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Artist (excerpt)

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Artist (excerpt)

Cover Page Footnote

This piece was written and workshopped in 18S and brought into workshop in progress. Because we operate under a workshop model, we see value in an unfinished piece.

These days in Union Square one can find something very peculiar among the weeds and ragged-run luckless who inhabit the cracks in the concrete – if one knows where to look. The tourist walking along 14th would never see this thing-of-the-very-peculiar, it is a privilege not for the distant farseers. You have to go in deep, wading through the morass of madmen deep up to the brain. Not that Union Square Park is much of a sea, or even a lake or a pond. There's bigger ponds than that whole thing in Central, plenty of them.

In Evelyn's Playground, there is this statue that has managed to hide away in two inches of tree-shadow and a tangle of vines, closed off in a small clearing of bushes. She's leaning one hand against the bark with her shirt billowing up like the wind did a drive-by, except it's blowing away from the tree which is the only direction people figure the wind can't be coming from. That's a mystery nobody's puzzled out yet. It was marketed as an art installation, but nobody ever thought that that overlooked detail was the artistry in it.

But that statue has been there for years already, one of those things which does not have time in it. You might get the impression that if humanity appeared in the blink of a cosmic eye the statue appeared in the same eye-blink. Copper and rock look old no matter what the age. It isn't what is very-peculiar, but it is peculiar. Sitting around the benches there you have to know that it has stories and wonder.

Oh, that statue has stories, yes. She presides over the most secluded spot in Union Square, she knows things that are spoken of in only excited giggles and hushed voices. She has observed the breaking of waves of water and hearts. Once some kids claimed under threat of perjury that they'd discovered, purely by bizarre chance, five hundred and half a brick stashed up the hollows of her shirt.

These are some of her stories, but there are others, too: the very best of which are told by a roughed-up apparition of a very-peculiar oldbie who appears around there on rainy evenings.

As to the statue, there's a last detail you'd see if you wanted to look more closely. On the side of it is nailed a plastic bit, which having been read, you'd think to be an explanatory placard for the piece. It reads: "*Copper and Acrylic. 1992. Nathan Zhao.*"

If prompted, the man, after a ponderous few seconds of staring tearfully at the placard, will cry that his name is Nate.

Nate will then extricate from his pocket a blackened strip of cloth to dab at his piercingly blue eyes.

The man is not much like the other transients, mostly because he is not transient. He is not always here, but here he remains. These benches are his to sleep on. The statue is his to orbit. Sometimes he reads poems to the statue. Other times he is content to gaze longingly at the very picture of a woman inconvenienced by the elements. He will not answer most questions.

But if you ask: “Who is she?”

Well.

“Her name was Kathryn, and –“

–she hated being called an artist.

That’s the first thing she reminded me of as we waited in line for our coffee. The bistro was full of people looking to use the ceiling as their umbrella from the light rain outside, and we were choked off from the register. Kathryn leaned against the wall and surveyed the décor. Industrial chic, pipes and aesthetic bike racks, complete with a crowd of students on laptops preoccupied with themselves and their roles in a world made for them. It was a nest of ants, crawling through their home and blind to each other. Underneath the scent of coffee was a tinge of metal and motor oil. She wrinkled her nose.

“I’ve never seen this place, but I hear the coffee’s good,” I explained, and the queue jerked forward like an assembly line.

“I ever tell you that I hate kitschy places like this?”

I remembered. “Offended your artist’s sensibilities, right?” I smiled.

“Don’t call me that.” She flicked me playfully. “You know better.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not an artist.”

“That’s news to me.”

“Tale as old as time and maybe as senile as you.” She swept her eyes around the café again and made another face. “Is it Alzheimer’s?”

“Not hardly. Last I remembered, something about an art degree?”

Kathryn beamed at me. “Yep, you’re terminal.”

The décor was the problem, she said suddenly, and it was a structural problem. Aesthetics for aesthetics’ sake was as unforgivable and offensive to humans as lies. It erred on the level of morality itself – I reminded her of pathologies and liars and she told me that it excuses nothing.

