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## THE INVERSION LAYER: ESSAYS

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THE INVERSION LAYER: ESSAYS

By

Benjamin William Kinney

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

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July 2016

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

THE INVERSION LAYER: ESSAYS

This thesis by Benjamin Kinney is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE INVERSION LAYER: ESSAYS

By

Benjamin William Kinney

This essay collection examines the ways in which places with rich histories exist through time. Five sites are examined, four of them in the Upper Peninsula and one of them in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan. The sites in “The Best Souvenir” and “The Cloud Chamber” are official museums, the site in “Comfort in Buying Things” is an active mall, the site in “The Inversion Layer” is a tourist destination, and the site in “A Beautiful Piece of Nowhere” has no official memorial. All of these essays incorporate research but are grounded mostly in the author’s experiences at his visits to these places. The essays explore how personal stories are interwoven with the places where they occur, and how these places’ pasts are interwoven with the present day.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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## INTRODUCTION

When I decided to quit my job as a middle school teacher in Florida and move to the Upper Peninsula to study writing, I imagined all the rich historical sites I would visit during my two years in the program—an amount of time that seemed endless. I had already visited several areas in the U.P., as my great-grandfather lived in Seney until his death, and my older brother had moved to Escanaba five years earlier. Still, I was excited to have a deeper understanding of it. I figured that during summers, I would spend weeks at a time traveling through the wilderness, talking to quaint locals and learning about an area with such a rich history. I am prone to such unrealistic visions.

In reality, the first year of my program was a blur—a blur in which I did not write nearly as much as I had planned, during which I rarely ventured more than a few blocks away from my apartment or my office. In fact, I realized that I would most likely be moving out of the area, on to the next writing-related job opportunity that came along, without having ventured out of Marquette at all. I was disappointed, but with stacks of required reading materials on my nightstand and only a few hours of free time each weekend—free time I had to guiltily steal away from my personal reading and teaching—I reasoned that I would never be able to take these trips.

I initially planned to write a novel as my thesis. I imagined it to be long and complex, an undeniable work of genius, the type of thing David Foster Wallace wrote for *his* thesis. During my first semester at NMU, I did manage to write many words of a novel, but the process was not enjoyable. I found myself typing away as a formality, not caring about what I was writing and without a single clue about where the plot was



headed. After getting stuck around 30,000 words, the last third of which were truly dreadful, and failing to add to it for an entire semester, I told my advisor, Jon Billman, that I would start a new novel based on a concept that was kicking around in my head. I restarted my thesis and got about thirty pages in before realizing that this, too, was passionless, not to mention the clock was ticking. I could *technically* finish a long narrative piece with a beginning, middle, and end, but I doubted my ability to write a piece with a *pulse* within the time frame, much less send it through several drafts of editing. Reluctantly, I came to the conclusion that I needed to think smaller, to write multiple short pieces instead of a single long one.

Around this time, I was reading a few of W. G. Sebald's books for my classes. Sebald has an uncanny ability to blend anecdotes of his visits to locations with reflections on those locations' pasts. He could stare at a broken window in an old run-down building and reminisce about a time when the window was intact and the building occupied, often divulging into well-disguised research, all of his meandering thoughts culminating in a beautiful realization about the area or about people in general. Reading Sebald was not necessarily easy or fun, but by reading his work I gained a greater understanding of exactly what nonfiction could be.

My mind is also prone to wandering and imagining, as has probably already become evident in this introduction. After reading Sebald, I realized that I *could* speculate on an area without fully knowing its truth. Upon seeing a stretch of beach of an artifact in a museum, I could disappear down whatever rabbit-holes seemed most appealing or inexplicably relevant. I could include all the details of my visit to an area: my drive to a location, my conversation with a waitress at a restaurant where I ate lunch,

my seemingly unrelated memories from childhood that surfaced as I stood in front of placards, evoked for reasons I could not understand. Now all I needed was a place.

One place that had been knocking around in my head ever since I had visited it four years earlier was Paulding, Michigan. My brother and I had taken a trip there in order to witness a supposed paranormal light. While we ended up disappointed in what we regarded as an obvious hoax, we still had a great time on the trip. Over the years, I kept thinking back to a few important details—the food in the casino restaurant, the breeze while we waited for the light—and as the events solidified in my memory, I tried to understand why I found them so significant. I began thinking about other times when I had believed in outlandish things, starting from childhood and culminating in an ill-informed move to the Chicago area to find success as a writer. Even though all of these events had happened years previously, I finally was able to contextualize them enough to write a piece reflecting on the desire to believe in something unlikely to be true. I was happy with what I was saying, as well as my braiding of personal elements with analysis of place. It perhaps wasn't as beautiful as Sebald, but it still examined some important questions. This essay eventually became "The Inversion Layer," which is the second essay in this collection.

Of course, I'd had plenty of time to think about my trip to Paulding, as I'm sure Sebald had given years' worth of thought to his locations before writing about them. I feared writing essays about places within only a month or so of visiting them. I voiced my concerns to my advisor, Jon Billman, and stated that maybe I should write a fiction/nonfiction blend with the common theme of disillusionment. I had plenty of pieces that could roughly fit under such a theme. Jon recommended that I challenge

myself to write a more targeted collection: the Upper Peninsula was full of places, of stories to be examined, and Jon deemed me capable of visiting and writing about them within a summer. He gave me some excellent resources to show me how it was done, such as the writing of Wells Tower. In reading some travel essays, I realized that I could still write place-based nonfiction by working harder to examine these locations' minutiae and overall feel. I would still incorporate personal elements wherever they seemed to fit, but I would focus foremost on how these sites are functioning in the present day, even as many of them try to memorialize events that happened fifty or a hundred years ago.

From that point, the other parts of the project fell into place. Finding places to examine was among the easiest parts of the process, as the Upper Peninsula is full of history. I eventually chose to focus on the Shipwreck Museum in Paradise, the Quincy Mine in Houghton, and Pequaming, because each of these areas had changed differently throughout history; while Whitefish Point had an official memorial commemorating the history that happened there, for example, Pequaming existed without such a memorial, despite being the site of a once-booming lumber mill for a Ford plant. My main goal became to analyze the way that these places function differently in the present. What does it feel like to walk through the Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point, and how is it a different experience than standing on a random patch of land in Pequaming, even though both sites were once such important places in the Upper Peninsula?

My next step was to take care of logistical concerns. I obtained an Excellence in Education grant from Northern Michigan University, which allowed me to make in-person visits to all the sites I wished to write about. When I visited each site, I stayed for hours and took dozens of pictures. I asked the staff members questions. I wrote down

snippets of conversations I overheard, metaphors that came to mind when I looked at certain objects, or memories from my past that were evoked from these visits. I tried to take so much away from each site that by the time I got into my car to return home, I was simultaneously exhausted with information and thinking about a million different forms the essays could take.

Then I went home and tried to write. I realized that the place-based visits were helpful but that they brought up a slew of questions to answer, so I researched whenever appropriate in the Northern Michigan University library or the local Peter White Library, along with finding a plethora of information online. I realized when researching that I could easily make each essay about the research and historical context—about the logistical details, for example, of the Edmund Fitzgerald—and I had to make sure I was not retreading ground that others had previously conquered. I wanted to make sure I wrote about *my visits* to these places, not the histories of such places.

In this phase of writing, I relied on sensory details that were important to me but which others might consider inconsequential, as well as random thoughts I had while visiting these sites, and I tried to make *these* the heart of these essays rather than the research. In each case, I found that the question I had examined by the end of each essay was a little different from the one I had intended to ask at its outset. Each essay was read by my advisor, Jon Billman, and my reader, Jen Howard, who gave me encouragement to write about these places in the way I desired.

What results is a collection that examines several places in the Upper Peninsula, as well as another place-based essay about the Grand Traverse Mall in Traverse City, Michigan. They might not be written with the same historical knowledge as past essays

about these areas, and they may include too many irreverent details about fast food meals and the temperaments of tour guides, but I can confidently say that they are not quite like any other essays about these areas that are out there. I am happy with having learned how to write nonfiction in a way that feels authentic.

Ultimately, I got my wish of exploring some places in the Upper Peninsula during my time at the university, and it was wonderful.

## The Inversion Layer

It is a glimmering light on a distant hill, but of course it is more than that.

The most popular legend about the Paulding Light describes it as the lamp of a conductor who died trying to stop an oncoming train. Other possibilities listed on its Wikipedia page include “swamp gas” and “the ghost of an Indian dancing on the power lines that run through the valley.” The light is a phenomenon that *has* a Wikipedia page because in the Upper Peninsula, almost everything has a story and a group of townspeople willing to tell it.

