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Despite confusing display, unyielding surfaces, the city is not inhospitable to a competent culinary shopper, an expert at gathering groceries. She is impervious to ploys, indifferent to novelty. There is no longer anything new, nothing new happens anymore. This is the conclusion toward which Nietzsche points with his aperçu that “God is dead.” As Walter Benjamin points out, since then humans have had “to face with heroic composure” the eternal return of the same. But even that heroism is lost to us now. Everything is new and that is what’s no longer new ——— the lack of novelty in the endless iterations of newness. Nothing old occurs anymore, either, except novelty’s old news. History, in that sense, is dead too. Everything is the same. It is all hum and grid. Rhubarb is rote; edamame has entered Standard English. There are two large supermarkets equidistant from the building in which I live, one ten blocks south, one ten blocks northwest. I am entirely familiar with the way they are laid out. Produce to the right as one enters the door, against the wall. Citrus first. Nonetheless, shocks proliferate; what returns is perpetually unfamiliar ——— every commodity is unprecedented, though unsurprising. Within every story another story is hidden, autonomous and unfolding though scarcely noticed except now and then, inadvertently, when, just as with a slip of the tongue a woman exposes a bit of the turbulent life underway in her unconscious mind, a rat scurries through an open window with a doll’s head in its mouth, or a man shouts a couplet from a passing bus:

o queens of urbanity, kings of the crush
let’s sing of convenience, importance, and plush

Feral children come off the fire escapes. A highly educated mother masturbates triumphantly. Her name may be Alice Milligan Webster, but that name is significant only to those for whom it names her ——— it has only that local significance, if

any. The city has 101,377 names, around 9800 per square mile. Maxine Able Smith, Leo X. Lee, Charles Altieri, Maggie Fornetti, etc. The sun emits a continuous roar, but from such a distance that it doesn't seem it can possibly be addressing any of us. With the death of the ahistorical or prehistorical God, history should have been born; sense perceptions should be able to discern something of the past, which bears the meanings and functions of the things that come before them. But history has no face. The shoppers flock to kiss the gleaming lemons. The city rumbles with unsubdued composure; its buildings betray little of what goes on inside them. The city players and planners all keep a low profile and work fast. They are left to their proliferating tasks. And, like Don Quixote, the literary scholar sets forth to do her work. Why like Quixote? Because what she engages with doesn't exist. There was no Emma Bovary to dream Madame Bovary's dreams. And if the literary scholar asks if the nameless narrator of Henry James's Turn of the Screw has really seen a ghost, the answer is that there was no nameless narrator but only the narration, with its ambiguous progress. Entering the supermarket with an empty cart pulled from the chain of carts standing ready by the door, I turn sharply to the right, past the avocados to the melons, in front of which I park my cart out of the flow of other shoppers. I move like an unregulated chess piece across the large checkerboard pattern formed by the floor's square tiles. Madame Bovary was Flaubert's "book about nothing," a test of "the axiom that there is no such thing as subject — style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things." Flaubert took on Guy de Maupassant as a student of sorts. "[Flaubert] forced me to describe, in a few phrases, a creature or an object so that it was clearly distinguishable from all other creatures or objects of the same race or species.... Homework consisted of a practical exercise: observe a grocer on his doorstep, a concierge smoking his pipe, or a cab-horse in a row of cabs, and then, 'with a single word,' show how that particular grocer, concierge, or cab-horse resembles no other." I tear off a plastic bag and reach over a display of parsley; I select a single head of butter lettuce from the dewy, vernal, green display. The tips of its outer, darker leaves are imperfect — they are slightly torn and

