

Drink and be hole again beyond confusion.

—Robert Frost, kind of

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HOLE STUDIES

WORK, OR THE SWET SHOP BOYS

*The page is flat. It turns or it doesn't.
The ceremony of trust requires no math.*

—Paul Killebrew

I borrowed *The Eminem Show*—the CD, it was 2004—from my housemate, a friend. I worked in a back office, wore headphones. I got in around 9. My boss got in around 3. The floor of the warehouse we worked in was settling and to keep my chair from rolling backward I hooked my ankles around the legs of the desk. Eminem rapped about white America, a subject I thought I knew well.

It was 2004 and there was war in Afghanistan and war in Iraq. White America had started two wars.

There were four housemates, a kind of communal living thing that didn't last. We'd all gone to college together, an elite institution, New England. We lived way out in the country. Our landlords lived one hill above us, their yard scarred with several dozen car chassis they claimed they were working on. Dirt bike trails looped through the neighborhood into the nearest woods and at the foot of the hill a wooden cross marked where a couple dirt bikers had died. Our landlords' grandkids, we thought, maybe wrongly. The landlords would invite my Jewish housemate particularly to go to church with them. I thought he shouldn't go but he went. He was nice about things like that, too nice, he was from the South. I'm from rural white New England and if rural white New England landlords try to sell me on their white church I know what white expression to make, though I couldn't describe it.

My CD-loaning housemate and I carpooled

inefficiently into the small city we worked on opposite sides of. She was staffing a helpline at an organization that worked to prevent the sexual abuse of children. People called the helpline if they felt they were at risk of abusing a child. *A lot of people before you have burned out from that job*, her coworkers told her, or she understood. To help prevent burnout they'd redesigned the position, which seemed to mean that it was not a full-time job with standard benefits but a part-time job with limited benefits, though I believe they eventually added mandatory counseling.

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I was working at a leftist publishing house, and Eminem was helping me correct a travel guide to Helsinki, or the index to a history of Hamas. Or I was checking the proofs of a debut novel by a Nigerian writer, my first proofreading assignment, and later I realized how much I'd missed, how much had passed me by. My lack of ear for Nigerian English didn't help. I was 22 or 23 and had a lot to learn about English. None of this was Eminem's fault.

The house in the country was on Sprinkle Road. I was often arranging repayment of my college loans over the phone (a landline): *Hilary Plum*, I'd say, *5 Sprinkle Road. So cute!* someone would say, and we'd set up a plan for me to repay my loans while making \$11/hour. I was content with \$11/hour. My previous wage had probably been less than \$7. I paid off my loans within five or so years, partly from working but mostly from several small inheritances from elderly relatives, without which I would be in debt to this day.

Is any inheritance small?

I got up early. I wanted to do so much before I had to go to work. In the mornings I'd let my big dog out the door, and he—the only male dog in the neighborhood, or he acted like it—would trot out to the paddock where our landlords kept three old bored horses. Sometimes my big male dog would raise his nose by the fence while the old male horse lowered his nose. Noses touched. A patriachs' greeting. It was early, misty. The wars outlived them both.

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For two years at my last job I worked alone in a corner office my employers rented in a larger suite. The office building belonged to a private university that seemed to have bought out a quadrant of the city. Most of the suite worked for something called Business Services. Probably spreadsheets. My employers—a scholarly history journal, the job looked great on a CV, everyone reminded me—rented three offices there, but I only used one; the other two sat decadently empty while the suite's younger workers were stuck in cubicles. For two years the days were nearly silent. The six or seven people who worked together in Business Services rarely spoke. I'd never been anywhere so populated yet so quiet, other than in a public swimming pool, underwater.

Once I asked one of them, the friendliest one, if the music I played in my office bothered him. Oh no, he

said, we all listen to music.

I'm telling you they were all silent.

Later some stray offices got rented to a teachers' organization, and I would sometimes hear the man who was the boss tell young women interns about his youthful time on a kibbutz.

Upstairs was a sleep lab. People came and went slowly.

I was bored.

