

Barry, the Balding Eagle.

Barry, the Bombastic. Barry the Bold. The Brave? No. He's none. None of the standard monikers a young B-named eagle could hope for. Barry instead became the Balding Eagle. A joke. His species, of course, is quite full feathered, a rarity to see even a glimpse of scalp. Barry, however, has not one but two bald spots, and they're large. One right above his eyes, rendering his forehead barren and concave like his brains had been mined and depleted. The other, back of the head, the classic spot. The situation is such that any animal, from any direction, can at any given time see at least one of the two spots and go, "There's Barry, the Balding Eagle!"

His constellated identity orbits like two static moons. This inverse force, the celestial stillness of it, is in some way a comfort to Barry, for, as long as he can remember, he's wanted nothing more than to be a star, to be famous, a lone and emanating light upon the masses. And he knows that he holds a place in the minds of his fellow creatures—he has, after all, a literal sphere of influence, his bald-headed beacon radiating in every direction from the placid sky above Catalina Island. But at best he's just a local icon; at worst he's nothing more than some kitschy novelty.

He needs to rebrand. He's not the young adonis he'd hoped to be, but he can still be dignified, respected. For this reason (or else some innate animal duty, ancient and cell-ciphered) Barry continues with his preordained life plan: returning to his ancestral home of Big Bear Lake, finding and courting a suitable female—one with mass and strength and not much of a taste for feathers—and generating offspring. It's as simple as that, two words, a verb and a noun. Generate offspring. The most natural thing in the world.

Barry's seen the movies. He's seen the way humans belabor the issue. The mulling, the consternation. But reproduction to him is as seamless as flying, connecting two distinct points in

space with the fluid movement of bodies. It's commensurate with living; it's worth dying for. And indeed, it had been his breathtaking death-plunge (talons locked with his mate-to-be, dragging her into a free-fall that broke so late their talons shattered the water's surface and their respective upsweeps, wide and arching, drew a shimmering heart above the lake) that won him his mate, and soon thereafter, his children, the wriggling amniotic concepts of which lie inert and pregnant with foreboding, glass sculptures balanced upon a crumbling pillar.

He built the nest high, guided by nothing but instinct. Away and up. His body knew the way. May the sky swaddle the eggs. May the deadly distance between nest and highway swell up and catch beneath their future wings, may it carry them across Time's bending horizon.

#

"Mudworms?"

"Argentinian mudworms, yes."

"And he grinds them up?"

"And eats them, yes."

"Does he add salt?"

"Salt?"

"Yeah, salt. Or hot sauce? I could maybe do it with hot sauce."

The men stop walking to catch their breath, guzzle some water, roll their necks stiff from skyward craning. They hike on.

"This isn't some culinary exploration or macho gag-test ritual—this is about life, Albert. Extending life. It tastes like ground up mudworm slime because that's exactly what it is and all it needs to be."

"Well, I don't see any market viability if you don't at least add salt."

“I don’t see why market viability should be any of his concern.”

“Oh, come on Frank, you know all too well that scientific discovery doesn’t mean a thing unless it translates to a marketable product.”

“I *don’t* know such a thing, and I resent the comment.”

Dr. Francis Schopenhaur, or Frank as he’s called only by this newfound partner, is a rigid man of the biological sciences. At sixty-two he’s fit, pessimistic, and hard to talk to; he wears a lot of khaki and those SPF-imbued sunhats with the drawstrings cinched beneath his chin. However, despite his somewhat cliché outdoor-academic aesthetic, he’s made a name for himself with his innovative methods of receiving funding. Early on, he found that by tying his research on developmental biology to the burgeoning pop psychology movement he’d have ready access to grant money, ancillary revenue streams, and easily publishable content. In academia you find your niche and chip away at it, like wind intent on shaping a canyon.

In the eighties, as a bright-eyed Stanford post-doc, Frank sold replicas of Bandura’s Bobo dolls to hipster-intellectual parents across the country. For a small discount, parents could participate in his research measuring both when and how violent tendencies develop in children and how they’re mitigated by parents’ historical knowledge of psychological research. His provocatively titled paper *Get Your Head out of Your Ass: Anal-retentive parenting in the anal stage* won him his tenure-track position at Berkley, a book deal, and a whirlwind publicity tour of all the country’s prominent morning talk shows.

