<html>

Matthew Baker

<html>

After supper, his family had wanted to play a game, but instead, as always, he had exiled himself to the basement, in flip-flops, sweatpants, and a dirty tank top. He sat at the computer, in the basement, in the dark, his body lit by the screen. Clicking, typing, clicking. For the past hour, between dice rolls, his family had been calling his name, trying to lure him back up to the kitchen, to join the game. He wanted to, but wouldn't let himself. He was hiding.

The basement was unfinished: concrete floor, concrete walls, the ceiling all pipes and beams. He had set up the computer, an outdated desktop, on a scuffed desk between the furnace and the stationary bicycle his parents never used. That was where he hacked. The desk chair was haloed with rumpled clothing. He didn't sleep in the basement, but essentially lived there, at the computer. The keyboard was missing several keys—escape, home, control, multiple characters—whose functions could nevertheless still be triggered by pressing the exposed nubs.

Tonight, twilight, as snowflakes flurried beyond the slider, he was writing code: an eloquent, complex script, meant to hack the servers of a military airfield. The base was domestic, an installation in Pennsylvania. He lived on the outskirts of Philadelphia. He was fluent in C, C#, C++, Ruby, and Lisp. He was flunking eighth grade, again. Including English.

He was trying, failing, to debug the script, when messages began flashing onscreen—emoticons, emoji, hexspeak, leet—invitations, commands, pleas, to come sneak outside. Then, gloves pounding against the slider, as boys wearing hooded jackets bolted past the glass, crossing his backyard, toward the ravine. Urging him out.

His family called his name again, and then again, popcorn popping in the kitchen. He shook on a coat, stomped into a pair of boots, as the door swished open and thocked shut.

His breath turned to mist, the invisible becoming visible. The snowstorm was torrential. From upstairs, the kitchen chandelier cast warped polygons of light through the windows onto the yard. Whether his family had heard the slider, were watching him running away from the house, he didn't know. He vaulted the split-rail fence into the ravine, stumbled down the frozen slope, and chased the others into the shadowed looming trunks of the pine trees. Here, this was his condition: he couldn't remember ever feeling anything but lonely. At thirteen years old he had already quit hoping that he would ever not be. When he was alone, he felt lonely. Around people, he felt lonelier than when he was alone. School assemblies, multiplex lobbies, supermarket checkouts, dance recitals for his sisters—crowds made him feel so lonely that he had to gnaw his cheeks to keep himself from shaking. But that wasn't why he hid in the basement. He wasn't protecting himself from people, but protecting people from himself. He hurt people. He always hurt people, had been born with some energy inside of him, some demon spirit, that he did not understand and could not control, and that's why he avoided his family, why he hid in the basement, why he ran in a pack with boys like these, boys with tipsy parents and absent parents and violent parents, boys with drawls and limps and tics—because they were used to hurting, didn't feel anything anymore, had developed psychological firewalls. They slipped across patches of ice, and cursed and laughed, and cuffed each other, and tackled each other, and battered each other with snowy branches, and cheered, and danced chanting around a

rusted barrel of burning newspapers, dizzier, and dizzier, and dizzier, and a gust of wind blasted the barrel, and embers flurried wildly into the whirling snow, and he felt just as lonely as ever, and very alive.

Naked, after gym class, stepping across the frigid clammy tiled floor of the locker room, he crowded with the others around a mirror cloudy with dripping steam and swiped handprints. Their voices echoed muddily: whoops, hoots, grunts. They snorted and pointed and taunted each other, appraising virtues and mocking flaws. There was a certain thrill in becoming the subject, in being evaluated, and a certain misery. On his turn, the others twisted his wrists and pinned his arms behind his back and shoved him toward the mirror, and critiqued him, howling, and he stared at himself, at all that HTML.

<body> buzzcut forehead eyebrows eyelashes eyes nostrils underbite throat clavicles nipples ribs navel hipbones birthmark pubes penis testicles knees ankles toenails </body>

As boys in creased boxers flicked the birthmark, he jerked, and faked a laugh, and saw the obvious. That bodies were pages. Made of code. And that embedded in there somewhere was that demon spirit: some malware that would crash anybody he touched.

In the murky haze of the showers, beneath a drizzle of tepid water, lathering himself with a cracked bar of woodsy soap, he listened to the others crooning improv love songs: for the principal; for the president.

There were “hackers,” and hackers. He wasn’t a “hacker,” but a hacker. “Hackers” wanted money; what hackers wanted was information. His curiosity, simply, was voracious. He

cached knowledge like bankers cached profits. Weather patterns riveted him; population cartograms enchanted him; he was captivated by neuroimaging. He devoured corporate accounting. His lexicon included filibuster, neocon, theocon, paleocon, muck-a-muck, and doughface, all acquired while browsing the emails of a certain senator. Before bed, wearing a headlamp, he liked to read classified printouts taken from the military. They helped him sleep.