Paulding is in Ontonagon County, one of the least populated counties in Michigan. In the Upper Peninsula, where the largest town has only around 20,000 people, Paulding is a place where *those* people go when they need to get away. My brother Mark and I drove to the area for a few reasons: to do a bit of hiking in the Porcupine Mountains, to gamble at the Lac Vieux Desert casino, and to see this famous light. But mostly, we had come because we were bored with ourselves. We had spent the past few days at Mark’s house in Escanaba, drinking Mountain Dew and watching *The Simpsons*, laughing ever-less frequently at the jokes and trying to ignore our inactivity-induced headaches. Our impromptu destination idea came from a Google search of “fun things to do in the Upper Peninsula.” Even though we were venturing only a few hours away from the TV we’d been watching all week, we at least *felt* like we were getting away.

Whatever the light is, it at least isn’t camera-shy: there are plenty of YouTube videos of it, and right before we left Mark’s house, he pulled one of them up on his phone. I saw nothing but a light, shaking all over the screen due to shoddy camerawork,

but Mark shook his head within seconds and muttered, “I know what it is.” I attributed his skepticism to his usual nature: growing up, he was endlessly analytical, becoming a manager at a credit union before working his way up into administration at a few different colleges. He was always rewinding films to point out inconsistencies, mostly characters’ hairstyles and outfits changing mid-scene. Mark never believed the people on the SyFy network who claimed to have been abducted by aliens, discounting them for their frizzy hair and incorrect syntax. I had always wanted to believe them. Without knowing anything about the Paulding Light, I wanted to believe that too.

We planned to get the hike out of the way first. At the trailhead of the Porcupine Mountains, we examined the bulletin board and selected an 18-mile loop culminating at the promisingly named “Summit Peak.” Neither of us had hiked more than a few miles at a time before, but I reasoned that hiking was just glorified walking. I pictured us at Summit Peak, the air silent, a lone bird flying across a canyon, my mind the recipient of some new epiphany brought on by the majestic landscape. In reality, we got tired and bored within an hour, and our view of trees and rock-strewn trails was nothing that I hadn’t previously seen on an inspirational poster. My hiking boots—heavy brown things that I had bought, oddly, for the homecoming dance in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and which I had never worn on a hike before—caused my feet to drag with each step. Within an hour, we took a shortcut off the trail and walked along the side of the road to our car, bailing on nature in favor of the casino.

The Lac Vieux Desert Casino was barely larger than the average high school gym, and the restaurant served food of the same quality as the average high school lunch. We were forced to eat an early dinner because within a few hours of gambling, we were each a hundred dollars down. Eating overpriced meals, it turned out, was a slower way of losing money than gambling. Mark choked down a gristle steak, and I bathed a handful of hardened chicken tenders in barbecue sauce to make them tolerable. Our waiter asked us if we were going to watch Da Yoopers, a regional group whose greatest hits are “The Second Week of Deer Camp” and “Rusty Chevrolet.”

They were playing a free concert in a showroom fifty feet away and had actually drawn quite a crowd of broke gamblers. We stood on linoleum tile and craned our necks to see the band of fifty-somethings in flannel shirts launch into “Twenty Yoopers on a Pontoon Boat,” which, the lead singer explained in a meandering introduction, was based on a real incident. The song was in the same campy vein as Randy Brooks’ “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.” There were six or seven band members present, depending on whether you counted the guy casting a fishing rod off the side of the stage. Halfway through the song, Mark and I decided to bail for the second time that day and visit the light.

The Paulding Light was five minutes down the road, where the edge of an embankment was cordoned off by a railing. When we arrived, a dozen people were already waiting. One party boasted of having come “all the way from Wisconsin,” but this was later revealed to be a drive of under an hour. This at least *felt* like the type of woodland scene where mystical things might be expected to happen, the Upper



Peninsula's very own *Twin Peaks*. There were the lazily blowing trees, the sounds of occasional passing cars, the accents of chattering Yoopers. The hill in question where the ghost was thought to appear was large and abandoned. I worried that we were too large a group to meet a ghost; weren't supernatural beings most likely to display themselves to one or two people at a time, and only when those people were trembling with fear?

But in fact, it wasn't even quite dark yet when we began to see it. A light appeared at the crest of the hill, shimmered for a few seconds, and disappeared, though it never disappeared for very long. This happened over and over again—the same shimmering light in the same duration. The crowd was excited to see their ghost and began analyzing the nuances of the light. But it was sadly evident to me, as it had been to Mark after a five-second video clip, what this presence was: car headlights.

This theory, readily supplied on any website that mentions the Paulding Light, would explain many of the flaws in the legends, such as how a train conductor could be killed in a part of the state with no train tracks. It also explains the nature of the light: the slow, bouncing quality, the occasional presence of multiple lights, and the appearance, as one gentleman using binoculars near us would yell, of “two red ones!” The Paulding Light could be considered a tourist trap, akin to the multiple souvenir shops scattered throughout the U.P. or the Mystery Spot on U.S. 2, if not for the fact that it requires no admission fee. For free, I got to stand with a dozen other people and realize that this, too, was a disappointment.

When we were kids, Mark once told me he could fly. In reality, he was just doing a standard long jump, but my young mind was convinced that he was besting physics,

and still in my memory of that event he soars halfway across the yard before landing on the ground. Growing up, I was always the one whose imagination went too far: I spent lots of mornings in my underwear, making all of my mismatched toys talk to each other. I was obsessed with fantasy worlds in video games and books, and when these worlds got too generic and cartoonish, I replaced them with foreign countries. In ninth grade, I resolved to travel to China and also vowed not to read a single book about the country, officially stating, “I want to be surprised when I get there.”

In college, where I still read almost nothing but bad fantasy novels, my imagination doomed all the important decisions I had to make. I imagined lifelong marriages to people who laughed at one of my jokes or friended me on Facebook. I bought tennis rackets that I used only once, giving up when my serves were not as lightning-fast as Andre Agassi’s. I took all the classes for a teaching degree, despite admitting that it was not what I wanted to do with my life, because secretly I planned to write a best-selling novel by the end of my undergrad years, allowing me to spend my post-college decade touring the country as a writing wunderkind. The teaching degree was a backup plan I never expected to need.

I graduated with fewer accolades than my peers who had been forward-thinking enough to research in labs or apply to graduate school. Lacking a best-selling novel or any publication outside the college literary journal, I moved back in with my parents and began plotting my future. I attributed my lack of artistic success to the fact that I was living in rural northern Michigan, so at age 23, with 2000 dollars in the bank and without having applied for a single job, I moved to Riverside, Illinois, just outside Chicago, into a

room for rent I had found on Craigslist. I had a few friends in the area, and I imagined it to be such a huge place that opportunities would practically fall out of the sky.

The room I was renting cost 400 dollars a month and was smaller than the room I had left in my parents' house. My landlord was a fifty-year old gay church organist with four cats and hoarding tendencies. One day, he burst into the living room and asked me to come look at his latest find. It turned out to be a giant old dollhouse, its paint chipped, and it covered almost the entire table I used for writing. I had enough savings from my summer job to last until December, by which time I planned to win the \$1500 Glimmer Train Prize for Short Fiction. I actually wrote three decent stories in my first month in the Chicago area, though Glimmer Train passed on them and I didn't think to submit them anywhere else.

I got some part-time seasonal work at the customer service desk at a Target store in Crystal Lake, fifty miles away. I sometimes made the trek in my car, often getting stuck in rush-hour traffic on the way home. I tried listening to Spanish radio stations to become bilingual, but all I learned was that "punto com" meant dot com. I gave up on that idea and listened to the dozen or so CDs in my car—both of Savage Garden's albums, my mom's David Archuleta CD that I had shamefully stolen, and a Willie Nelson Greatest Hits collection on which half of the tracks skipped.

Sometimes instead of making the trek to work by car, I took the train from Riverside to Union Station, where I gorged myself on General Tso's chicken, and then caught another train up to Crystal Lake, a process costing sixteen dollars one way. On days when I worked four hours, I made two dollars for my troubles. "That's just stupid,"

an old man returning a printer told me one day, and I wanted to reply that my success was inevitable; who could take the risks I had taken and not have something to show for it?