Now, more than thirty years later, though he may have fallen from the zeitgeist, he’s perfected his approach, finding the internet to be especially accommodating. The “marketable product” to which Albert so mockingly refers is the multi-pronged social media plan Frank designed to capture, share, and, yes, commodify the bald eagle rearing they aim to study. A

Facebook group for the forty-five-pluses, an Instagram for the millennials, regular TikToks for the kids, and all the while, a YouTube livestream, unflinching and stark, for the whole world to watch along. The platform diversification casts not only the widest possible net (and reels in more income, to boot), but allows for audience segmentation and the fruitful comparative analyses this will breed. Reproduction as it's witnessed. This is the real target of his research, a fact that Albert finds queasily anthropological.

Southern California's preeminent eagle scientist, Albert's interests lie solely in the nesting habits of the bird and the quantifying of their egg viability, which has been closely monitored ever since the DDT environmental impact studies of the sixties and seventies. This is true particularly in the contaminated regions surrounding the Palos Altos peninsula where much of the pesticide was produced and subsequently ocean-dumped. Having settled into the sediment, the toxic pesticide gets consumed by worms, and makes its way up the food chain. Via bioaccumulation, the chemical is amplified with each rung, which can result, in the worst cases, in lethal doses being found in eagles. Perhaps more pervasive, however, is the effect it has on eggshell density, thinning the shells such that the weight of a brooding mother is enough to crush her offspring. The work, to Albert, is honorable, transcendent. It may be generations yet before they know the full extent of DDT's impact on the reproduction of bald eagles. But someday, in part because of his research, they'll know. Wind in a canyon.

"So he eats mudworm slime every day for five years and adds twenty years onto his life?"

Frank shoots a hot look of scorn over his shoulder, coy and fragile at the lip. "He did not *add* twenty years to his life. No one can *add* years to their life."

"Yeah, yeah, he becomes younger, elixir of life, et cetera."

“After consuming Argentinian mudworm slime for five years and conducting meticulous testing, he determined that his body acted, metabolically, like that of a man twenty years younger.”

“Well, I bet he got a bunch of chicks.”

“I wouldn’t know about that.”

“Did he ever marry?”

“Six times.”

The men share a laugh, which, for Frank, manifests merely as a wetness of the eye, a wryness of the lip.

“So? How far did he make it? I’m dying here.”

Frank stops for effect. Bending slightly, the physical embodiment of a wink, “Forty-three. Car crash.”

Albert supplies the spit take. “Tragic,” he gasps between his water-choked laughs. “And so *metabolically* young, too.” His howls shock the birds into relief, all of them black against the bleached sky, and the men’s eyes are pulled upward. Clutching at each other and missing, not wanting for a second to peel their eyes away from the prized sight: at the very top of the tree, nearly three feet wide, the nest of a bald eagle.

#

A couple in a car. Convertible. California. Trees and mud-brambles scream into rearview. Screams of course defined by the silence that follows. Like that sudden darkness that starts at tunnel entrance. She switches off the radio. It feels stupid. Superfluous in the hush of this subterranean intimacy.

He looks at her. Looks back at the road.

“Anyway, can I have some peanuts, babe?” he says.

She looks at him and kicks out a breathy little scoff, tongue literally in cheek, cute and stylized.

““Anyway, can I have some peanuts, babe?’ ‘Anyway, can I have some peanuts, babe?’”

She repeats it another five to ten times. It’s a thing she does. Each time morphing her intonation slightly as if to suggest with each rendition a new offending word...*Anyway? Babe? Some?!*

And the reason for the incredulous repeating he never knows. Sometimes it’s that she thought it was a weird way to say whatever it was that he said. Sometimes that she was pondering it, turning it over in her mind, aloud. Sometimes she just liked how it sounded. Sometimes she was profoundly offended, and other times she was just pulling his leg. He just has to wait see.

After several questions that begin, “Do you *really* think...?” he gathers that it wasn’t what he said, but what he didn’t. That those words, reverberating after her verbal flagellation, teased out and hovering like a mother’s hairspray, were wrong in that he used them to fill the moment that called for such different words. Also, clearly, it was a poor choice of snack.

Apologies. Sunshine. Pop music. The cleansing of American highways: the vast lush of muted landscapes. His hand on her thigh, fingers tapping a 4/4 apology, transcribing the words he can’t say. Cement engine: the stillness of blasting off. Bridges roar by like ruler markings in the sky, each one the memory of a *whoosh*.