His parents researched human genetics at a university in the city. They didn't know he was a hacker. What did they think he was doing, in the basement, night after night? Probably blogging, updating profiles, browsing imageboards, watching videos of spinning leeks and rabbit dances. And he was doing those things—but, simultaneously, also writing code, and scanning ports, and nabbing data from a megachurch halfway across the country. And, simultaneously, emptying a box of shortbread. And, simultaneously, downing a pot of coffee.

Mutations, that was what his parents studied. Deletions, insertions, substitutions—missing c's, superfluous g's, a's become t's—strings of codons undone by a single letter. All the resulting syndromes.

An extremely rare disorder, his mother was saying, but listen to these symptoms.

His parents had driven the family to the ocean, to walk the beach in coats and boots. The clouds were ruffled. The wind was brisk. The beach smelled of thawing—dune grass, rotting oak stumps, toadstools, birch bark, mossy boulders, all waterlogged with thawing snow. His sisters were running along the shoreline, jabbering, as waves surged onto shore, then foamed away. He was hunched in the sand, poking a clump of seaweed with a twig, pretending not to eavesdrop as his parents gathered seashells along the dunes.

These boys simply lose control, his mother said. Neurologically. X-linked, recessive, so the disorder rarely affects girls, almost always boys. And the effect is that—he's sitting

there, doing nothing, maybe waiting for somebody to bring him his lunch, a bowl of soup, when suddenly he realizes certain parts of his body have just cut off all contact with his brain—his hands go totally offline—he's looking at his hands, and his hands begin moving, independently, reaching, across the table, for a spoon—and he has no control over anything that happens next. Or maybe not his hands. Maybe his neck. Maybe his jaw. These boys spend their lives in wheelchairs, beg to be confined. You leave them alone, unconfined, turn away even a moment, and they'll begin gnawing apart their fingers, or banging their head against the wall, or gouge out their eyes. Except, they aren't doing it. Their bodies are. It's incredibly sad.

Then, so, like historical descriptions of spiritual possessions, his father murmured, peering at the shell of a crab, squatting, frowning.

But the spirit is in the genes, his mother said. And like any behavior, that's only a point on a spectrum. We all do things involuntarily, instinctually. What those boys do only seems bizarre because that behavior is uncommon. But what if the behavior were widespread? What behaviors are widespread? Why are we the only extant species from our genus? Why are all the other species like us extinct? Because we were social—survived, through cooperation, what the other species could not? Or because we were antisocial—killed off the other species?

A pair of men wearing matching jackets (#CC9966) trotted past on dappled horses, leaving a winding trail of hoofprints. His sisters squealed, chased after the horses, collapsed, breathless, onto the sand, and then, still jabbering, stumbled back to his parents. His sisters had found some frosted seaglass, and a sandy ribbon.

Beautiful, his mother crooned, stooping to examine the seaglass, beautiful.

Later, at the playground across from the marina, his sister, the youngest one, disappeared. All three were on the swing set, jabbering, kicking—and then one wasn't. She was,

just, gone. The other two were in the midst of a discussion about caterpillars—cuteness, grossness, on the loneliness of the chrysalis—and had not noticed the other run away. Which direction had she gone? Toward the marina? Toward the street, the parking lot, the minivan? Back toward the beach, the woods there? They didn't know.

He hopped down from the basketball hoop he had been attempting to climb. His parents were trying not to look worried, but looked very worried. The unspoken hypothesis, the word they were saying with their faces? Kidnapping. His father took off running for the parking lot, his mother took off running for the beach and the woods, and they left his sisters, his remaining sisters, with him, and told him to search the marina.

Standing there in the sand, one gripping their seaglass, one gripping their ribbon, his sisters stared up at him. For guidance, for support, for anything. What could he say? He said something, trying to assure them that the youngest one would be found. What he said seemed actually to frighten rather than comfort them. He tried again, said something else, and they immediately began to cry. He was making things worse, much, much, much worse, hated anything that made his sisters cry, and so now hated himself. He ordered himself not to speak, not to talk, not to say even a word unless absolutely necessary, which was always the rule, so why had he spoken? Shouldn't he have known that whatever he said would backfire, would ultimately cause rather than ease suffering, like a pilot airdropping parachutes of medicine onto a war-torn village, only to watch horrified as the parachutes transformed, midair, into bombs?

His sisters had stopped crying, were sniffling, wiping snot with mittens. He pointed at, began trudging toward the marina—the concrete slipway, the windswept docks, the yachts under canvas tarps. His sisters hurried after. Stumbling through the sand, each clinging to a sleeve of his coat, yelling their sister's name.

On the very last dock, they found the youngest one crouched in a coiled fiber rope,

talking to a panting dog with matted hair, who was also lost.

There were times when he and the other boys avoided each other, pretended to be strangers, behaved like enemies. Times when, as he strolled through the neighborhood, the others would eye him from darkened doorways, from the depths of garages, from between cracked window blinds, like feral animals from their dens. Times when they would ignore each other in the hallway, would eat alone at separate tables in the cafeteria, would dress in the locker room without speaking. Times when they would hole up in their houses, licking wounds, hibernating with video games and magazines.

