downtown, offices with dentists and tax attorneys far as the eye could see, rising up, blocking out the sun, the dentists and their tax attorneys, but here squarely in the middle, like a little grandmother smushed between the shoulders of her acne-pocked, frat-brother grandsons, was the unaccountably purple Victorian, the American Homestead Museum, and on its first and second floors were ancient photographs of settlers settling west across America.

He displays several photographs.

NARRATOR

He would go there on Sundays and stare at the long, severe faces of the settler men, the round doll-eyed faces of the settler women squinting into the sun with barely a hint of the self-consciousness you might expect from someone whose picture would be displayed publicly 200 years later, these bold pioneers on the untamed edges of the world, living their long-faced lives far from any dentists or tax attorneys, settled in sepia. But it was not the people that drew him back week after week. It was the pictures of dogs. There they were among their owners, at times even facing the camera, to be recorded, without their knowledge, for posterity. And if the humans displayed a surprising lack of self-consciousness, then the dogs were perfect Buddhists. They didn't see themselves at all. Nor the future, nor the past. Going back. They didn't know why they were there and not here or here and not there -- they didn't know they were there because they only knew they were here. And this man with the camera, this future dentist or tax attorney, he meant nothing to the dog, who was sufficient to the setting. The humans were the contingent ones. In every photo Mac could see it: the way they stood in different waters of time. Close one eye and you'll see it, too: the dog is too present in the moment itself, a moment that passed two hundred years ago, and saved nothing of himself for the moment of the future the way his humans did. The humans fade eerily away; they are the ghosts haunting these wild pasts, their work inscrutably abandoned, the dog she is rooted and healthy and whole, and when she dies she will become earth; the children with their cotton shirts and sticks are only tragic apparitions, lost, going forward going back, he sees the dog alone, do you see it? Beneath the painted wooden sign, with pine-clad hills rising in the distance, she looks to the camera and asks the question, no, she is the question, and she shames the cameraperson with the question, she shames the viewer with the question why? Why are you there and not here?

He looks at the audience for a long beat. Almost begging.

Mac puts the dog photograph down. Checks his watch.

NARRATOR

Not long now.

He begins to search desperately.

NARRATOR

There was a...there was a...I'm not forgetting this, I mean, I'm forgetting that, which is why I'm looking for this, but I have not forgotten this.

He bumps into Mom one last time.

MAC

Mom! I mean The Mother. I mean Mom. It's good to see you. I was actually just...

They look at each other for a moment.

MAC

I was wondering, when I was happy, when there was a time, when I was older, when I was grown-up, after I left home, when I was happy. When we both were happy. Wasn't there? Or was it all...

MOM

Oh, Mac, you've always had the funniest questions.

MAC

I'm not trying to be funny.

MOM

When I say funny I mean bad.

MAC

It's a bad question.

MOM

It's a hard question. Because you seem awfully happy to me.

MAC

What, now?

Yes, now. MOM

I seem happy? MAC

Yes. MOM

Have you been listening? MAC

I've heard parts. MOM

I can't go to *now*, so that's irrelevant anyway. MAC

Are you going somewhere? MOM

You know I am. I'm going back. MAC

Back to where? MOM

I can't explain it, or I can, but I don't want to, because it is very late in the evening, and some of us have been thinking about literally nothing but this for nearly an hour, and if you'd been listening so well I wouldn't need to repeat myself. MAC

I'm happy right now. MOM

Which, come to think of it, is maybe another thing you've done to - you're what? MAC

I'm happy now. With you. MOM

OK. MAC

Do you want to sit? MOM

MAC

I don't really...I have a...

MOM

It's so nice to be here right now, with you. This is exactly what I came back for.

MAC

You...?

They look at each other.

MOM

All my friends were dying. And you were gone. I didn't have anyone left, and I didn't want to be a burden to your sister.

MAC

Mom...

MOM

I thought if I spent more time with you. And I have. It's been wonderful. Even if it didn't change a thing.

MAC

It has?

MOM

Wonderful.

MAC

Why?

MOM

Because we're here.

MAC

But I'm leaving.

MOM

I know. You've done it before.

That hangs there.

MAC

Will you be...will you be ok?

MOM

I don't know. If you had a little money, I could follow you. I might like that.

MAC

I spent it all on...

MOM

Oh.

MAC

I'm sorry, I

MOM

No you never did make very much

MAC

Well, I didn't know

MOM

I'm sorry, I don't want to make it about that

MAC

Well you did. You do.

MOM

I don't mean to. It really doesn't matter.

MAC

Why didn't you tell me?

MOM

I didn't want you to worry about me.

MAC

Well now I...

MOM

You don't have to be scared. Going back. It's. It's bound to be just fine. Look at me.

MAC

Do you want me to stay?

MOM

Do you want to?

Mac shakes his head uncertainly.

MOM

I want you to be happy.

MAC

I thought you said I was.

MOM

Yes, but...Maybe this is what it will take for you to know it. Whether or not you know it.

Mom scooches uncomfortably and looks under her seat. She finds a harmonica. She plays.

She pauses. The train whistle blows, and smoke billows up.

END