On my days off, I took the train into the city and walked around downtown, writing at park benches or buying four-dollar hot dogs from vendors. On one of my walks through the city, I bought a wireless attachment for my computer that cost 70 dollars a month. I interpreted the Best Buy store clerk's interest in me as a sign of my utter charisma, a trait that would bring me unmitigated success. I believed myself to be days away from some life-changing interaction with a book agent or a producer, even though I still had nothing more than a few short stories to show them. Only when my bank account had dipped below five-hundred dollars did I realize, during a silent late-night train ride to my apartment, that there was no universal power guiding me to a perfect future. This whole time, I had been doing an especially bad job of making up as I went.

I spent a few panicked weeks trying to figure out how much money I could hope to save in a year, this amount never exceeding a thousand dollars. Thankfully, in January a college friend was able to get me an interview for a teaching job in Florida, and despite it being far from the fantastical author's life I'd envisioned, I was relieved. In fact, I instantly began picturing the teaching awards banquets, the palm trees, the endless sunlight.

A group of students from Michigan Technological University visited the Paulding Light in 2010 on a well-intentioned quest to explain it. Their experiment must have been over within minutes; all they needed was a telescope to see the individual cars driving on a stretch of road 4.5 miles away. But when they asked tourists to look through the

telescopes, they were met with disbelief. In a YouTube video of their findings, one student remarks, “We had people standing here, having the pictures of the vehicles on the screen of the computer like, ‘well, that’s it,’ and they still won’t believe it.” Another student says, “People are going to believe what they want to believe. A lot of people say that [this] light is not the *real* Paulding Light, and that the real Paulding Light hasn’t been seen for 3+ years.” I understand the tourists’ dismay. Why would anyone want to believe that after driving for hours, sometimes across state lines, they are standing on an embankment staring at car headlights?

Tourists who want to believe cling to the way this light shimmers eerily, unlike those headlights you see on the road. The Michigan Tech students can explain this as well; they hypothesize that the light’s shimmery appearance is caused by an inversion layer—a meteorological term involving light refracting as it travels through a certain amount of space. Basically, from afar, ordinary things glimmer. Because the road is almost five miles away, the car headlight *does* seem a little more ethereal.

The glimmer was not enough to captivate Mark and me. We returned to the casino, where we lost ourselves and most of our money. I noticed that most of the slot machines had some vaguely exotic element: many were based on the premise of opening King Tut’s tomb or stumbling upon an enchanted forest. I played the machines with the most interesting aesthetics, and I lost another hundred dollars. Covered in cigarette smoke, Mark and I admitted defeat, retreated to our room at 2 A.M., and watched a few episodes of *The Office* before going to bed.

The next morning, we returned to the restaurant for their breakfast buffet. Somebody had dropped a ladle in the tray of syrup so that it was completely submerged,

and without thinking I began reaching down to get it. In reality, my fingertips recoiled from the hot syrup. But sometimes I imagine my entire hand jamming downward, and I bring the whole ladle up, glinting strands dangling from the newly surfaced handle.

We decided to gamble a little longer before leaving. On my last five bucks, I hit a three-hundred dollar jackpot on *Rembrandt Riches*, a painting-themed slot machine. I clutched my paper cup of Coke with a paralyzed excitement and watched the money accumulate. The pile of bills that the clerk gave me seemed positively mountainous. But after accounting for the money I had already spent, I realized I had only enough for a pair of jeans and a tank of gas.

The ride home was quiet. The novelty of this part of the state was gone for Mark and me, and we had one fewer unexplained mystery in our lives. In the coming years, we would find new myths to believe, but on this day nothing else would happen. The sun was out, and sometimes we glimpsed mirages, looking like puddles in the road. We approached, and they always dissolved.

## The Best Souvenir

It cost thirteen dollars to enter the Shipwreck museum, seventeen including a trip to the top of the lighthouse. “I tell people to get the whole package,” the ticket lady said, “and to get the lighthouse part out of the way first.” I did not find these words encouraging. I had driven a few hours out of my way to get here, during which I had passed only a few sleepy towns that seemed like the types of places whose residents conspired to murder tourists. Because I had come all this way, I wanted the entire experience, which is maybe a little problematic considering that the “experience” this museum is trying to convey is the tragic sinking of ships, foremost among them the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. The *Edmund Fitzgerald* could be considered the *Titanic* of freighters, bigger and faster than any of the other ships of its type. But we all know, and they knew even in 1975, how the *Titanic* ended up.

The view from the lighthouse was beautiful, showcasing Lake Superior on one side and the woods surrounding the Shipwreck Museum on the other, but at the same time I felt like I had seen it all before. In the grand scheme of things, what is the difference between seeing a few hundred yards of Lake Superior and a thousand? “Canada’s that way,” said our guide, a guy in his fifties with really youthful eyes and really white teeth, which made him look either lively or slightly psychotic. The only other person who had elected to take the lighthouse tour with me was a middle-aged man from upstate New York, and after making the compulsory comment about what a nice view it was, he began recollecting other staircases he’d climbed, including one in Germany that

was even more cramped and terrifying than this one, in which visitors were constantly bumping into each other as they went up and down. I made vaguely approving comments about the view for a respectful amount of time, even though I would have been content to get back down to ground within fifteen seconds. I racked my brain for a polite question I could ask the guide, and settled on “Is this the original lighthouse?” The guide confirmed that it was, though it had been pressure-washed and repainted three years earlier.

“Wow,” I replied. I have never been good at museums, where everybody is either interested in all the minutiae I find boring or really good at feigning interest.

I then entered the old boathouse, where before even closing the door I was greeted by an overly cheerful guide, who beamed and began talking immediately. Any hope I had of reading the several placards on the walls and getting context for this place was quickly dashed. This guide had been cooped up in the building, arguably the least interesting of all of them on the premises, and wanted to talk—not about the museum but about me.

“Where do you come from?”

“Marquette.”

“Oh, that’s nice! So you aren’t too far from home then. Marquette gets really nice this time of year. So are you a student then?”

“Yep.”

“Oh, wow! We get a lot of students here—sometimes we even allow them to earn college credit by doing internships. Those are usually the students who study history, not the other subjects. We really love our interns, and they do a great job.”



Five seconds later, as I was reading a placard, she continued: “If you have any questions about the boathouse, that’s what I’m here for! I also have some maps over here if you would like them. Here, I’ll roll them up for you. You’ll notice that you have already seen some of the sites on these maps here, and you aren’t too far from some of the others. You can complete them all if you really want to!”

“Cool.” I attempted to understand what was in front of me, to care about it in the same way this lady did. There was one display of the type of rescue boat that would have assisted the *Edmund Fitzgerald* had the weather been okay, and I tried to concentrate on the boat and imagine it being tossed about on Lake Superior. I decided to start taking pictures of the placards, with the idea of reading them later at home. Sensing the presence of this person staring at me, I asked, “Can I take pictures?”

“You sure can! Sometimes the best souvenir you can have from a place is a picture! Let me know if you want to know where to stand. I have worked here a lot of summers, so I know which vantage points offer the best photographs! I can turn the lights off in here, and you can use your camera flash if you want.” I inched towards the door. “Thank you so much for coming, sir. Remember that your ticket allows you to walk in and out of these buildings as many times as you want before the park closes!”

I was probably at the Shipwreck Museum because of the Gordon Lightfoot single, “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.” I had a teacher in fourth grade who loved the song so much that he played it on a monthly basis for our uninterested class. Later, when I first visited the museum as a middle schooler, too young for the concept of the tragedy to make much of an impression, the one thing I took away from the place was the

omnipresence of Lightfoot's song, which is piped over the speakers in the main gallery. It alternates with just one other instrumental song, meaning that anybody who stays in the museum more than ten minutes is likely to hear it multiple times. The song is pleasant enough—it has somewhat of a “sea shanty” feel going for it at least, and though it is not my cup of tea, I will admit that lyrics are competently written. Lines like:

*The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down*

*Of the big lake they called 'gitche gumee'*

*The lake, it is said, never gives up her dead*

*When the skies of November turn gloomy*

There is poetry in the lines—maybe not Keats, but poetry. But as I listened to the song playing in the museum, I realized that it sounded decades old, and I deduced that if the *Edmund Fitzgerald* sank as recently as 1975, the song could not have been written long afterwards. A Google search confirmed that it was written only a *year* afterwards. Bodies were still underwater, families were still grieving, and Gordon Lightfoot was on the radio, singing lines like “When supertime came, the old cook came on deck sayin'/Fellas, it's too rough to feed ya.” The old cook in his song was apparently a replacement for the regular (much younger) cook, and the only words known to be said aboard the ship were the ominous “we’re holding our ground,” uttered by the first captain, so Lightfoot was putting words in a dead man’s mouth. Of course, taking a few liberties here and there in art is okay, but isn’t it a little weird that grieving families had to hear a song about their attending the funeral for the men in “a musty old church,” or Lightfoot’s repeated assertion that the *Edmund Fitzgerald* setting out on Lake Superior in November was a ridiculous venture—that the ship was a “bone to be chewed?”