Then things would change—the moon would wane or wax, the temperature would climb or drop—and again the pack would form.

They smashed mailboxes. They chased squirrels. They threw stones at beehives, shot fireworks at trampolines.

They were not friends. They were rivals united by a common cause. Destruction.

Or, sometimes, terror. Blood-curdling, spine-tingling, hair-raising dares. Like the night they snuck into an abandoned factory, rumored to be haunted by a ghost with stitched eyes and stitched lips, and forced each other to scream the ghost's name. Like the night they crept into a shuttered asylum, allegedly the domain of a skeleton that prowled the hallways in a ragged straitjacket, and goaded each other into peeking under the mildewed cots and rusted gurneys. Like tonight, as they crossed a desolate lot of cracking pavement and rampant weeds. There were ways of learning just exactly what you were. There was this way here. A woman. Through the broken slats of a rickety fence, down a chalky slope of loose rock and broken glass, onto the deserted railway tracks. The dusk was starry. The tracks were strewn with brittle leaves. A woman lived there, beneath the highway, that looming bridge of rumbling trucks. A vagrant, maybe a witch—for money, she would read

your soul. Supposedly she was as old as Philly.

Rail cars with weathered paint and blossoming rust were scattered along the tracks, unhitched, linking to nothing. Fireflies drifted twinkling. He stopped—the others blew past, hissing and cackling, running for the shadowed underside of the bridge—and stood quietly. Watching fireflies disappear and reappear. Trying to predict where the lights would flicker next.

Within reach, a firefly flashed. His gaze drifted—expecting the firefly to appear next near the rungs of a rail car—but instead the firefly appeared suddenly beneath him, was on him, clinging to his tank top. He stopped breathing, stood totally still. The firefly kept clinging. The light there must have called the others. Another came—another, another, others still—alighted on the fabric. He was blinking everywhere. He felt chosen, and embarrassed for feeling chosen, and also the lonely feeling that never left. He shook the shirt, sending fireflies scattering, then ran for the bridge.

Above, traffic rumbled. Pigeons cooed from nests in the metal beams. There was light, from some fire, firelight being cast through the doorway of a boxcar against the pillars of the bridge. A lantern—now he saw—a lantern, the hazy gleam of a gas lantern, hanging from a nail inside the boxcar. Cans, canned beans and canned pears, were stacked against the walls. There were boots crusted with mud, plastic jugs of water, a crate littered with tattered books. There were hangers with clothes. There were many boys.

As he climbed into the boxcar, the other boys shoved, jostled, fought for room. A woman sat on a crate in the shadows at the back of the boxcar. She looked much younger than they had been told. Her hoodie framed her. He stared, spellbound, studying that elegant code.

<body> <p> bangs irises <u>cheekbones</u> snubnose

teeth <s>chin</s> </p> </body>

It was a scar, on the chin, a pale lump struck across the skin there, from some fall or tumble. Maybe on ice skates, maybe some pogo stick. She could have been the daughter of a carpenter, the daughter of a florist, the daughter of the mayor. A teenage runaway, a decade later. A girl grown into a witch. The woman was speaking, a raspy honeyed voice, dangerous, hypnotic. The boys got onto tiptoes, peeked between each other, clutched their hats nervously, their crumpled money. I do not do tarot, she said, I will not scry crystals. If you want those things, there are shops in town, you are welcome to visit the psychics there. Doing tarot, scrying crystals, those are about past, present, future, are about your events. I will not tell you about events. I do not care where you heard about me, I do not care what you heard about me, here are the facts. I do not do anything special. I do not have a gift, I do not do anything supernatural, I do not understand why people keep coming here. Here is what I do. I do phrenology and chiromancy. I read skulls and palms. Listen again. Phrenology, chiromancy. Are those sciences? Geology, phrenology, astronomy, chiromancy. There is science; there is witchcraft. The difference is whether you can prove your methods work. I do phrenology and chiromancy. Skull reading, palm reading, these are about essence, nature, disposition, are about your person. If you want to know who you are, put your money in that bucket, and step over here.

Outside, the sound of the traffic hushed, and then the sound rose again. He felt himself swelling with hope, that when she read him she might find something good hidden there.

As each boy knelt, she took her hands from the pouch of her hoodie—spread a hand across his scalp, lay a hand across his fingers—and she read them. The knobs and ridges in those sweaty, pimply, greasy skulls; the creases and folds in those sticky, muddy, scabby palms. And she did find something good, for every boy: for this boy, she found crudeness,

but also profound humility; for that boy, she found cowardice, but also marvelous imagination; these boys sarcasm, and cynicism, and dishonesty, and arrogance, but also charm, and grit, and moxie, and zest. And, for each boy, the others realized what she said was true. They had seen, but hadn't noticed: this boy never bragged about himself, but liked to spit and curse; that boy could invent genius pranks, but was always afraid of hurting himself. She did have a gift. She was breathtaking. She made them see what they saw.