She went on like this for a while, and it was a sort of idle chatter but I listened with interest as she gave a saga of the Hard Rock Cafes and hookah bars and the inevitable reduction of culture to meaningless glamour.

All the while, the line moved forward in fits and starts, and occasionally arts students would scowl at her while she was absorbed in herself.

“This better be some damned fine coffee,” she said by way of conclusion.

“You know why those caterpillars over there are so upset?” I pointed at the students. “They’ve just watched a butterfly preen.”

“You haven’t changed one bit.”

“Your orders?” The cashier looked over her thick-rimmed glasses and tapped a pen on the counter impatiently. Like a metronome, her hands were occupied ticking away the time until her shift was up and she had the money to spend on things like a new coat of blue for her chipped nails or another piercing to round off the five pairs on each ear. “Names, too?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Kathryn went to order first.

That had been her drink for as long as I could remember, and my memory stretched back until Junior year of university. She would always have a caramel macchiato, and when I asked her what she was balancing on top of the stack of books in the library the week of finals, she laughed and asked if I needed to retake the unit on extrapolation we’d covered together in statistics. After we’d graduated, I started drinking them as well. They anchored me, somewhat, and I thought I began to understand the familiarity of having a single solid drink.

“I’ll take the same thing she’s having.”

“Two *café au lait*,” the cashier called over her shoulder.

I was stunned.

We moved to one side and the line moved to fill. I thought about changing my order, but that felt like weakness, which was something that could not be had while Kathryn stood next to me.

“What happened to caramel macchiatos?” I didn’t like *café au lait*.

“I got bored,” she said.

“I see.”

I did.

“And what about you?” Kathryn held back a knowing giggle. “You used to love them, didn’t you? Some pretentious something about their *interplay of aromas*?”

“I still do,” I said. “I just thought I’d try something new for once in my life.”

“That’s new in itself,” she observed, glancing and perhaps wondering, just as I was, how much changed and how much was the same in the three years since we’d last remembered each other.

It was a reunion. We’d lived lives parallel to each other in New York, and that was natural and correct, because we had both come to the city to disappear. I was a programmer for a small firm, she was an artist, and we both found our souls lost and searching for themselves. I nurtured some delusions of riches and independence, and I didn’t yet know what Kathryn had wanted, but she pitched herself headfirst, as she had always done, into the wide lonely world to chase something fleeting. It had been art this time. At some point, I’m sure, we both realized that disappearance was not the way to the promised land, that we needed someone else to buoy us – but by then, we were already prisoners to consequence. We were weighed down, maybe, by our debts and egos, and gone in the depths. We could not leave.

And of course, I loved the city, and that rooted me also. I wondered about it when I was asleep, wandered around it when I was awake and the weather was sunny so that I could walk half the way back home. And I walked occasionally even when it was raining, or started to rain while I was walking, the city took on a sadness that sucked the emotions from me and everything melted together into a viscous mud.

On one of those days, the rain shunted me into a little gallery in the nooks of Brooklyn, stone-faced and newly old, and inside I remembered seeing a butterfly of gears and clockwork suspended on reddish wire. The artist painted it like a monarch, or tried to, but the colors were faded and seemed to almost drip off the metal. The placard told me it was made of copper and food coloring, and that it was titled “Artifice,” and that a very familiar artist had made this piece. That was the coincidence which led to my obtaining a phone number from the owner of the gallery and finding the friend that the heart had been yearning for.

She surprised me, I surprised her. It had been a long time. In each other, we saw anchors of an old world, a simpler time when arrogance chained our dreams to our psyches and we were the inheritors of the earth. We each needed somebody to keep our footing steady.

In the end, that is how I was coerced into drinking a *café au lait* instead of a more comfortable macchiato and already the meeting began on an off step.

“*Nate, Kate.*” They set our twin coffees on the counter. Kathryn ran her eyes across the shop again, and elbowed me, nodding towards the door.

“Let’s go for a walk?”