A couple in a car on a highway going fast.

#

Blake the Ranger has a billowing sexuality, if not vague and inert. Muscles, just-too-large burst from the khaki edges of his sleeves and his shorts, cropped short before the bicep, several inches above the knee. His curly blonde hair a gelled ice sculpture of innocence, one you watch, hot-breathed, waiting to melt. He smiles sweetly. He does what he's told. Naturally, the men treat him with a dominatrix's disdain.

"Up here, Blake," says Frank—putting words to his eye roll. Blake shoots up from his ass-enlarging squat and trots over, Baywatchian. He stands erect before them, beaming, presenting in his outstretched palms a rock of some sort. Frank sighs. "What's that, Blake."

"*This*," he says with nauseating affection, stroking the rock with his thick, earth-calloused finger, "is a crystal *formerly* known as, 'Magnesio-katophorite!'" he says in a voice like an old-timey radio broadcaster from a Superman movie, left arm akimbo, right, holding the rock, stretched triumphantly toward the stars. "But after the great katophorite group shakeup of 2012, the amphibole nomenclature now just refers to it as katophorite."

"Fascinating, Blake, really," says Albert without even looking up, withdrawing things from his bag. "Now drop it and come over here."

Blake looks down at the rock and then up, big-eyed, at Frank. "I thought I could add it to the display in the Visitors Center."

"Fine, we'll put it in the bag," says Frank, averting his eyes and shooing away the ranger's sheepish gaze. "Just go and get loaded up. This is the tree."

Blake tilts his square head upward and lets out one of his long, awestruck gasps, dripping with unquestioned pleasure.

“Look doable?” asks Albert as he clips around the ranger’s neck a camera, a microphone.

He scans the tree from base to tip, brows furrowed like a soldier’s surveying the battlefield. He looks Albert in the eye and gives a hard nod.

Albert, like Frank, can’t stand to look directly into his milky blue eyes, so it’s to the ground that he says, “Alright, up you go. Quickly, while the birds are out.”

And it’s with an impossible grace that this burly man slinks up the tree, muscles squeezing and pulling his way up the slick trunk. In no time at all, he reaches the penultimate branch (the highest, which houses the nest, being unclimbable). It’s quite a stretch to the nest, so it’s on tippy-toes with arm fully extended that he maneuvers and adjusts the camera, this way and that, to the tune of Albert’s barked instructions, which he yells into the screen of a satellite viewfinder from the ground below: “Left! The other left! Get it higher and angle it down! Better! A little more! Oh!” he suddenly cries, putting a hand over his gaping mouth. “Eggs. We have eggs!”

“We have eggs?” says Frank with excitement. “We have eggs! Hot damn!” he exclaims with a celebratory hand clap—it’s always awkward to see stoic men feeling giddy.

But Albert’s excitement is sufficient enough to smooth over such idiosyncrasies. His joy is free and abundant and easily shared amongst the men. He puts his arm around Frank’s shoulder and shouts, “We have eggs!”

The moment is cut short by the grating *pssst* from Ranger Blake above.

“What, Blake?” spits Albert, with more aggression than he intended. Once one has started yelling, it’s hard to accept the reality of whispering.

Blake, silent, points up.

Registering finally his behavior as something beyond vexing sounds and movements, the men look at the viewfinder and gasp. An eagle has landed in the nest and stares, head cocked, directly into the camera.

“The male,” whispers Albert.

“Are those...bald spots?” asks Frank.

“Could be a birth defect. DDT perhaps.”

“Well,” says Frank with a little laugh. “It’s Barry, the Balding Eagle!”

And so high are the spirits in which the men return to base camp that they’ve even taken to entertaining Blake’s plodding rock-talk.

“Interesting!” booms Albert as he thrusts through the door, actually meaning it this time. “Really, very interesting.” He’s cut short by the site of his wife and his nine-year-old son, who, to his utter terror, has in his arms a shamefully familiar inflatable woman. It’s dressed up in Albert’s clothes: an old golfing polo and a pair of khaki pants cinched on by his favorite belt, crudely modified to accommodate the enticingly slim waste.

“Sindra? What are you doing here?”

“I’m leaving you,” says his wife.