After the other boys all had been read, he stepped toward her, and knelt at the crate. She read his body, kneading his skull, touching his palms. He began to relax. She murmured, like she had with the others. Wonder… confusion… an aptitude for language… far too much love…

She stopped. Then backed away, her crate thumping into the wall. Her features had updated, had changed appearance, suddenly displayed a new emotion. The look of a mapmaker, hired for a predictable survey of a remote mountain, discovering, at the summit, the rim of a smoking volcano.

She lied.

And that's everything, she said.

She began sorting through the wads of money in the bucket.

Goodnight, boys, goodnight, she said.

But afterward, as the others hopped out the boxcar, running back along the tracks, yipping and laughing, she stopped him. He was crouched on the rocks, where he had landed. She stood there, gripping the handle of the door, backlit by the lantern.

You have some thing, she said. Some thing in you. It wants to eat you alive.

She glanced beyond him, at the others. A frigid breeze swept through, and the pigeons cooed. She leaned out, through the doorway, and whispered.

You could learn to control it, she said. But it's hungry. And it's strong.

Then hauled the boxcar shut.

He did try to control the malware. But often just containing it, just keeping it from bursting out of him, required all his strength. And certain situations gave the malware a surge of power, left him vulnerable to being overwhelmed. He dreaded celebrations. Birthdays, like this birthday, he could feel its presence seeping through his body, taking control. Gnawing his cheeks did nothing. He tried to laugh, and couldn't. He tried to smile, and couldn't. His skin tingled with bad code.

In the kitchen, his parents hunched over a cake, murmuring excitedly, holding matches to striped candles. Beyond the dining room windows, a flock of birds plunged toward the ravine, vanishing into the treetops. Layered patches of sunlight quivered across the walls, amorphous, murky. The tabletop was stacked with presents in metallic wrapping. His sisters chattered happily, seated around the table, wearing sundresses (#99CCFF, #66FF33, #FF99FF) with grass stains and dirt streaks. As the cake was installed onto the tabletop, the youngest one swiped a dollop of rippled frosting, sucked her finger, shrieked, then collapsed into her chair in an ecstasy of cream and sugar.

Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear—

He blew the candles out, a single breath, not letting himself make a wish.

Before we cut the cake, you've got packages here to open! his father beamed. His sisters thrust presents at him, shouting over each other, each wanting her own present opened first.

He tore paper from boxes, snapped off ribbons, lifted lids. He expressed no surprise, or pleasure—simply examined the contents, then set each box aside.

His sisters had stopped bouncing, chattering, smiling. His parents watched intently. He could feel the malware spreading, their moods crashing, them wondering what was

wrong. And something did seem wrong: peering into each gift, his face got gloomier, and gloomier, and gloomier, as if what the boxes contained weren't presents, but punishments—this box a puff of smoke, that box a cloud of sulfur, these boxes dead animals. This wasn't just birthdays. He ruined everything.

Wearing a new windbreaker, new headphones, he tried to say thank you, and couldn't.

Afterward, his mother hugged him, which made him feel worse, because the hug was only another thing he didn't deserve.

He did have a blog—he never wrote about hacking, just wrote about life, his various experiences, anonymously. At the outset, he had envisioned a masterpiece, imagined somehow charting through the blog the intricate bewildering shape of his life, eventually discovering some underlying significance there. But, in reality, the blog was a random assortment of random experiences. As if he were only an aggregator, an aggregator of memories, of memories that truly were impossible to comprehend.

What was the meaning of a rash appearing, then disappearing, on your body, where nobody but you saw? What was the meaning of losing your key to your house? What was the meaning of seeing, from the backseat of the minivan, driving with your family to the aquarium, the form of a woman leaning over the railing of a distant bridge, and realizing the woman is about to leap, and being seized by a gut-wrenching panic, and watching the woman instead suddenly release a bouquet of balloons into the sky? Why did he love pancakes? Why did he love erasing things that other people had written? Why did he love molehills collapsing underfoot, the flaking striped paper shell of wasp nests, the crumbling rooty mud of swallow nests, spiderwebs when wet with dew? Why did he tear down those spiderwebs? How could he hope to explain the feeling, stopping on the walkway between the bus and the school, in a downpour, rain as heavy as hail, as others rushed past

him, in hooded raincoats, with quivering umbrellas, toward the doors, explain the feeling, stopping there, in his tank top, and jeans, and flip-flops, staring up at the clouds, being battered by glacial rain, squinting, and drenched, and smiling? That, if awake was the level above asleep, the rain had shocked his system into the level above awake?