The song's guitar solos sound like something that could be heard in the adventure classic *Willow*, or maybe in an Irish animated film. They are perhaps reverential, but decidedly not mournful. And that, I was discovering, was the tone of the Shipwreck Museum as well. There was an air of remembrance, but even though we were standing at the site where hundreds of people had died—where bodies, even now, were rotting underwater a few miles away—none of the workers seemed particularly sad about it.

The second building I entered was the lighthouse keeper's quarters, and trying to avoid the first situation from happening again, I snuck in a back entrance. A bell clanged as soon as I opened the door, but nobody came to disturb me, and I was free to look at the furnishings of a site that nobody had wanted to build: one placard informed that "The need for a light at Whitefish Point had been recognized in the Federal Congress, but had become bogged down in political bickering over its expense." The lighthouse would eventually be built only after newspaper editor Horace Greeley made a public plea, writing in the *New York Tribune* that "every month's delay is virtual manslaughter, yet the executive pays men to air uniforms at the Sault in absurd uselessness, and leaves the lighthouse till another season." In 1847, the land was officially reserved for the lighthouse to be built, and in the coming 125 years there would be so much continued "manslaughter" that this entire museum and its \$17 admittance fee would become possible.

One disadvantage for anybody staffing the lighthouse at Whitefish Point was that it was a wholly boring place to live. In the lighthouse keeper's quarters, I looked at a lot of lamps, empty glass bottles, and photographs of people in small-town parades and

celebrations, which I imagine were infrequent and over early, but the placards were honest about how little fun everyone was having. One titled “An Isolated Childhood” described it thus: “Such a relatively isolated life meant that families were very close. Simple, little things were important and had a significant impact on children’s lives. With no electronic media, not even radio, children developed a special attachment to the world of their lighthouse parents.” I imagined lighthouse keepers to be stern people who rarely hugged their children and slapped them across the face for the slightest infraction—say, failing to secure a fisherman’s knot properly.

Not helping matters, I imagined, was the selection of toys a child was able to play with. In the recreation of the child’s play room, the two most prominent toys were a set of blocks that spelled out B-E-R-T-H-A and a doll. The blocks were annoying enough, as Bertha would be severely limited in the words she would be able to spell in addition to her name: be, he, ha, art, the, are, bar, bat, hat, bet, ear, eat, era, bare, bate, hare, brat, bathe, heart, berth, and breath. She must have figured them all out within an hour, and then what use are her blocks? She probably started to invent words; her parents would look over to see that she had arranged them to form *treb* or *ethrab* and would exchange worried glances. And the doll looked to be evil incarnate. I imagine this doll came awake on stormy nights and whispered to Bertha that some ship or another was sinking at this very moment, and that it was Bertha’s utter naughtiness that was responsible.

I went downstairs, where I had a few more rooms to explore, and it was at this point that I met an elderly guide whose utter passion for the lighthouse became unfortunately evident from the first sentence she spoke. She looked for all the things I was looking at—such as the mannequin of the lighthouse keeper, who was writing at a

desk with a quill pen—and launched into diatribes about them. “Would you believe,” she said, after describing everything in the room, “that when they pressure-washed the lighthouse three years ago, they found that the roof was made of *copper*?” She said the word *copper* with the awe of somebody saying the name of the woman her husband has been sleeping around with. I tried to remember my metals and determine how odd it was for a structure to have a copper roof, and in the meantime I said “That’s crazy!” in the most platitudinous way possible. “And the trim around the windows was made of *brass*,” the guide added. Confirming my theory of the harsh nature of these residents was a mannequin of Anna, the Carlsons’ matriarch, who, another placard informed me, “had to feed the men that came to repair the cribs, the submarine bell, or anything that Keeper Carlson couldn’t fix on his own.” Judging from the expression on the wax figure of Anna, she was not too happy about this task.

Everything in this building seemed deliberately placed in order to convey boredom—from the simplistic toys, to the scowl on Anna’s face, to the static-y broadcast piping out from the radio in the living area. (“It’s not a *real* broadcast,” the guide told me, after noticing I was looking at the radio and following me into the room. “It’s just a compact disc in a stereo we hid below the radio.”) And in a place like the Shipwreck Museum, a little boredom is probably mandatory; keeping a lighthouse, after all, was such boring work that few people could tolerate it. Carlson, the guide informed me, was uniquely suited to the job here because, after a stint keeping the lighthouse in Marquette, he wanted to move away from the young people in that area, who were always building bonfires and being the 1900’s version of raucous. In a way, I think it’s beautiful that the museum doesn’t let you forget that Anna and Bertha and the others were probably bored

out of their minds for most of the time here—that although they didn’t die like the sailors on the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, they sacrificed something all the same.

Most of the workers of the museum seemed to share Carlson’s love for the specific area, but I was thrilled to enter the gift shop and find one who didn’t. The gift shop contained most of the same things you could find at almost any gift shop across the Upper Peninsula—homemade jams and flavored salsas, stuffed animals, sweatshirts, magnets, puzzles, and, of course, fudge. There were two women working in the shop today, a blonde and a brunette, and I was greeted by the blonde as soon as I entered. The brunette stood behind the counter, where she announced that she was tired and that her back hurt. I immediately liked her bluntness. The blonde chirped, “Maybe you would like to work *downstairs* for a change!” The brunette shook her head and said, “No, I don’t think I would like that, either.” The blonde laughed as if this was a joke, and I realized that sometimes even *working* at the site of the lighthouse was a job that required a certain hardiness that I was not sure I possessed.

My penultimate stop at the Shipwreck Museum was the main gallery itself. The *Edmund Fitzgerald*, though the most talked-about shipwreck in Lake Superior, was only the latest of hundreds—the first being named, in a bit of sad irony, the *Invincible* in 1816, which crashed en route to Fort William, where it was delivering soldiers. (The soldiers, I read, “miraculously...struggled ashore,” in a story that I am sure will someday be a major motion picture.) One thing I’ll say about the placards of the twenty or so ships whose sinking was highlighted in the museum is that the writer had a morbid fascination with the sinking that makes their reading fun. For example, on the placard about the

*Independence*, a steamer that sank in 1853 and killed four people, is a section about Captain Amos Stiles, its subheading “The Man Who Never Smiled Again.”

Crewman Amos Stiles was blown skyward and soon found himself in the cold water of the river. Struggling to stay afloat, he located a bale of hay which had been part of the deck cargo and used this as his life raft. The current swept him a half mile downriver through the boiling rapids of St. Mary’s river. Having narrowly escaped death twice, he was pulled from the calmer waters of the lower harbor. The experience damaged facial nerves, causing him to wear a permanent frown, and he was known therefore as the man who never smiled.

This description could have been used by Marvel in one of its latest superhero movies. One of the other placards is titled “Hello Says Goodbye... VIENNA Sunk by Friendly Gesture,” and details two ships crashing into each other after the crews sighted each other on Lake Superior and “altered course to exchange greetings.” Whoever wrote the descriptions in the museum had a lot of fun doing so, adding to my confusion at exactly how I was supposed to feel about all of this.

Of the dozen or so ships mentioned in the museum, the *Edmund Fitzgerald* is the one where the most lives were lost. There seems to be a camp of *Edmund Fitzgerald* enthusiasts who want to make this out to be some sort of mystery, as if the fact that many people do not know what happened here adds mystery to the tragedy. Even a *National Geographic* special in 1995 includes lines such as “we have a few theories about what happened, but nobody knows for sure” But the museum itself, and everything I read about the ship since, reduces its sinking to human error: either that of not securing the hatches well enough, or of setting sail in terrible conditions on an extremely long ship,

where the heavy buffeting of waves against its middle could be enough to snap it in two. There is an immensity of facts around the *Edmund Fitzgerald's* sinking—dozens of books and articles written about what might have happened on November 10, 1975—but in the museum, with salvaged pieces of a bunch of other ships around me, I got the impression that the facts did not matter nearly as much as the emotions. This was why the descriptions were written so dramatically. This was why the Gordon Lightfoot song was playing for the fourth time since I entered, as it had done every day the museum was open.