Frank is the first to move. As light and subtle a movement as you'd expect of him, but it's amplified into a kind of mechanical screech on account of his windbreaker. He places a hand on Albert's shoulder and gives it a little squeeze. Then he swishes off with Blake close on heel.

"Where is this coming from? What is *that*?"

"You know damn well what that is."

"Well, sure, we can talk about *that* later, but why does my little buddy have it?" he says, managing to build across the sentence both his sense of playfulness and aggression, smiling at his son and glaring at his wife.

"*That* is your son's father."

"What? The fuck what? The fuck what?" his brain temporarily broken, "The fuck what?"

"You're never home!"

"I'm away on this research trip, sure. For a month. I'm coming home on the weekends. You know this!"

"We thought you abandoned us!"

"Sindra, what the fuck is happening? Why did you say that *that* is his father?"

"You're an absentee father, Albert. Textbook. There's no way around it."

"I flatly disagree."

"You're an absentee father, and so your son latched onto this...*avatar* to fill the fatherless hole in his heart."

“This is my first research trips in three years. Until last week, I’ve come home every single night!”

“Yes. Right. You come before dinner and leave after breakfast. We know what we are to you.”

“Yes, I go to work, Sindra. That’s how work works!”

“You’ve been an absentee father ever since his conception. You know it’s true. You wanted an abortion.”

“Jesus, not in front of him.”

“Why? It makes no difference to him. He doesn’t think of you as his father. He thinks the doll is his father.”

“But I *am* his father. I am your father,” he says to the boy, who’s been looking Albert placidly in the eye this whole time, a blank and patient curiosity playing across his eyebrows. “He knows that, right?”

“It doesn’t matter what he knows. It matters what he thinks.”

“Well, I think this is fucked up.”

“Don’t curse in front of him.”

“Oh, right!” he cackles maniacally. “Right!”

“We’re going to Chile.”

“Oh?” he says, unable to stop chuckling.

“Yes, to the Andean Institute for Boys with Placeholder Fathers.”

“That is not real.”

“To you, no. I suppose not. Not unless it’s observed and empirically studied, right?”

“Don’t even.”

“I suppose you’ll stay here then? Watching birds sit on eggs?”

“Yes, Sindra. I have to. This is my work. It’s important.”

“Right. Because the eagles wouldn’t lay eggs if you weren’t watching, right? Their whole reproductive cycle would spinout and dissolve if you weren’t there to, what? Count their eggs?”

“Please don’t invalidate my life’s work with your jejune philosophy. Please do not do that!”

Their conversation fizzles into knee-jerk bickering that is, at its core, about thought. It’s what makes their marriage work. True academics the both of them—comparative literature and eagle science, respectively—thought is the only plane of existence they choose to occupy in any meaningful way. The flappy, material realities of their lives, meanwhile, saunter by. She moves to the door. They kiss goodbye.

“Have fun in the Andes,” he says, tousling the boy’s hair.

He doesn’t react but drags his proxy father behind him along the floor. It’s less a *pop* than a *puh*, dull and muted behind the greasy golf shirt. The boy’s scream is terror, unvarnished. A scream a child should never utter. But what’s really surprising, and pleasantly noted by Albert, is the boy’s confidence, which erupts at last, sharp and clear.

“Father!” melodramatic as he sinks to the ground, catching his head and laying it into his lap. He pinches the gash in the plastic and whispers “Hold on,” into his father’s ear. “You! You did this,” he screams, looking up at his father.

“Me?”

“Mark my words. At the dawn of my manhood, I will return. And I will avenge my father’s murder!”

Albert looks at his wife. She rolls her eyes, which lift with them a sigh from deep within her chest.

“Now fix him!” whines the boy. He begins to cry.

After much fumbling and frustrated attempts to smoosh the torn plastic around his lips to create an airtight seal, Albert retrieves some duct tape and a plastic straw. A man of science!

“See,” he says, as he applies the final strip of tape, “just a bandage for his booboo and he’s good as new-new!”

His son glares at him with an almost mythological loathing. He turns on a heel and, without another word, climbs into the back seat of his mother’s car.

“I’ll send the papers,” says Sindra. “Or Terrance will. You know.”

“I think I do, yeah.”

#

A camera. How incredibly fortuitous. A camera situated squarely and focused on the very locus of his newfound fatherly identity. A Californian after all, Barry knows that a camera is the

sine qua non of fame. He struts. He puffs his chest and spreads his wings. He becomes blindingly aware of his bald spots, cocks his head this way and that, searches for the optimal angle, feathery and flattering.