He dripped rainwater, a puddle forming around his chair. Today in chem lab each student had to present on a different element from the periodic table: chemical symbol, atomic number, period and family and state of matter. He found himself at the blackboard, clutching a trembling sheet of paper, wishing he were back out in the rain, where now there was thunder. Anytime, the teacher was saying, go ahead and start. He stood, terrified, staring at her staring at him over the back row of students.

<body> updo wrinkles <object>eyeglasses</object>
<object>mascara</object> lips <object>pencil</object> </body>

She had a habit of chewing pencils, left jagged toothprints in the wood. A few of the other boys were in the same class, were variously smirking, pouting, blowing kisses at him. The other students were glaring at him like something unsightly that had just washed onto the beach. He began speaking.

For him, trying to talk to people, just what was that like? He chose the wrong words; he used words wrongly; he rushed sentence to sentence, or paused mid-sentence, or put words in the wrong order. Helium, that was the name of the element he had drawn from the beaker, the subject of his presentation. He knew, had so much to say, about helium. And he could not get any of that out of him—as if his mouth could only form a simple shape, and his thoughts were complex shapes, all bowing curves and jagged angles, that could not be shoved through.

That's why he only spoke when he had to—why, afterward, in the cafeteria, sitting around a table of boys chugging milk and swapping cookies, he didn't say anything, to anybody—why he sat quietly chewing the carrots his parents had packed him—because talking, getting things through his mouth, meant having to break his thoughts into pieces.

What was the meaning of a seagull suddenly soaring into the cafeteria, swooping over the tables of stunned children, and then veering into the hallway, headed toward the gym?

What did the malware hate? The malware hated power. The malware hated seeing people in positions of inferiority, hated inequality of any sort, hated having power over anything. Restaurants, he hated being taken to restaurants, hated being led to a candlelit tabletop and having a chair pulled out for him, hated sitting at a table where people in collared shirts (#FFFFFF) and spotless aprons (#000000) would run back and forth through swinging doors, pouring iced water from a carafe into his glass whenever he took a sip, whisking away his menu, fetching another basket of steaming bread, navigating a gauntlet of scooting chairs and gesturing patrons while burdened under a tray of entrees meant for his family, stooping to pick up his knife from the floor after he dropped it, apologizing to him about the knife when he was the one who had dropped it, hurrying to get him another knife. He stopped sipping his water, so the people wouldn't have to run. He stayed thirsty, and the malware spread anyway, pooled into his feet and his hands and his skull, into all of his extremities.

The malware hated garages, seeing mechanics having to scurry around beneath cars. The malware hated supermarkets, seeing baggers hustling to fumble groceries into the bags. The malware hated hotels, seeing bellhops loaded with luggage. The malware hated restaurants, especially restaurants, like this here.

His grandparents had ordered the same thing, the stuffed calamari, because they copied

each other in everything. Everything except politics. His grandmother was a Democrat. His grandfather was a Republican. Together their votes did nothing.

We've read the news online for years, his grandfather was saying. But we always stopped reading where the story stopped, like you would with a newspaper. Then, yesterday, we made an incredible discovery.

His grandmother held her glass out, for the server to top off with water. Thank you, his grandmother said. The server ran through the swinging doors. His sisters were slurping fettuccini noodles, chewing spinach ravioli, listening curiously.

An incredible discovery, his grandfather said. We scrolled past the story, and there were comments. Comments! Do you know about the comments? There are comments, after every story—sometimes hundreds, sometimes thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands!

Dad, of course there are comments, his mother said.

You don't understand, his grandmother interrupted, folding her hands on her napkin. How it was. I had to call him into the room. I saw there were comments, and I had to call him into the room. And we read a few on top, and then we just began scrolling, and we kept scrolling, and scrolling, and scrolling, and scrolling, and scrolling, and even at the end of the page, there was a button to click that would load the next page, there were pages and pages and pages of comments about this single story alone, and I realized suddenly—I realized—I realized suddenly who these people were. Strangers, complete strangers, from all over the country, who didn't know each other and otherwise never would have met, some sheep farmer in Montana, a pediatrician in Oklahoma, a housewife in Vermont, and gardeners and jewelers and plumbers and brokers in Utah in Arkansas in Florida in Maine, all coming together, and actually meeting, actually holding a discourse, actually having a place to speak, and be heard, and listen, and most of them were so angry,

and could not agree on anything, but, still, but it was so beautiful—

Abruptly, his grandmother had stopped, putting her hands to her face.

Mom, are you crying? his mother said, leaning forward.

His grandmother waved her hands, then smacked his mother's napkin, laughing.

That was never possible before, his grandmother said, still laughing, and pinching tears from her eyes.

Then, at that moment, he felt himself swelling with love for his grandparents.

Although could not imagine a world where that was never possible.