It had been raining that day – a fine mist falling endlessly from the sky – and the top of the city had been shorn off by the low-hanging clouds. Watching them brought to mind the steel belly of a sinking ship: heavy, opaque, grey, and massive enough to press upon the whole of the human imagination. It seemed like the only thing holding the sky from falling were the stumps of skyscrapers that disappeared into the morass like columns. Ionic, Doric, Corinthian, meet the American of New York. Atlas of glass and steel, pinned forever between earth and sky. The air tasted like exhaust as cars honked and whined and kicked up mist around the feet of the colossi.

But now, the rain lulled to a halt, and we stepped out of the store into the shadows of the high-rises. The mist now came from the streets, the warm pavement and the hot air of the subways fanning a gentle steam from the ground like miasma. I looked to her for direction, and she walked us across an orchestra of honks and shouts towards Central Park.

“So, art.” We strolled past the full spectra of New York. A procession of horses, a litany of tourists, a gaggle of hawkers, and the flocks after flocks of pigeons crying in the treetops. We walked together beneath the ceiling of doves, she balanced her drink between her fingertips. “Is that what you’re doing nowadays? Making your name in the art scene of New York? What’ve you been up to the last three years?”

“I might ask you the same, Mister Programmer.”

“My stories are dull,” I said. “And I asked you first, Miss Artist.”

She looked at me askance. “Dull?”

“Yours are more exciting than mine. Tell, tell. I haven’t met an artist who hates their title so much before.”

“Still haven’t,” she said, and took a mouthful of the coffee. “Probably won’t.”

“Go on.”

We had made it down to the lakeside. Ducks’ quacking and the brackish smell of fish took over the scenery from the streets, and the pigeons clustered together in the trees that we’d left behind for the open lake banks.

It was a word almost like an accusation, she said to me. If they wrote it in her criticisms, it was libel; if they said it in her praises, it was slander. She put all her insecurities into that word, all the self-doubt and uncertainty and the empty spaces where conviction did not lie, all those things that [artists] wore in their hearts on their sleeves. For her, it was like the dark of her childhood, a nebulous place that was empty but for fear; the negative space of her being. The word rolled into her like a stone, heavy on her soul: a gravity on her heart, leaden and laden. “You know what they did with stones, back in the day?”

Pummeled people. *Artist.*

To death, she reminded me.

I began to say something when the first droplets came again. “Oh, it’s raining,” she observed.

The sigh of the rainfall on the water like whispering cymbals was a threat, and we hurried to protect ourselves, running back into the woods and the broad-leaved cages of the pigeons.

Although we’d hidden ourselves beneath the mottled canopy of an oak tree, I could feel the pinpricks of water fall onto my skin. Cold pins and needles speckled across me, as if every inch of every limb had, all at once, fallen asleep. New York was perched on the edge of May, a time where sixty degrees Fahrenheit was considered chilly, and I began to regret my decision to wear only a t-shirt as the rain began to bead on my skin. Our coffees were cold, and I wondered if her unspoken refusal to drink hers inside the kitschy bistro had begun to breed regret. I looked at her and couldn’t tell. She had always looked a bit anonymous, as if she was just the profile picture of another, truer version of herself elsewhere. Even just watching the ducks drift, the nature of her face was unchanged. Unreadable in its frown. Her own t-shirt was soaked through, splotches of paint beginning to bleed into the white.

We were sitting on a bench in the half-shadow of the trees on the banks, and the rain was falling into the water. The lake in front of us simmered with the pitter-patter of the droplets, millions of them. Each held a single tiny ripple within them, and together, they turned the lake into a shattered mirror; I could see us, the shuddering, vibrating peach-and-denim reflections like a pointillist’s portrait. Was this how those painters saw the world: an endless sea of nauseating dots of color? Did they paint to pick out the order from the chaos of their being? In the broken, glassy surface, we looked like impressions of humans, ideas of art, and the dark, wet ideas of foliage of Central Park provided a tasteful backdrop of green that faded, suddenly, subtly, into grey. A Seurat, maybe.