Amazing, the power this little device has over him. It's not much more than a rock. He investigates, looks all around and behind it, gives it a few testing pecks. But he knows of its ghostly abilities, at least on an instinctual level, faith-like and relenting: stand before its gaze and be reproduced, ad infinitum, in the awestruck eyes of the world. It isn't until this moment, however, that he realizes the courage such edification requires. To stare down the lens' vacuum hose, not knowing where you're being taken, not knowing what is left.

He shakes himself free from the camera's suctioning, hoping to shed too some of this embarrassing self-doubt. He's acting like a total amateur. Gingerly he nestles back atop the eggs—he'd already been off them for too long—and focuses on projecting warmth, a kind of fatherly grace. Unsure of himself and feeling awkward, he twitches his head left and right. He wonders when the mother will return; she only left to stretch her wings, leaving him this brief and infrequent bout of paternal duty. He shuffles and squirms, his brood patch smaller than hers, less capable. It barely stretches wide enough for both eggs to make contact with the heat of his skin. She's taking longer than he expected, and his mind begins to spin out, flailing in the unsettling stillness. Is this it? Is he doing it right? Is this really all he's supposed to do? He calms his nerves with the image of himself landing gallantly on nest's edge with a glistening bass arching supple and expectant from his beak. Despite the burgeoning confidence this self-projection fosters, he's relieved (and ashamed of it) when she presently returns.

Magnificence. He can practically hear the world's collective gasp on the other side of the lens. Utter magnificence, he can't help but admit. He'll never top that entrance, he knows:

descending from the top of the frame, her broad wings catching, it must have seemed, the entirety of the wide-open sky. No, neither his wingspan nor his coordination will allow for such an entrance, and he refuses to be upstaged—scratch that element of his debut. He shuffles over, careful not to knock the eggs. She slides on swift with the hefty, determined grace of a mother. So quickly in fact that she generates a waft, carrying upon its force the stench of betrayal. There's nothing uncertain about it: she's fishy. In her spontaneity, her skill, she must have spotted, lunged, gulped in postpartum voracity a fish for herself. Slash that too then from this tattered plan. He scuffles to a nearby branch, a lookout. It's all he can do. He's not even sure if he's in frame but that doesn't stop him from furtively casting his brazened eyes in little jabs around the vista. Inwardly he prays for a threat, something menacing yet small enough he could kill it without her help.

#

A couple in a car on a highway going fast.

Idaho plates lending punches to rearview drivers eager to mete their violence according to structured games of highway chance. It's hard to say what's worse, the drive there or the drive back. Of course, now, there's a kind of relief, the Vacation being over, completed. But then again, driving away from the setting sun slipping ecstatic into the Californian shore feels like a kind of death knell, if not an outright death. But again, as always, the question of the positionality of suffering: is it the exploding orange angulars setting behind them (the warmth of a dying day splayed spectral across the curvature of tomorrow), or is it what lies ahead of them, the silence of a dew-soaked dell?

Driving heartland-ward, empty, diagnosing the causes of the pits in their respective stomachs.

Vacation had been an effective euphemism, though it wasn't employed for any moral squeamishness. In the privacy of their apartment, they had been quick to lob the clinical terminology, at least she had: the procedure, the evacuation, the abortion, her abortion; she would look him in the eye: my abortion. She hated that Hemingway story about hills and white elephants, a woman's suffering cast to the horizon of a male's gaze, unuttered, only taking shape in the implication that issues from his lips. For his part, had been less emboldened, but armed with the requisite political and scientific knowledge of the day, he was able to compartmentalize what was surely his upbringing-related emotions until her linguistic brazenness could rub off on him. And indeed it did, and then some. Being young Americans equipped with both the language of their enemies and their compatriots, they had precipitously descended into a protective lair of irony, one in which they could, without ever drawing their blackout curtains, transmogrify themselves into shadow-people capable of walking the sun-bleached Boise streets as both martyr and murderer—not truly either but not really interested in going outside anyway. He'd press his cheek to her wholly unaltered belly and say things like *Our little peanut is going to grow up to be the best blob of biohazardous waste this country has ever seen*. She'd say things like *Oh! I felt the clump of cells kick!* or *Aww, it just said its first declarative sentence: "Get me outta here!"* No, they referred to it as a vacation, as The Vacation, because their trip, according to Idaho state law, is illegal, he an "abortion trafficker". The best way to lie is to convince yourself you're telling the truth, so they referred to it as such and planned accordingly, even opting to drive all the way to L.A. rather than the much closer Portland, so as to not arouse suspicion. Plus, they liked the idea of passing through Salt Lake City and then Las Vegas. Straight from the holy-