The other boys didn't hack. But every boy, everywhere, practiced some forbidden art. In his neighborhood? Predominately, graffiti and skating. He dreamt of cracking the Pentagon; the other boys dreamt of tagging Mount Rushmore or shredding the Hoover Dam. Weekends, they would don baggy jackets, ride trains around the city, watch each other unleash forbidden talents. Boys shaking cans of spraypaint, bombing glass doors and brick walls and concrete barriers with monotone throwies and polychromatic blockbusters and wildstyle totally illegible to everybody, boys who saw the city as canvas, that a dumpster wasn't a dumpster, a billboard wasn't a billboard only. Boys leaping onto beat-up skateboards, the decks twirling and spinning and flipping with their sneakers as they did tailstops and airwalks, lipslides and nosegrinds, heelflips nollie and pressflips fakie, boys who saw past conventional assumptions about an object's purpose to reveal the object's true form, recognizing fire hydrants as hurdles, traffic cones as targets, parkway benches as springboards, stairway railings as ramps, teetering ledges of scattered pebbles and shattered glass as legitimate pathways, garbage cans as platforms, street lamps as switches, parked cars as shortcuts, swerving taxis as detours worth taking. Oily, bleeding, splattered boys, giggling happily. He understood what graffiti and skating were. What the other boys

were doing. They didn't hack, but they were hackers—hacking the city itself—changing how the objects were read, the meaning of the architecture.

Some weekends, he was the entertainment. The others would slip into his basement, huddle around his computer, munching donuts and sipping juice, ice clinking in their glasses. And watch, as he hacked, hunched over the keyboard—typing scripts, sniffing honeypots and planting rootkits, shutting down the city website, reading aloud from emails of the sheriff.

They were painters, and dancers, and writers.

They had no mentors. They had heroes, but they had no mentors, so they could only teach themselves. And they did, spent night after night after night alone, studying their art. Weeknights, from his bedroom window, he might see the boy in the next house crouched under a crooked lamp, drafting murals in a sketchbook, blowing eraser shavings from the paper onto the floor, or see a boy with a flashlight sneaking into the ravine to experiment on the abandoned garden shed, testing acids for etches, wheatpastes for stencils, different lettering techniques. At nightfall, cutting between houses, he might stop at a garage window to watch a boy freestyling beneath a bare light bulb, practicing railstands, the garage door closed for privacy despite the sweltering weather, or stop at a mesh fence to watch a boy squatting beneath the moths whirling about the porch light there to examine a skateboard, knocking pebbles from the griptape, wiping wax from the deck, probing cracks. They were amateurs, essentially. They celebrated trivial breakthroughs, and dismissed recurrent disasters. They were considered toys, considered posers, considered kiddies, for their age alone. Acid burned holes into their tees. Wheatpaste crusted their sweatpants. Griptape frayed their shoelaces. Wax stained blotches into their jeans. They kept training. They were industrious, and studious, and did not do homework, ever.

Were they ever exhausted? Did they ever tear their sketchbooks apart, hurl their skate-

boards into the garbage, delete the script, delete all of the scripts, and curse the internet? Did they ever trudge together to the hill above the baseball diamond, collapse there onto the grass and clover? Wind blasted ripples into the grass, blowing twisting streams of seeds from the dandelions, knocking spotted butterflies adrift. The sunset was cloudy. There were no games today. Beyond the backstop, a couple, a man and a woman, had emerged from the dugout, now were walking the line where infield became outfield. Silhouettes, updating constantly, the woman adding links, removing links, to the man.

<body> head arms hands </body>

<body> head arms hands </body>

<body> head arms hands </body>

<body> head arms hands </body>

He hated seeing the couple finally separate. He always hated seeing people separate. Even the other boys, who could not write code, seemed to intuit that there was something unsettling about being a page that nothing linked to, a page that linked to nothing. They were shouting at the couple to kiss.

Celebrations were predictable. Birthdays, he knew were coming. Holidays, graduations, weddings, were penciled into the numbered boxes of the calendar hanging alongside the refrigerator, could be foreseen. He could gather his strength, focus all his energy on suppressing the malware, prepare himself for the surge.

But there were also things that he could not prepare himself for, unexpected encounters, unpredictable events. Like this man for example, at the park, at the soda stand, in the shadow of the awning—like this gnarled elderly man, wearing his polo and his khakis and his scuffed loafers, shaking his wooden cane, shouting at the vendor who had spilled a lemonade onto his wife's purse—he could be sunning, yawning, sitting on a bench with his family, and then see this man at the soda stand, shouting insults, obscenities, slurs, as the vendor cowered and apologized and mopped the purse with napkins and appeared on the verge of tears—see a person with power abusing somebody without.

Just like that, a surge could hit him, the malware could overrun his body—he was already crossing the plaza, leaving his family behind, cutting between patches of sunshine and tree shade, shoving between a pair of women with strollers, popping the lid from his own lemonade, his flip-flops snapping against the pavement, his body screaming with malware, he was already there, at the soda stand, where the man was still shouting, saw but didn't see him, there, trembling, breathing, raising his cup and then in a quick chopping motion swinging it at the man, the lemonade slicing through the air, hitting the man like a slap, drenching him and his clothes.