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The job was 25 hours a week but there were maybe 2 to 15 hours a week of work to possibly do. My predecessor had kept a pretty mysterious schedule, and so there was an idea I should work regular shifts, Monday through Friday, 1 to 6. Mostly I did, at least at the beginning. Then I didn't. Mostly no one knew if I was in my office or not, or no one I worked for. The rest of the suite could have narc'ed to my employers, but they didn't. They were on my side, I think, if they cared at all, largely because I (a woman in her thirties) was left to do the dishes of the senior editors after our monthly editorial meetings, with their ritualized sandwiches and potato salad. Until the boss of Business Services said this to me about the dishes, in a tone of decorous solidarity, I hadn't even noticed this offense. It just felt natural to me to do everyone's dishes. I was embarrassed, suddenly the worst feminist here in Business Services.

I'd taken the job so I could stop working freelance, but I took freelance jobs again (more academic editing), did them while at my day job, got paid by two private universities at once.

Maybe it became my job to do everything in my life for which I didn't get paid while I was there, in my office, getting paid. I texted a lot, wrote long emails, received long emails back. I had long conversations. Friendships that had lain dormant, or never quite existed, or been nearly lost amid the *sorry I've been so slow to write backs* were suddenly vibrant. It seemed impossible no one could hear. I would leave to take phone calls by a fence enclosing a nearby lot that was becoming a parking garage. Giant black stockings filled with detritus snaked across it, blocking some movement of water. We talked about literature, for hours, not bored with any of it, not bored with each other.

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My husband and I are part of a small press founded by two friends, all unpaid. I brought the novel I was editing to my office. The novel has eighteen sex scenes. I got flushed.

When necessary I tightened the sentences of history and made citations conform to Chicago style, Documentation I: Notes and Bibliography (not Author-Date). To drown out the silence I did listen to music. I didn't know what music to listen to because I have *no musical culture*, I might say, a phrase I think I heard Derrida say in that documentary about

Derrida. *But of course I listen to jazz*, I think he said. My relationship to music is sentimental, aiming to recreate a sense of promise and inchoate freedom I associate with dark late-night adolescent New England roads, the curves you try to take as fast as your friends. Beastie Boys, A Tribe Called Quest, Moby, Soul Coughing, fucking Blink-182. And college, the Strokes, sure, or *Kid A*, while around you everyone is dropping acid and playing bocce for days. (They're all lawyers now, or they run motivational programming for lawyers.) Musically I didn't know where to start and I didn't want anything in English. I can't listen to English while editing English, which is the only language I edit, and only partially, it increasingly seems. It occurred to me that although I'd worked in literature in translation my whole career (career?) I only ever listened to Anglo-American music. I can't read without reading critically, but I listen to music in some ignorant way, barely hearing anything, no craft. I doubt I know what's snares.

In the novel I was writing then I wrote the sentence: *When your husband is dying you get a job that pays better*. We thought then that my husband was dying. I'd dropped out of a PhD program I was lukewarm about to get a job that paid better, that job. In those two years my husband had two tumors, the second one perfectly visible.

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My work life—like, maybe, yours—is built around

another, nonpaying vocation. Writing one, two, four hours in the morning. I try to be efficient. I arrive everywhere with my hair wet. My ambitions to have a job—to be, for example, an editor doing important editing, or to be a person who makes more than \$18,000 a year—seem to conflict with my ambitions to do this not-job. You can describe these two ways to spend time (writing, working)—to spend or sell time—as if they made up one story, the story of your life. But in your life they have to happen at the same time. At that time you are due at the office. At that time someone is or may be dying. When I wasn't in my office, I might be at the hospital. I might be at my desk, writing. I might be in Microsoft Word's Track Changes mode, listening to an EP by the Swet Shop Boys.

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What is it we need from each other?

What could we still make happen?

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At my first ever job I did the dishes most nights. Dairy Queen. I was 16, 17, 18, 19. The controls on the hot water heater didn't work and the water could scald skin red. I don't feel much in my hands, so no problem. After closing we divvied tasks up, tried to finish as fast as possible. We got paid by the hour but if your shift clocked out slow when you next saw him the owner would raise an eyebrow.