roller mecca through Sin City itself. It felt apt. And aside from dark irony, finding cosmic confirmations of one's internal cynicism ranks as a top tenet of today's youth culture. *I want to see a stripper. I want to see a pregnant stripper* she had said in a crazed late-night planning session.

They stop for gas. As he's pumping, he studies a billboard for San Bernardino National Forest. Next Exit, it says.

"Should we go?"

"We're already behind schedule."

"Come on, it's so close. It won't add more than a couple hours to the trip."

"You know how you get around trees?"

"How do I get around trees?"

"You know."

"I don't know! Please, tell me how I get around trees."

"You get all calm and Bob Ross-y. It's creepy. Whispering things like, 'Do you hear that? It's the tree creaking in the wind.'"

"So I find nature soothing. What's so weird about that? I feel like we could both use a little natural cleansing."

"I don't. That's the last thing I want. I want strippers with fat asses devouring their thongs. I want bottles in the club and tobacco-hazed craps tables. I want people vomiting on the streets. I want drunk women screaming at each other, pulling hair and swinging purses."

“It’s right here,” he says with a smile, sugary and simple, as he settles back into the driver’s seat.

“Fine, but we’re not stopping. Just driving through.”

A couple in a car on a highway going fast.

#

Following the family crisis, aired out like mysteriously stained laundry, the keyboard clacks and mouse clicks attenuating the awkward silence form a kind of aural rendering of a pointillist veneer, the impression, when viewed from afar, of normalcy, of business-as-usual. But from Ranger Blake’s vantage, peering nervously over his rock-twiddling fingers, the situation could not be more dire.

Denial! Thinks Blake. A condition the man, who wears his heart not just on his sleeve but on every skimpy item in his wardrobe, considers to be of the utmost severity. Emotions, to Blake, are physical threads of the human body no different than muscle fibers, and just the same, when sore and inflamed, they need to be stretched and rubbed and soothed. In short, they need to be addressed. In all things, the ranger endeavors to limit the barrier between his physical self and the natural world around him, to be “one with nature” as the cliché goes—one which he, a professional, finds rather trite and leaves to the tourists with sticker-laden water bottles and Subarus—and pain, both physical and psychological, represents one of the greatest inhibitors of the natural movement of bodies through space, of picking up rocks, for example, and seeing in them the crystallized meaning of being a solid something amidst the ever-expanding universal rush. He must intervene.

“Albert?”

The scientist's back stiffens upon the affront, this tactless and vexing assault on the silent fortifications he's established. He exhales and his shoulders relax.

"What is it Blake," he says with the usual disdain, still typing, words spilling out regardless of thought, of mental location.

"I just want you to know, I'm here if you want to talk. You know, about what happened."

Frank shoots him an eye-corner look, shakes his head, and resumes his computational activity (that is, simultaneously googling the AIBPF, looking at plane tickets to Chile, and writing a new research proposal).

"What happened?"

Blake isn't sure if he's incredulously repeating the euphemistic phrase or if he's genuinely asking. He focuses instead on projecting both warmth and worry with a series of eyebrow and mouth contortions.

"Talk about what, Blake?" he clarifies, not without a tinge of vitriol.

"Your wife? Your son?"

"What about them? So they're going to Chilies, who cares? Let the kid eat all the chicken tenders he wants."

"Chilies? That's not what I heard."

"Or Applebee's, whatever."

"She said she's taking him to Chile. The country?"

“Look, Blake, my wife is what you might call ‘an Eccentric.’ She’s probably at this very moment driving around in circles, chain smoking cigarettes, and listening to Bulgarian hip hop.”

“Albert, I’m only saying this because I feel that we’ve grown to become close friends—”

“It’s been a week, Blake.”

“—but I just think you’re not, you know, accepting reality here.”

“Don’t talk to me about my wife and reality.”

“She said she’s leaving you!”