rust-stained, travel-worn. But the inner leaves are a pale, delicately variegated green, tender without being limp. This is the most succulent of lettuces. I've now added a cucumber, a head of endive, and a rubber-banded bunch of scallions to the shopping cart. I'm letting myself go. Long ago, little Lyn was in the produce section of a grocery store eating raw peas from the pod; big Lyn can remember the pods, the peas, the bin, the wood floor, the handsome, genial grocer: Roy of Roy's Market whom little Lyn carefully conflated with Roy Rogers, whom interim Lyns have had little occasion to remember, and whom big Lyn recognizes to have been carefully produced and like an animated porcelain (and later plastic) doll. A commodity. The radio cowboy offered an aberrant alternative to the possible ways and places one might live an everyday life (spectral repetition) — in an unfenced sprawl. Who offered him? To whom? Why? It's all a war zone but not to those who've imposed a deadline on abundance. Or it's all an ear exam testing for timbre-sensitivity rather than an ability to catch the drift of melodies. Everyday city life is a macrosystem, naturalized into invisibility, sometimes oppressive and sometimes so transparent as to seem to leave living unimpeded, nothing but green lights and a clear conscience and prospects or detritus: a black lacquer vase in an antique shop window; property lines; the drift of history; radiators; a small dish of potato chips; a photo of a dead man; reading glasses; Telegraph Avenue and Postcolonial Cul-de-Sac; the pungent smell of a tomato plant; a college education; a city-wide strike; anxiety: "[T]he true object of anxiety is precisely the (over)proximity of the Other's desire." Is the problem that the Other will impose his or her desire on one, that one will be forced to satisfy the Other's desire, rather than one's own, leaving one's own desires unsatisfied? Or is the problem that the Other's desire, when seen too closely, is repulsive (this is what Slavoj Žižek suggests, but it seems equally likely that, when forced to look too closely at one's own desire by the confrontation with the Other's, one will find one's own repulsive). I develop a few animosities as I gather groceries, and here and there a fleeting sense of camaraderie. There are countless ways to combine existences. Clearly there is much of myself that I want to present here. A novelist is in many ways

like a ringmaster and a sociologist. He or she announces, and thereby calls, people into view, where they are fated to perform and to fare (poorly or well). An essayist is, however, a performer — an athletic bareback rider or juggler or high wire walker or trapeze artist, or one of the clowns: whapping or being whapped by other clowns, wig flying into the ether on a string, shoes flapping, pants dragging, jumping into a barrel over which a lion leaps while elephants trumpet and a monkey plays a drum. The clowns are variously criminals or detectives or victims of life or celebrants of the moment, giddily delinquent, or altogether earnest. The public pays to play its part, that of being the public. Willem is discerning, Bill is demanding, Betsy Warren is devouring, Rick Quincy is disdaining, and Askari Nate Martin is no longer detecting; he has long ago left Sue to be dismayed and Sid to stay away. The sunlights are multiple, refracting a city with a “Mediterranean feel” and hills. Boys and young women in uniform follow Sid, they go from one circus to the next. Dropping a baggie of sunflower seeds and a baggie of oats into her cart, and leaving it where it stands, Alice Milligan Webster backtracks a bit and goes down aisle 4 to get a jar of marmalade, which is among the jellies and jams just past the peanut butter and honey and across from the candy near the front of the store. She never drives her cart into the aisles and feels a twinge of approval as she overhears Austin White say to Betsy Warren, “You don’t need the cart if you’re just going halfway down the aisle for a box of sugar.” Alice Milligan Webster is a person who accepts her fate and believes it is never the function of family life to subtract members; family life is all about addition and flow. Life is subject to “false halts” more than to “false starts.” The revolutionary task before us is to create conditions in which the old and the new can occur again. History is to be resuscitated, though the disaster of monotheism should be avoided. With private ownership of land, myth-enchanted social culture along with its myth-suffused, story-bearing spaces came to an end. Monotheism is the religious principle closest to the sensibility of the home-owner. The heavens ceased to be social. Our identities are no longer bolstered, we have to reconfigure the world in such a way as to admit all that gives evidence of existing along with us. It is from kernels of impersonality — the