My last stop at the museum was at a building where they showed a clip from the 1995 special about the 20-year anniversary of the ship's sinking. I met yet another old lady, who sprang to action as soon as I walked through the door, and I went through the whole routine about how I was from Marquette, which isn't very far away, yada yada yada. She initially said I could read all the placards in the anteroom before watching the movie—a fifteen-minute event that I was beginning to dread, feeling the information overload—but an older couple came in immediately behind me, and she decided that three people was enough for her to put on the documentary at once. “When does the movie start?” the tourist asked, and the lady said “Whenever you want it to!” He then asked, “How long does it go?” and she replied, “However long you want it to!” She ushered us into a dark room, pressed *play* on a DVD player below an old console TV. The doc began, of course, with a snatch of the Gordon Lightfoot song, and I willed myself to pay attention.



In the end, even though I was starting to get tired from processing all of the information, paying attention was not that difficult. For the first time since entering the museum, I was seeing the faces of some of the guys who drowned, and the majority of them seemed the young, attractive types—those energetic guys all over college campuses, including the one where I had been teaching for a few years. In these guys' faces is such innocence that you never suspect they might die, nor were they likely to suspect it, yet here they were aboard one of the heaviest ships of its kind, one that had literally carried more weight, faster, than any other ship on the Great Lakes. So many of them must have seen this voyage as nothing more than a paycheck, maybe a story they could tell their friends. With them are a few older gentlemen: the cook mentioned in the Lightfoot song, and a captain who had apparently spent 38 years of his life at sea, which his brother tried to contextualize on camera before breaking into tears.

The documentary detailed the recovery of the bell that was aboard the Edmund Fitzgerald, a bell that I remembered seeing prominently displayed in the main museum but which I zoomed past. I had not noticed its importance at all. The team that recovered the bell decided to replace it with another one, on which the names of the 29 dead were inscribed. At the 1995 ceremony, family members of the survivors were bawling at the sight of this bell, each of them trying to explain on camera how it wasn't nearly enough, or how it was just the right tribute, most of them coming to the conclusion that it was a beautiful gesture but that they were still hurting.

The movie ended, and the lady came back in and shut off the TV. "I was just having some fun earlier," she told the older man next to me. "I hope you weren't offended." He said he wasn't, and I realized just why all these Shipwreck Museum

workers took their jobs so seriously. Along with what I had interpreted as simplicity and obsession over facts, the workers at the Shipwreck Museum possessed something I had lacked: an appreciation of just what a tragedy the sinking of this ship was.

And here is my souvenir, which I have been thinking about in the weeks since the visit: I cannot stop wondering if the commemorative bell is underwater with the wreckage today. We do not know, as diving around the Edmund Fitzgerald is now forbidden, but the bell presumably lies alongside whatever remains of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*: pieces of bodies, the two fragments of ships, and some of the iron ore pellets that went undelivered. By the time the bell is discovered, maybe in a hundred or two hundred years, when we have decided that guided dives of the ship are *exactly* what the crew would have wanted, tourists in their scuba gear will be gawking at the inscriptions on the bell. At what point will people be making jokes about the bell that I made about Bertha's toys—Bertha, who herself led a difficult life and is now dead?

## Comfort in Buying Things

1992

I was five years old. The Grand Traverse Mall, the first large mall in Traverse City, Michigan, had just opened, and my eyes were exposed to a lot of new things: a food court where I could pick from TEN different restaurants. So many stores that I sometimes got tired just *walking* to them. An arcade, where if I was a good enough at the fighting simulators or ski-ball, I might win enough tickets to buy a small personal television. And the dragon!

The dragon was a green plastic contraption that stood in front of the arcade, and to me it was the size of an *actual* dragon, a creature I still thought existed somewhere. It perched in front of the arcade and gazed out over the food court. I'm sure my mom picked me up and plopped me into the seat behind its head for a short, jolting ride, but in my memory, I climbed up to the top myself—putting a shoe on a smooth plastic claw, grabbing a pointed ear for leverage. And in my memory, the ride was always a smooth one.

I was at that age when a half hour spent in JC Penney's was the most boring event imaginable, when walking through the mall and trying to stay on the narrow rows of brown tiles, avoiding the white ones at all costs, was preferable. Back then, everything had an element of wonder to it: the funnel in the middle of the aisle where you would drop a penny and watch it spin in an ever-narrowing spiral until it fell through the hole in the middle. The small outcropping of candy machines where, if you had a quarter, you could buy a gumball or M&Ms or Skittles but which you would probably spend on the

more exotic candies that you couldn't find anywhere else: multicolored baby rattles that dissolved into sour powder in your mouth, or little dog bones in the exact same colors that did the exact same thing. In a nearby candy shop there were jawbreakers the size of baseballs, so large you had to lick them down to a size where you could awkwardly fit one of them into your mouth. I never thought anybody could actually finish one of them. There were plenty of clothing stores as well, but I breezed past them.

If, after one of these trips to the mall, I had eaten some food court McDonald's or was walking out with a book or, even better, a Super Nintendo game, I considered it to be a victory. I could spend an hour standing in the aisles of the B. Dalton store, reading the latest *Goosebumps* or *Animorphs* book, which if I was lucky, I would get to buy and take home. Even then, I had probably already seen plenty of media with anti-materialist messages that the best things in life were free, and that getting rich didn't necessarily make you happier. But for me, a kid sharing a bedroom in a doublewide trailer with his brother, there was comfort in buying things, in feeling the weight of them in their plastic bags as I walked out into the parking lot.

1998

I was in sixth grade on my first date, which had necessitated my mom driving to my girlfriend Sanya's house, picking her up, driving us both to the mall, leaving us to our innocuous fun, and swinging back at a predetermined time. Sanya and I decided to go to the café in Target, which had a constant popcorn smell and patina of dirt over all of its surfaces, and grab a cherry Icee to split between us.

We neglected to count the tax rate on prepared foods, so we were ten cents short when the cashier rang us up. A guy behind us in line, a man in his forties wearing cargo shorts and a baseball cap, gave the dime to the cashier and wistfully said something like, “I was a kid once. I remember being in this situation.” I can still picture his face even though I don’t remember what Sanya looked like that day, despite the fact that it was our first date. A possible explanation for this was that I had no concept of physical intimacy and figured that the main point of being in a relationship was having somebody to do something with—a concept that would not change much in the nine months we were together, culminating in no more than a frontal hug, before she dumped me over the summer to date a guy who enjoyed hand-holding, kissing, and the idea of more.

I haven’t had an Icee since that day. Not that I avoided them, but I moved on to other desserts in the food court. I could have one today if I wanted it. But if you’d told the eleven-year-old me that I wouldn’t drink another Icee in the following sixteen years, I might have savored it. However, at the moment, it was just part of another day. Sanya and I ate some free samples from the Auntie Anne’s pretzel shop outside Target. Then we walked to the theater and watched *Baby Geniuses* while my mom shopped in Marshall Field’s. When I dropped Sanya off at her trailer that night, she whispered into the ear a quote from the movie she’d found hilarious—“Don’t have a cow, Basil!”—a joke I laughed at but whose context I have now forgotten. I kept our tickets to the movie, because I had seen on TV shows that couples were supposed to do things like that.

2000

Toward the end of middle school, in the same theater where Sanya and I had watched *Baby Geniuses*, I saw the Guy Pearce version of *The Time Machine*. My small box of cookie dough bites shook in my hand as I watched the protagonist scribble a bunch of formulas on a chalkboard and then build a machine that transported him 50,000 years into the future. The prospect of building a time machine seemed plausible. I swore the movie was so well-orchestrated that it felt like half an hour long. And the cookie dough bites were fantastic!

At that moment I was incidentally interested in becoming an entrepreneur, convinced that my straight A's in school were a precursor to wild monetary success. I looked down at these cookie dough bites—such a simple idea, but also novel and interesting. Inspired by just having watched a man build a time machine, I figured I could at least create something as good as these bites. I walked out of the mall that day imagining myself as the head of a cookie company. I began researching the process of registering a business during my downtime at Computer class at school. I recruited a few reluctant friends, whom I always figured would be lackeys, and at my friend's kitchen table we planned everything from branding to the logistics of baking. We never actually baked anything, and I don't remember why.