“And she did, didn’t she? She left the room, she left the park. She leaves me all the time! You don’t understand. Words to her are like...it’s all metaphor, or irony, or some other kind of linguistic tomfoolery. Reality and my wife don’t belong in the same sentence. Here’s the only reality I’ve ever known of her: she has incredibly interesting things to say about Tudor feminism, she’s fantastic in the sack, and I love her very much.”

“And what about your son?”

“What about him?”

“Aren’t you worried about him?”

“Oh shit,” interjects Frank. “Oh shit. Fuck.”

“What?”

“The nest is collapsing.”

The storm accommodates, whipping up leaves and pine needles to match their frenzy; or else they match the storm: calling up inside themselves fresh gusts of worry, a deluge of adrenaline to meet the wind screaming through the trees. A thunderous crack freezes them until they're awakened by the branch's crash and splintering upon the forest floor some fifteen feet to their left. The men look at each other and they begin to run.

Barry holds his vigil—he's no stranger to the elements. But this wind is unusual. It feels momentous. He steels himself to it, clenches his talons around the branch and squints through the force of the air swirling frenetic around him. This is all an eagle can do. When the topmost branch cracks and shifts a few degrees groundward, he meets his partner's eyes with a similar look, futureless and steady. She gives a little shake to fluff up her feathers and looks back out over the lake.

"We should really close the top, babe."

"What?"

"We should really close the top!" she yells into the wind.

"No, no. You said we're *not* stopping!"

"Seriously, it's going to rain soon!"

"Bring it on, baby! I am one with nature! The elements feed my soul!"

"I'm not joking. I just felt a raindrop!"

Punctuated by pants and sharp, lung-stinging gasps, Albert barks instructions as they run.

“If the branch hasn’t—collapsed—just reposition the camera—but—if it looks like it’s going to fall—try to get the eggs into this,” and he tosses an insulated lunch box to Blake. “You might get a little—pecked.”

They reach the tree and Blake scrambles up the trunk. About halfway up, his eyes lock with the non-roosting eagle, who presently initiates his defensive maneuvers, swooping and clawing at the ranger’s exposed flesh. The academics below wince.

“Just keep climbing Blake!” shouts Albert.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Frank says to him. Impressed if not afraid of his cruelty.

“Just wave your arm, he’ll leave you alone!”

“Come down, Blake! It’s not worth it!”

“Not worth it?” spits Albert, turning on Frank. “Who are you to say it’s not worth it? After what we’ve done to them? Every single eagle egg is worth all we can give. Every single one!”

“Get down from there, Blake!”

Albert shoves him, and, caught unawares, he falls hard to the ground.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“You’re almost there, Blake! Get the eggs! You can do it!”

The eagle retreats, issues a couple powerful wingbeats, and turns a sharp semicircle, homing in on the malignant tree-beast, who dutifully continues his nestward climb. Before he reaches his target, talons extended and attack-ready, a terrible crack once again disseminates a

stillness over the scene. Barry, at the last second, twists his body upward and lands on a branch just in time to see his nest, his eggs and their mother, tumbling amongst the branches, the latter, having knocked her head and unable to orient herself in the gravitational onslaught of branches, falls to the ground, just short of the craggy ridge the tree extends above. The two eggs, however, catch on a fascicle of pine needles and launch with a lateral trajectory out over the ridge, plummeting to the highway below.

“I’m telling you, if my hair gets wet, I’m going to be seriously pissed!”

“Ah, this is heaven! Do you smell the trees? This is exactly what I needed!”

She rolls her eyes. He’s even worse than she anticipated, spreading his non-steering arm wide and throwing his head back in affectation of religious awe. “Eyes on the road, babe. Eyes on the road!”

But those very eyes have grown wide, his awe morphed into terror. As the car veers into oncoming traffic, she lunges for the wheel while he moves to shield his face from the attacking eagle, barreling down from the sky. A splat supplies the crescendo to the long and baritone honking of the oncoming semi. Inches from his face, the eagle pulls up, rising gallantly into the sky, one of the eggs held gently between its talons. He pumps his wings, hovering in place, and looks around at the shambles of his home and his progeny, unsure where to land with this fragile future cracking in his clutches. She manages to steer the car safely to the highway shoulder while he wipes the egg from his face.

Everything is still and silent as the decimated present gives way to the future.

The End