“You know how language is.”

“I don’t think many people truly know how language is.”

“I mean, did you fail out of high school English?” She cocked an eyebrow at me over the rim of her cold coffee.

“Please. I’m more literate than you are.”

“Literature’s a waste of time,” she scoffed. “I was talking about connotations, denotations. Artist? What’s that mean?”

“I have a dictionary on my phone—“

She pinned me with a glare, and I flashed a sardonic grin back at her.

“Writer? My nephew’s five, he can write,” she spat into the air. “That word, artist. Do they think I’m some kind of painter?”

“What’s wrong with painters?”

“Nothing’s wrong with painters. It’s a damned fine job. They paint, nothing wrong with that. But I’m not a painter.”

“Who accused you of that?”

“Name a few famous artists, go.”

“Monet. O’Keeffe. Van Gogh. I don’t know.”

“Seeing a pattern?”

She threw her head back and laughed. Kathryn had that laugh that was ambiguous, that hovered on the cusp of empathy – deep down, it tried and almost succeeded in tickling a chuckle out from the stomach –and as your laughs rose through the lungs, the mind began to doubt the fidelity of that laugh. She meant it, but not in the way that anyone could ever be sure; I never knew – had never known – *what* she meant with it. Her laugh was in contagious because it didn’t ask for company. It was a joke for her alone, if it were a joke at all.

I looked at her, unsure again what she found so amusing, hysterical enough to force her face into an unused smile. Her laugh dropped off sharply, as if the sound had simply disappeared from her mouth, and she leaned over and hit me in the chest.

“Artist means painter, understand? With their palettes and berets and European accents and everything.”

“That’s not true.”

“Maybe it isn’t, maybe it is, but whatever that word means to you people–“

It was a pastime of hers to refer to the untalented and uninterested as *you people*.

“It’s a god damned untruth.”

“So it’s a labeling issue.”

“It is,” she said, and crumpled the coffee cup in her hands before tossing it into the lake. It bobbed there like a buoy, knocked side to side by the rain and drifted slowly away. I watched it float among the ducks and send them squawking with fascination.

“That’s–“

“Biodegradable,” she said, and ignored my raised eyebrow. “So I was saying. You so much as touch a computer, people start calling you ‘hacker.’ Sure, those people are idiots. Give it a few years and that illiteracy’s put to death. But art has been around since Adam married his left rib and has a couple million years of *nobody gets it* tied up with it.”

“So it’s a labeling issue,” I looked at her.

“It is,” she nodded. “It’s critical. You still have ‘programmer’ to fall back on. Everyone’s got the right idea about that. Past ‘artist,’ we have nothing.”

“I see.”

“There are only wrong words to describe us.”

We sat there together in silence for a short time, and watched the rain fade again. Kathryn got up and stretched, shook the rain from her hands and dried it on her pants before taking out her phone. It dangled in front of me like an offer of a handshake. “What’s your email? We should keep in touch. I’d forgotten that you were tolerable.”

I stared at the screen for a little, and my eyes wandered over her body to land on her face, with two bottomless black eyes and a characteristic smirk. I grinned back up at her.

“Sure, I’ll add you.” We traded phones, filling the phones with our contact details and the air with small talk and good-byes and promises for the future. When the clouds broke and the evening sun peeked in on its neglected children, she’d become a blot on the distance, halfway to the closest Orange Line Metro station, and I was starting for my Red Line stop.

Of course – the thought came to me while an escalator carried me into the earth and the clouds above had split fully in two – I had forgotten then to ask her about her butterfly. But there would be opportunities in the future.

The studio hissed, and this was the first thing I noticed when I walked into the atrium. It was the undulating sound of serpents, and although I knew that it was steam, it was better that my imagination escaped with the idea that there was a pit of vipers one story beneath, because it was something that I hoped that Kathryn, or the kind of person that Kathryn was, would keep for personal enjoyment. The sound was smooth and came from the gaps in the walls, and there were three layers, one which was constant and quiet, another which came and went every few seconds, and the third, higher pitched, which always came at the tail end of the second as if vocalizing its assent – as if beneath was held a board meeting concerning special reptilian matters in an unfriendly locale like Manhattan. A Diet of Serpents. Maybe they were composing chords.