By this point I had heard even more about the evils of greed and wealth, two terms that I thought were pretty much interchangeable. But in reality, I could go to the mall with twenty or thirty bucks and feel like I could own everything in the world. There was comfort, now, in being surrounded by new clothes at the racks in all the stores. I would walk by the giant speedboats put out on display in the aisles, and even though I

was the nerdy kid who spent all of his time indoors, for whom the idea of operating a motorized vehicle always coincided with visions of a grisly death, I would momentarily want to drive one.

2004

I was sixteen, and my friend James and I were new to driving—new to the freedom of being able to go wherever we wanted whenever we had free time and a little bit of money. The mall was the closest and trendiest place that was open, and because James was a little bit older, we were able to watch Sarah Michelle Gellar in *The Grudge*. We bought our tickets and screamed along with the maid in the movie who was the first of many to succumb to the lanky Japanese ghoul. The movie, my English teacher would tell me the following week, was “lacking even one original idea,” but to somebody who hadn’t seen a lot of movies, it *was* original: the monster was creepy, and more than anything else, the Japanese setting was exotic and fun. We felt a little older as the credits rolled and we hadn’t cried or left the theater.

We decided afterwards to grab dinner from the food court. A few of the options had changed by this point: the McDonalds that had been there when I was a kid and from which I always ordered the Happy Meals in order to collect the plastic toys had vacated; now it was a Verizon store. The Arby’s was gone, replaced by a restaurant with such an ambiguous name and appearance that I could never remember what kind of food it sold. My favorite place, by far, was the Cajun Grill Express, which stood at the end of the food court, next to where the old arcade had been.

I had been a picky eater all my life, but one day I walked by this restaurant, and the lady behind the counter handed me a free sample of bourbon chicken on a toothpick. I was too young to realize that free samples don't exactly obligate you to buy a full meal of the product, so reluctantly I bought a plate of chicken, fried rice, and vegetables. I couldn't touch the vegetables, which had a weird, sour aroma, but the chicken was actually pretty good, and its juice could be poured over the rice to make a savory, satisfying dish. I was obsessed with China during this part of my life thanks to Susan Lu, a Chinese girl who had attended my school for a month, during which time she wowed everybody with her weird accent and limited command of the English language. I loved the experience of something foreign, and the bourbon chicken, in my mind, *was* my first literal taste of it. From that point on, I would get the bourbon chicken whenever we went to the mall, James opting for a small mountain of Taco Bell products that would end as a pile of crumpled wrappers when he was finished eating.

I was working at a grocery store, my first job. I made \$5.15 an hour, and before long a few thousand dollars accumulated in my account. I could think of nothing to spend my money on other than food court meals and movie tickets, and for junior and senior years of high school, that was pretty much all I bought.

2012

It was a weird feeling when I finally got a teaching job with a salary of forty thousand dollars a year, and instead of the window-shopping I had done throughout my youth, I could afford most of the items in the mall. My teaching job was in Florida, and I was just visiting here for the summer, which made my return to the mall seem like some



weird Oddysian event. I went into the stores whose prices had sent me running for so long—American Eagle, Express, Abercrombie and Fitch. I had four hundred dollars in my pocket, and I was determined to not leave the mall until I looked stunningly gorgeous. I pictured myself to be one nice suit away from looking like Leonardo DiCaprio in one of his ads for expensive watches.

What I found were fifty-dollar T-shirts that had dumb, vague sayings on them: *For the Win* and *Defense of Honor*, along with old-fashioned advertisements for surf companies that may or may not have existed. The shirts were so small that when I put them on, I looked like either I had recently gained a bunch of weight or was trying to fit into the clothes of my middle-school aged brother. At 25, my hairline was already beginning to recede, and I was graying early: I looked too old to be doing this.

I bought a few shirts out of sheer determination to change my style, and while I got some compliments at work from co-workers who noticed that I was attempting something new, my life remained more-or-less the same, other than me being a few hundred dollars poorer. Around this time, I had about ten thousand dollars in my bank account: enough that I felt at financial peace, but not so much that I could afford a house or a new car or any of those other larger purchases I desired. As I left, I realized that the mall wasn't a very large place at all, and that I could be in and out in an hour, having looked at everything I even remotely wanted to buy.

Was I becoming less materialistic, or had I outgrown *these* material objects in the twenty years of being a customer here? I had a distinct desire to go back in time to before my hairline started receding—to a time when I could be immersed in *When a Stranger*

*Calls* and the other horror fare that James and I had watched so steadily in high school. I wanted to feel the same way about all of these cheap material things.

2016

For a while, I was a very lazy writer. Every one of my characters was either a teacher, unemployed, or living in some fantastical society where jobs are obsolete. Most of my characters didn't even have any siblings. But when it comes to the food items in bad chain restaurants, I am an expert, thanks to the food court in the mall. Every piece of Sbarro pizza I've ever eaten was consumed here. I can think of almost nothing more peaceful than eating a food court dinner on a dark winter night. My characters also tend to love food, and while I might skip over traumatic events that have shaped them as people, I rarely omit any of the things they eat.

I read in an article recently that around 15% of malls have closed or been repurposed. This one is still alive and kicking, especially compared to the increasing number of "dead malls" in the country—malls that are technically still operational but which have more vacant shops and closed gates than open stores. There is one in my brother's town of Escanaba, MI, where you practically have to feel your way through the dark to get from store to store. But even in the Grand Traverse Mall, you can feel the march of time.

It's perhaps most evident in the little kiosks that line the center aisles. For a while the big seller in these sorts of stores was lotion, so hyperactive salespeople would stand with bottles in their hands and yell at passing customers to stop for a few moments and talk about their skin. Sometimes I could look at one of the kiosks and determine within

five seconds that it was doomed. A few notable examples: the wind sock stand, the place that sold pillows so large and puffy that sleeping with one couldn't possibly be a viable option, and a place that sold beef jerky that was both more expensive and of a lower quality than the Oberto beef jerky readily available in most gas stations. The worst one I remember was an "oxygen bar," at which patrons strapped cannulas underneath their noses and inhaled treated air, which was supposed to have a calming effect. There was a short-lived coffee kiosk, and as a fourteen-year-old with no taste in coffee, I purchased a single Ghiradelli chocolate for around sixty-five cents, which I learned through the salesman's grumbling had been his only profit of the day.

The kiosks *look* temporary, though, so it was no shock when they invariably disappeared. In the twenty-three years that I knew the mall, there were bigger changes. The Marshall Fields became a Macy's. The pet supply store where I bought little peanut butter bones for my dog, as well as the adjacent Alpaca Connection, which specialized in rugs and other alpaca hair products, went out of business, their spaces never filled. I walked through the mall one day to find that the GameStop of all places had disappeared, but mercifully it had only moved locations, now inhabiting the space between Orange Julius and Hot Topic.

There were a few damaging blows, though. The B. Dalton bookstore where I was first exposed to the *Animorphs* and *Goosebumps* books as a kid, then to Stephen King novels when I got older, closed to make way for a Forever 21. The only other place in the mall that sold books was the Target, and I knew even as a child that the books there tended to be the mass-market variety. When the B. Dalton closed, I felt like the entire town had gotten a little dumber.

Currently one of the kiosks sell cases for smart phones. Another sells rides on motorized plush animals and seems to be doing well; every time I walk through the mall, there are several kids zooming by me on giant pink pigs with wheels on their hooves. How long will it be before these kids grow bored of this trend, and where will all those toys go then? What will take its place, and is there an inevitability that *nothing* takes its place?

The theater has moved to a bigger location a mile down the road, so you can no longer watch a movie in the same structure where you can buy back-to-school clothes, and this saddens me somehow. I don't get the cookie dough bites when I go to the movies now—too sickeningly sweet. I don't even go into GameStop or play video games, period. But whenever I eat at the food court, I still go to the Cajun Grill Express—now renamed the Teriyaki Grill Express, but still with the bourbon chicken. I've been to China, so I should know better that this is just a cheap, artificial substitute for something authentic. But the food still tastes good, especially as quickly as I tend to eat it.