The man was not shouting anymore—now seemed only shocked, and almost sad.

He did, next, throw the cup.

By the time the cup had hit the man, had bounced into the grass, had settled into a nook between some tree roots there, he was getting dragged away by his parents. Toward the street, their parked minivan. The vendor, the boy in the striped uniform, now was pressing the man's shirt with napkins, apologizing, as if this spill too were his doing. Parkgoers were staring: dogwalkers from pathways, sunbathers from towels. His sisters looked bewildered. His parents looked furious. He had ruined their afternoon.

The ride home was quiet—the silence interrupted only by occasional gurgles, as his

sisters sucked at the straws of their lemonades.

Only later, as his family sat down for supper, did his parents finally address what he had done at the park.

We understand that that man was being disrespectful, his mother said, buttering spears of grilled asparagus.

But, also, you do not know that man, or anything about him, his father said, grinding pepper, then shaking salt, onto his corn. He may suffer from chronic pain, migraines or arthritis or lumbago, some condition. He may have recently suffered the loss of somebody in his family. His wife may have recently been diagnosed with cancer. He may have been feeling overheated.

He may have simply been having a difficult day, his mother said, spooning grilled mushrooms from the platter.

He was staring at his plate, gripping his fork and knife.

But that kid didn't mean to spill the drink, he muttered.

Yes, but do you understand that you cannot just attack people with—

But that kid didn't mean to spill the drink! he shouted. Oh, yes, his body was still the malware's—he had leapt onto his chair, wait now onto the tabletop, had dropped his silverware, was still shouting, yes the malware had his lungs, had his trachea, had his glottis vibrating, had his tongue shaping phonemes against his palate, had his lips shaping phonemes against his teeth, had him shouting, at his family, that none of them understood him, that none of them even tried to understand him, that he hated them, hated all of them, hated every one of them, yes the malware had his muscles, had his tendons, had his bones, had his arms swinging, had him pointing, at each person, his mother, his father, then this sister, then that sister, then the youngest one, shouting that he hated her, that he hated him, that he hated her, that he hated her, that he hated her, specifically.

Then leapt down to the floor, hurried away toward the staircase, like somebody fleeing the scene of a crime, leaving behind a cluster of stricken victims, which he was, which he was.

He hid in the basement. All night, he hid in the basement, at the computer, thinking only about code, losing himself in keystrokes, focusing on letters and brackets and numbers and slashes, so he wouldn't have to think about what he had done, wouldn't have to feel shame, or regret, or sorrow, or guilt, wouldn't have to feel anything, about anything, whatsoever. His body was still bristling with malware. His family would never speak to him again.

Upstairs, there was the clatter of plates, the scrape of silverware clearing steak gristle and potato skin into the trash. Then the thrum of the dishwasher, footsteps withdrawing. Later, somebody, a sister, crooning a question. Later, the hiss and click as the dishwasher finished. Later, the murmur of the television, and then that too went quiet. Water gushed through pipes as toilets were flushed, face wash and toothpaste and hand soap rinsed down the drains. Then the lights shut off, and the house was silent.

The windows were cracked, downstairs, treefrogs warbling outside. Aside from typing, he had not moved in hours. He was stuck, trying to work through a new script, could not figure out where he had gone wrong. He had decided to keep coding, not to sleep at all.

He was troubleshooting—posting queries, skimming tutorials—when he was jolted out of the internet, back to the basement, by the sound of the staircase creaking. A stair creaked—the railing creaked—another stair creaked—a shadow was gliding into the basement. The shadow paused, at the bottom of the stairs. Then the shadow slid toward the computer.

In the glow of the screen, a sister appeared, the youngest one, wrapped in a blanket (#FF00FF) and wearing a wool ski mask (#FFCCFF).

She could not sleep, she said. Her room gave her nightmares, she said. Somewhere between her bedroom and the basement, she had lost a sock. She said she needed to sleep here.

He was almost certain she had invented the nightmares, so that he could not tell her to go back up to her room.

As he typed, she slept under the desk, curled around his flip-flops, on her blanket, like a watchdog. The malware finally receded, gave him back his body. This time she had found him.

Classified printouts truly did help him sleep. Military reports soothed him. Operational messages, written in obscure jargon, riddled with references to vague entities with vague ambitions, usually dropped him straight from wide awake to deep sleep. Tonight, however, he had read a document that made sleep impossible. The document concerned a missing bomb.

Hundreds of nuclear weapons had been lost, fumbled into different habitats worldwide: a fjord in Greenland, seabed off the coast of Spain, a marsh in the Carolinas, seabed off the coast of Georgia. But those were the bombs that jets had lost—warheads on missiles. Worse yet were the bombs portable enough for people to carry—the nukes that could fit in a backpack.

The document, dated eleven hours earlier, reported intelligence that an unnamed terrorist organization had recently smuggled such a bomb to Pennsylvania, plotting that upcoming weekend to incinerate the city of Philadelphia.