fruits of the public sphere, where events and incidents that are not of one's doing, fragments of other people's existence, are encountered by chance ——— that one becomes a person in the city. I find myself watching a tall, shabbily-dressed man wheeling a grocery cart south along Seventh Street in which a fat woman in an overcoat is crouched, holding a paper bag. The rules that establish a relationship between them, and between them and me, and between me and the intrusive friendliness of the tellers at the bank I enter after noticing them, are derived from the game called "Napkin and Knife." As Peggotty remarks in David Copperfield, "I don't know how it is, unless it's on account of being stupid, but my head never can pick and choose its people. They come and they go, and they don't come and they don't go, just as they like." Everyday life (blatant repetition) is perpetually erupting into space and withdrawing from it. But to call it "erupting" suggests something abrupt. Public urban space, even the smallest, is analogous to a pause, however long prolonged, but it bears affinities with rest, too, and with patience, however sorely tested. Visitors may walk through it, residents may inhabit it, cars and buildings and pedestrians and noise may crowd it, and animals may traverse it or scuttle along its margins. It is available and accessible for cohabitation and communication, for acts of sharing, interacting, play, public displays of affection, flaunting, vying, acknowledging. People are out, strolling, hurrying, socializing, lining up, blocking the sidewalk, nodding to panhandlers, taking a break from their unshared and unshareable anxieties, fears, problems (or pleasures). Within the city's buildings, the immediate is under perpetual translation and transmission. To escape the barrage of media, we go out, away from our media-occupied private spaces (which the media renders strangely anonymous) and into public spaces: city streets, perpetually charged with anxiety and desire, and public parks, refuges for eccentricity and unproductivity. Everyday life (strange repetition) seeps from the city's interstices. I swipe the credit card and wait for the receipt to print out. The sun is coming through the doors. My arms straight, head up, pushing the bagged groceries in the cart in front of me, I make it to the car in nineteen strides.

Kiddies, kiddies, follow me

The streets, the trees, the feast, the sea.

It's a city with 36,485 actively managed street and park trees, which is to say public trees. They are unevenly distributed, abundant in the hills and more sparse in the more densely urban and industrial flatlands nearer the bay. The poor live on the hillsides above some cities (for example Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City) and the rich on the hillsides above some others (e.g., Berkeley and Oakland). It is among the labors of the poor to return home in the former and among the privileges of the rich to do so in the latter. Fragments of street music circulate — a bicyclist's bell, a siren, a vagrant with a guitar. Her beagle straining at the leash, a woman turns a corner and disappears. This isn't a city that "never sleeps." There's no bus service between 1 and 5 am. The city plot is knotted. It tangles conditions, situations, circumstances, terms which are not synonymous. The stronger the knots, the more vivid the plot. Dewanda Horn puts her body aside and, for an unperceived amount of time — it might have been hours, or only a few seconds, but it does not pass in increments, it is all of a piece, in a room, the windows open — she is but is not Dewanda Horn, sitting on a bench in the plaza with friends, facing away from the sun. Suddenly there's a tall hourglass-shaped cloud spinning toward us, blindingly white but dappled with dark markings, an hourglass cloud in the blaze of a rearing appaloosa. The massive twister grabs two women — I see them suspended upside down in the air, their dresses billowing. Then it's over, and we're standing in the plaza. Beside me is a young mother, holding a child; with her is Dewanda Horn. The young mother is weeping — she points to a photograph of herself with three children. "Two were taken away," Dewanda horn explains to me, "and they never came back." "And this one lost all her color," says the mother, looking down at her child, "and it never came back." I make a "to do" list — the happier version of the "did do" account that is the typical substance of a diary, in which, given the nature of the diary, there can no longer exist any reasonable hope. As morning returns, the sun recovers the city. Political struggle is not about ends but about beginnings. Political struggle

seeks to open new possibilities for happiness ——— ordinary happiness, the happiness of ordinary lives. Thousands of people march through the city, chanting and brandishing signs and banners. They swarm through the streets approaching City Hall, they fill the Civic Center plaza with speeches and music. Protesting cuts to the budget for public education, protesting the emotional violence inflicted on poor people, students from Joaquin Miller Middle School are flying banners saying “Know All, Be All,” “Don’t Dumb Us Down,” “Knowledge is Power,” etc.

So we appeal to you, sun, on this broad day.
You were ever a helpmate in times of great churning,
and fatigue.