## A Beautiful Piece of Nowhere

I wrote the title of this section before I visited this site, in Pequaming, MI, and I chose to visit the site because I figured there would no longer be anything on it but grass and old garbage. Unlike the other sites I picked for this collection, there was no museum, not so much as a single placard, to remind anybody of what had once existed here. All of my internet searches had indicated that it was a place the world had forgotten: an “unincorporated township,” a “ghost town.” In fact, I first saw the name of this in an entry in Roy L. Dodge’s *Michigan Ghost Towns of the Upper Peninsula*, written in 1973, which described it as “deserted, except for a caretaker.” Doing the math in my head, I figured that the caretaker would be long-dead and that most of the buildings would be gone as well. I could hop out of my car, stretch my legs, and consider the site visited. But I planned to find some little sign of humanity that still existed; I might see a last remaining structure or at least an old post that had been part of a fence, or maybe I would run across some trash: vodka bottles that kids from L’Anse had left there. Then I would be able to end this essay with a proclamation that there *is* some sort of physical manifestation of memory that persists in these places, a reminder that humanity has left its mark, and no amount of forgetting can eradicate it entirely. I could conclude the piece, maybe, with the line from Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass” about how “All goes outward and onward...And nothing collapses.”

But as I drove north of L’Anse, a few problems with this surfaced, the biggest one being that it is not deserted. There are nice houses all the way up the lakeshore. Most of these houses have RVs out in the front yard and satellite dishes on their roofs, suggesting that residents are able to live here with the promise of getting away periodically, whether

in person or intellectually. Another problem with my plan is that I could not tell, exactly, when I had *entered* Pequaming; when I hit Pequaming Road, I was only a few miles out of L'Anse, but I was still a couple of miles from where Google Maps told me was my final destination. I drove along some little bay whose name I didn't know. There came a point at which the water lapped shore within a few feet of the road, and I felt like I was driving along one of those winding Spanish mountainside roads that I have seen in movies, except the elevation was much lower and the sun was not out. I thought I could never imagine living here, even though obviously many people make it work.

And as I reached the peninsula I had seen in pictures, a peninsula I expected to contain nothing but a dotting of trees and a huge old water tower, I realized that *lots* of people still live here: people with money, who can afford to build sprawling log homes, and who decorate their front yards with figures of bears holding signs that say, "WELCOME TO THE WHEATLEY DEN" or things like that. There was the old Ford water tower I had seen in a photo of the area, installed when the factory was still operational, but around it now were a dozen or so houses. These houses on the peninsula *look* secluded, still, but they are about fifteen minutes from a Burger King and no more than twenty-five minutes from a casino.

On the way back from my very short visit to this place, a visit in which I was unsuccessful in categorizing this area as nowhere, I stopped at the Burger King. The cashier was extra talkative, asking me "Are you from around here?" as she put in my order, a question that in my melancholy I resented. I ordered chicken tenders and a large French fry, which came to only three dollars because I had a coupon, and the cashier offered to bring my food to my table for me. It was a slow day at Burger King, and I sat

sipping a water and trying to contextualize what I had seen. I had taken a bunch of pictures of Pequaming, trying to showcase the way the peninsula jutted out into the bay, but none of the pictures did justice to the view. The cashier shouted from the counter, asking which sauces I wanted for my tenders, and I was not able to shout clearly enough for her to hear, so despite her offer, I had to go up to the counter to get my tray of food. The cashier had spilled French fries all over my tray, for which she apologized profusely. I shoveled food into my mouth in such an unsightly fashion that I was thankful to be the only customer in the restaurant. As I put my tray away, I noticed a sign on the wall that said something along the lines of “Done Already? You Didn’t Order Enough.” And even though I had just eaten 860 calories of food, I still felt hungry.

Much of the lumber in Pequaming was actually used in the Ford auto plants, during a time when wood was still a common component of cars. Henry Ford paid his workers six dollars a day, which was apparently a great deal, but in exchange the workers had to agree to live on strict terms, as described by Dodge: “no drinking, saving a percentage of their wages, and [tolerating] a general surveillance of their homes and mode of life.” Dodge continues to describe the disconnect between the traditional lifestyles of lumberjacks and these new policies: “The lumber camps took on a new look, much to the disgust of many old-time lumberjacks. Neat, frame buildings painted snow white; beds with springs and mattresses replaced the old tick ridden bunks; fancy dining rooms with china plates...and to top it all off each section of the camp had its own individual ‘house mother.’” One is left to wonder what the lumber workers *did* for fun—read the Bible, perhaps, or have conversations about the weather. And today, the uniformity that Ford exhorted is evident in many places in America—even in the ten

chicken nuggets that I ate, identical to those I could eat in Anchorage or Miami. Many of my friends have jobs that are just as rote as the loggers' jobs, but instead of pushing logs through saws, they leave the same six or seven comments on essays and clean their inboxes of emails.

I decided on a whim to visit the casino in Baraga, just a few miles down the road. This was not a financially wise decision, given that I do not have a good track record of stopping when I'm ahead, but to me, casinos are a quintessential part of the Upper Peninsula. People aren't spending all day working in lumber mills and mines and fisheries anymore, and in the months when the tourism industry has not picked up yet, many locals need something to do. You can hardly drive an hour in the U.P. without running into a casino. This particular one had the same sort of plastic siding that many of the houses in the U.P. have, a style that I always thought looked cheap. I grabbed a free cup of Pepsi, an incentive I always use to justify my gambling, as if the miniscule value of the drink ever begins to approach the amount I spend.

I sat down anyway and proceeded to lose sixty-five dollars, most of my money being sunk into a game called "Swiss Chalet" which, as I played, I realized did not have a very viable path to winning. I am amazed how frequently I will play a machine in order to trigger a bonus game or get four in a row of a certain symbol without doing the math. Had I stopped to look at the symbols and their payout information, I would have realized that a spin with five jacks in a row, for example, only pays out about fifty cents, which is the cost of one spin. Almost every one of the interactions I had with fellow customers, most of them at least middle-aged and almost all of them smoking, was about how we are losing all our money. I sat next to an old grizzled man who was "losing [his] fucking life



over here” and sunk my last five bucks into a puppy-themed game called *Maltese Fortune*.

As I left the area, I chastised myself for once again giving into one of my vices, but I at least had the smug satisfaction that L’Anse seemed like a sleepy town with not a whole lot going on in it. I imagined there were lots of “community events” here, most of them including potluck meals and poorly coordinated singing from local church groups and school clubs. I imagined that the people summering in Pequaming drove to L’Anse all the time to feel like they are still taking part in the world, but every important thing that would ever happen to this area had already happened: that in October of 1942, when the last shipment of lumber was sent off, everything that followed was wholly optional, a real-life version of those end-credits scenes in movies telling you what happened to some of the tertiary characters, but in a light-hearted way that allows you to draw lots of the conclusions yourself. I get the sense that the ratio of positive to negative events in places like this is the same ratio as winners to losers in the casino—that you can hope to win big, but you probably won’t, and even if you do, at the end of the day not much is changed.

Maybe that’s how *I* feel. At almost thirty years old, I’ve already departed one career, and I struggle sometimes to find the incentive to get into another, just for the sake of having a nicer house or a retirement plan. Hell, sometimes I struggle to understand why I should wash dishes or make my bed every day. In my personal life, I’ve rushed away from the type of order the Ford plant advocated, which the house mothers tried to maintain. The house mothers are gone, and we can all drink and carouse as much as our environment allows us. Even in as deserted an area as Pequaming, there are plenty of

vices to be enjoyed. You can drown yourself in beer and lose all of your money at the casino, but what is the point of it all?

Still, there are people living here, spending their days doing these things. Nothing has collapsed, exactly.

## The Cloud Chamber

My brother Greg studies physics at Michigan Technological University. He was showing me the cloud chamber, which to me resembled those mammoth devices of sinister purpose in James Bond movies. The cloud chamber consists of a steel drum about a meter wide, encased in a giant blue box whose sides weighed, Greg told me, “literally a ton,” and swung open only if you put all your effort into pulling them. There were at least three separate computer monitors attached in some way to the device, including one monitor *above* it, which could only be accessed by climbing a ladder and standing on top of the chamber. Dozens of tubes and hoses sprouted from the device, including one pronged structure which, I learned, shot a little beam of light that could take pictures of any particles that come out of the cloud chamber. Sometimes people from California or even Germany would call Greg’s team at Michigan Tech and ask them to perform experiments with the chamber to help out a study being done halfway around the world.

I surmised this device was able to manufacture clouds, based on its name more than anything I saw in front of me, and I could not say much more about it than that. Greg was modest and said he did not know much about it either, even though he built one of the little tubular structures attached to the greater structure. This was a place in the Upper Peninsula I had never seen before—a place that seemed to be on the cutting edge of technology, counter to the dozens of abandoned motels and “historic sites” populating the rest of the peninsula. Who cares about those goggle-wearing, beaker-holding kids on the brochures for Northern Michigan University or Bay Community College? Here was the future.