As dawn began brightening his bedroom through the curtain, he lay staring at the spackle on the ceiling, clutching the printout, imagining what a bomb like that could do to a body.

<bod>y>y>y <p> eyse uose chkees tnguoe tteeh j a w kcen sshoulder

swoble swrist hauqs <\b> >>><poq\y>

Mutate everything. A total breakdown of code. Leave behind a city of corpses, pinned beneath rubble, clutching at air.

In the kitchen, on the television, the news had nothing to say about the plot. There was no emergency bulletin, no evacuation announcement. He ate yogurt. His sisters ate soggy cereal. His parents stood sipping coffee, waiting for bread to pop toasted out of the toaster.

He wasn't supposed to know what he knew.

So, he told nobody. Not his family, none of the other boys, nobody.

How did he spend the week? That final week? Before his grandparents, out strolling their neighborhood, would be charred to death by the nuclear firestorm, before his parents at the university would be blinded by the flash of light and then crushed beneath the collapsing library, before his sisters would be poisoned by a whirlwind of radiation, and days later perish after suffering nausea and tremors and delirium and seizures, and such great thirst, begging him for water he could not find?

He spent the week doing things he never would have done otherwise. Totally ordinary things. He was afraid, very afraid, of dying, and so he was selfish: he stopped protecting everybody, instead put his family within striking distance of the malware constantly. When his sisters called him from the backyard, he didn't step back from the window, crawl into his closet, hide there until his sisters had quit trying—he ran into the yard, and knelt at the fence, and inspected the smudged pawprints his sisters had found there in the clay. When his parents called him from the kitchen, he didn't jam headphones on, hunch toward the screen, pretend he hadn't heard—he bounded up the staircase, and sat on a

stool at the counter, and sampled the steaming tarts his parents had baked with their new recipe. When his grandparents drove in from town to visit, he didn't slip away to the ravine, sit in the abandoned garden shed, pass time throwing rusted screws at the wooden planks—he swung on the porch swing, between his grandparents, and listened to them tell anecdotes about landlords, as jets sketched contrails onto the sky, as jets sketched distrails into the clouds.

And the malware struck, and struck, and struck. He shrugged at the discovery in the clay, spit out the tart and left the tart unfinished, didn't laugh or nod or even acknowledge that he had heard the anecdotes. He snapped heads from dolls. He interrupted movies with groans and boos. He kicked pillows, slammed cabinets, jammed toothbrushes into the drains of sinks, hurled board game pieces at the walls.

And only now did he see, truly notice, what he had seen so many times before. When he shrugged at the discovery in the clay, his sisters looked hurt—but then dragged him away to another discovery, a snail with a whorled shell journeying up the downspout of the house. When he spit out the tart, his parents looked offended—but then offered him a cup of milk, brushed some flour from his tank top, asked if he wanted to go for a hike or a bike ride or take a trip to the park. On the porch swing, beneath the contrails and the distrails of the jets circling the airport, his grandparents kept making jokes, asking questions, telling anecdotes, as if willing to suffer any amount of rudeness in their quest to make him smile. The malware wasn't any secret. They all knew his malware was there. They were always so eager to have him near, not in spite of his malware, but because of. They fixed their dolls, then tracked him to his bedroom, ambushed him with hugs. They hushed his groaning, his booing during movies, then patted him from across the couch. He finally understood what he had begun to understand that night that his sister had slept under the desk, her hands linked to his feet. That he did not have to protect his family from the

malware—that what he had to do was something far more difficult, something far more perilous, which was to let his family protect him. He could fall apart, during their board game. They would pick up his pieces.

At nighttime, while his family slept, he read articles about nuclear bombs, poured through images of victims and survivors.

In daytime, he lived endless final moments. He jerked whenever sunlight flashed against the window. He winced, flinched, whenever the wind slammed shut a door, a truck backfired in the road. He waited, and waited, and waited. The weekend came, the weekend went, and the bomb never blew.

Had the bomb been faulty? Had the bomb been captured by the military? Had the bomb even existed? Yet another random experience: believing you are on the verge of losing everything, when you are actually on the verge of eating a sandwich.

The sandwich had mozzarella, basil, and heirloom tomatoes. His parents had made the sandwich for him after getting home from work. He loved the sandwich, although the malware wouldn't let him say that. He stood barefoot in the yard, chewing the sandwich, scowling. His sisters were chalking hopscotch courses on the driveway. The other boys roared by, pushing each other in clattering wheelbarrows, shouting his name. Dragonflies flurried past, a glittering swarm of flickering wings. His parents stepped from the house onto the porch, eating apples, having changed into tees and shorts. He was damaged, he was infected, his system corrupted. They could have been happier, much, much, much happier, without him. But here they were anyway. Crossing the grass. Munching the apples. Linking their pages to his.

</html>

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

Acknowledgements

"html" originally appeared in *Hayden's Ferry Review* in 2014.

License