I imagine that a lot of the residents of the Houghton/Hancock area have historically thought that.

Houghton is a charming place to visit, with lots of rolling hills that Greg claims are just horrible to navigate in the winter but which look majestic to me. The impressive Portage Lift Bridge with its constantly blinking lights connects Houghton to the neighboring town of Hancock, and in some of the downtown bars you can see the bridge blinking and the bluffs on the other side and the always peaceful Portage Lake, and if you are just visiting for a day or two, you can feel like there isn't a care in the world. But Greg also talks about how small the area is; there are essentially a few local bars, a handful of restaurants, and just enough in the way of Walmarts and gas stations to make its residents feel like they have every material thing they need, but if you wanted to go to a Kohl's or a Target, you would find yourself driving two hours to Marquette. "Without the University, this place would be dead," Greg claimed. In the weekend I visited, we would go nowhere without running into people he knew from college, making it seem all the more insular.

Only a few miles from Greg's cloud chamber was the Quincy Mine, which had not been operational in an official capacity since the 1940s but where tours were still held throughout the summer. For the purpose of this essay, I initially planned to visit the even more abandoned Delaware mine, a little further up the Keweenaw Peninsula, but its website only announced vaguely that it would open up "mid-May." When I called to get a little more clarity on when exactly it would open, the guy on the phone said, "Eh,

probably next weekend.” They were still “cleaning up from the winter,” the nature of said cleaning I was left wondering about. Thankfully, not only was the Quincy Mine open, but the staff were giving guided tours.

The Quincy Mine opened in the 1850s, after white explorers realized that some of the metals the Native Americans were digging out of the ground to make arrowheads and other tools could be harvested more efficiently for a great profit, as long as a few pesky things like land ownership were overlooked. So many people, even some of my college history professors, speak about 19<sup>th</sup> century USA as a place of unbridled potential, but to me it always seems sad and desolate. What would it be like to not even be able to imagine an automobile or a device that runs on electricity? At least as long ago as the 1940s, we were beginning to envision a future of food capsules and speedy travel through suction tubes; I reckon I could have contented myself with sci-fi novels even as I was dying with polio or fighting in one of the world wars. I would personally hate to live in a world where “the future” was by necessity the following season, not to mention where minerals and soil fertility were deemed important enough to kill indigenous people over.

Today, there is a gift shop where all sorts of copper-based products are sold: everything from spoons to bowls to candles to little plastic containers of copper flakes you could put on a mantle and proceed to forget about as you worked your life away. There were T-shirts and hoodies with cute sayings on them, stuffed animals and puzzles for the kids, books that weren't in any way trying to be interesting, in dire need of cover artists who understand contemporary design, DVDs that gave the same information as the mine tour, a few CDs recorded by an older gentleman who was apparently known for singing songs about the surrounding area, and, Greg would hold up and laugh, Quincy

Mine *mouse pads*, which I assumed would never again be purchased by anybody under the age of 70 and, when they are eventually cycled out of the gift shop, will be heaped into a trash bin and end up in a landfill, where rats will gnaw on them before realizing their absence of even the basest level of nutrition. Somewhere in the United States was a mouse pad production industry that I imagine was at one point booming, and with the advent of the laptop computer and smart technology, all of these people's livelihoods were destroyed in the same tragic way that, we would learn on the tour, the miners' lives were destroyed.

Our guide was a college-aged woman named Emily. She did not smile once during the tour, and I admired that for some reason. We took a lift down a hill that might have been a little too steep to navigate on foot, and even though thousands of people had made this same journey over the years, I had a strange sense of being in an Indiana Jones-esque adventure. I put on a stoic face like the guide's as we entered the first tunnel of the mine. There were all the requisite elements of mines I had previously seen in all the *Resident Evil* games I played as a kid: the darkness, the dripping coming from somewhere, the tunnels branching off into countless directions to who knows what. There were apparently around 115 levels of this maze, and we were on level five.

As is customary in many tours of now-abandoned work sites, Emily made a point of talking about how terrible the work was. Without any of the tools we are used to today, or even electricity, the first miners drilled into the wall by hand, requiring one person to hold a drill bit in a candle-lit mine shaft and another person or two to swing a sledgehammer at the end of the drill, meaning that anybody who missed likely bashed a

miner. The mining duos were typically related, often father-son pairs, which the guide assured us would make them trust each other more, though I feel like the prospect of bashing my dad in the face with a hammer would only worsen my aim. Another complication with early mining was that if the candle went out, there was no other light to see by. Miners were forced to feel around in the dark in order to find their way back out. The mine soon became a maze of dead-ends and pitfalls, its landscape ever-changing as new tunnels were dug, so some of the lost miners plummeted to their deaths. I marveled at finding yet another job for which I would have been wholly incompetent.

Growing up, I heard lots of quaint tales about the evils of modernization—how heroes like Paul Bunyan and John Henry could not, in the end, beat machines—and in the case of the Quincy Mine, this theme rang true. The advent of each new piece of mining technology resulted in jobs lost. Sure, when electric light came to the mines, it was widely beloved, but with it came the one-man drill, which meant that those father-son drilling teams were broken up. The mine was still making plenty of profits, but the profits were not being seen by miners themselves, many of whom had come over from European countries with no real other options than doing this job. In the Keweenaw peninsula, the mining companies had erected everything—from the houses where the miners lived to the stores where they bought their food—which meant that the same person gave miners their paychecks and sold them all the supplies they would buy with those checks

So in 1913, the miners went on a desperate strike. “The strike was bad for everybody,” Emily informed us. The mining companies got out of the miners’ personal lives, to an extent, but lots of the smaller businesses had closed in the year that the strikers did not work. When they eventually did go back to work, they had to drain out

the bottom third of the mine that had become filled with water. They made an hourly wage instead of being paid lump sums for twelve-hour days, but they were still required to use the one-man drill. This was the new technology, which could do things faster and more efficiently, and surely the men must have realized that they were not going to go back to the manual drill, any more than they were going to go back to seeing by candlelight.

In 2016, standing in the darkness, where we could hear dripping coming from somewhere, where tunnels seemed like they could go forever, with Emily's explanation and the scrim of research I'd done floating around in my head, I briefly thought I could understand what these people went through.

But of course I can't. I cannot compare any of the marathons I've run to the plight of stepping up a ladder after a twelve-hour day of strenuous labor. I cannot compare the intermittent smog I've inhaled while on vacation in foreign cities with the plethora of diseases that the men working in these mines contracted. Of course, I still like to try. At Michigan Tech, Greg is amassing student loans in pursuit of a future that has been sold to him but is by no means guaranteed. He is paid by the same institution that charges him tuition, which means that his paycheck, too, is little more than a formality. Can I just compare what the miners did to what he's doing? But even at our most exhausted, we admit that we have absolutely nothing to complain about compared to what the miners endured.

After the mine tour, we looked at the hoist that was used to drudge up copper from lower than had ever been thought possible. It was constructed after the miners'



strike, which technically resulted in higher wages and a few improved living conditions, but they had bigger problems to worry about: they were literally scraping the bottom of the bowl, discovering too late that the buried copper was giant but finite. The hoist, which is apparently the largest one in the world, was finished in 1918, and would operate for only eleven years before the mine closed during the Great Depression. I stood in front of it, and my inner cheapskate wept at the waste of the money—370,000 dollars, equivalent to 2.7 million dollars today. My brother, his girlfriend and I had paid fifty-four dollars for this tour, including a six-dollar savings thanks to Greg's girlfriend Alana's AAA membership. At a standard rate, they would need to sell 135,000 tickets to the Quincy Mine just to make back the hoist money. We were three of eight people walking around the premises that day, and I had a feeling they weren't quite hitting those numbers.

The Upper Peninsula has a history of solitude and suffering. We pretend to understand it, especially on the days when we get blizzards or the temperature plummets to -40 degrees outside, but even on *those* days, we have all sorts of comforts: electric heating, 24-hour fast food restaurants, Netflix, and the knowledge that if we want to, we can always go back to school or transfer to a warmer part of the country. Greg can blithely take on another ten grand in student loans, serving not any mustached mining baron but a loan company and a team of university officials, and at his worst, he is still at least not getting bashed in the dark with a sledgehammer. With that in mind, we ventured to the Keweenaw Brewing Company, where we sat around a table and recited to each other a bunch of the facts we had learned that day. We drank draft beers, played with children's dominoes, and waited for an overpriced pizza to be delivered.

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