I didn't know what the steam was used for. There were a few ready explanations for urban hissing, but all of them promised to disillusion me of my snakes. So I left the sound alone, and called out to Kathryn who was somewhere behind the wall that separated the entranceway from the studio. "Anyone home?"

Earlier in the week, she texted me an address, and said that it was her workshop. There was nothing in the way of invitation, but I doubted that many other people had this address. I told her I'd be coming by on the weekend, because programming work picked up as spring wasted away into summer proper and our work hours stretched to catch up with the fleeing sunset on weekdays, if that was alright, and she said nothing back until the day of (*what time?*) and I told her that I was on the way. On weekends, I once went walking and reading programming books, and for years accomplished nothing at all. I needed somebody to shake me from the prison of routine, and I'd always wanted to understand art.

So I wanted to know what it was about her butterfly.

"Come in." I turned the corner and my thoughts scattered.

"Hey." Kathryn was standing in the middle of the studio, arms hovering above a pedestal, and it looked as if everything in the room fell away from her. Canvases and easels leaned back, gaping and white; broken bits of wood like trees torn apart by gale winds were piled against the walls; glue caps and buckets of paint, half-sketches and piles of junk metal, they lay on the ground like the innards of a piñata. She was the epicenter of this desolation – dropped into the midst like a bomb.

I glanced around the room, and could not stop my eyes from wandering. She was perched at the intersection of leylines of this mess of supplies that was at once a jumble of objects that bore no relation to each other, and a web of entangled fates and threads of shared histories. It was such that one could not pick up a single brush to use without glancing at the rest and think: *who has been, will be, involved with who?* and in that way find a monster born of trysts between all material in the room. Was that how artists found inspiration, simply by living in the midst of the possible?

"Very punctual of you," she said, and with a gloved hand plucked a thin steel rod from the floor beside her, jamming it through the eyehole of a human skull and pinning the putty of its bone to an oversized, pink Styrofoam egg carton in front of her. Wire-cutters and pliers came next, and the rod was bent and rounded off into an invisible staple in the cavity of the eyes. There were ten skulls so perched, and one in the middle had cracked, leaking whites and a yolk onto the granite tabletop.

"Really? How do you know?" I didn't have many words to say, yet, and I didn't see a clock.

She raised her arm. It was pointed towards the west wall, which was taken up by a large window. A rusted sundial hung there on a peg, and the afternoon sun pushed the shadow of the hand onto a notched bronze face.

“You’re kidding me, right? You can’t be *that* ridiculous,” I said. The steam hissed another chord from the floor.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

I noticed that there was a watch on the wrist of the arm she had waved at me, and I started laughing. “Oh, nothing.”

“You’re an idiot.” She pinned another skull into the egg carton. That made eleven.

“Can’t argue this one.” I straightened up and walked past a pile of dust and old ideas scribbled on paper and sat in a sofa stained with paint and shards of glue. “What are you working on?”

“Who knows?”

“You do. You must. You’re the...what do you want me to say that isn’t ‘artist’?”

She fumbled in her piles of possibility for something, couldn’t find it, and with a muttered *fuck it*, sat in the chair facing me with a sigh. The six feet between us felt like the width of a canyon, and her eyes were brooding above gloves that were slick with glue and grease. They were clouded and stormy with ideas, with suggestions and emotions and all the things that I supposed somebody needed to have to truly call themselves an artist. From a distance, it looked like despair for lack of expression, but from up close the look in her eyes wasn’t something that I could think of a word for.

I remembered that my favorite author, Hemingway, ended up killing himself.

Grim, I winced inwardly, and she opened her mouth and closed it again. Her eyes cleared up and she seemed to settle on a satisfactory answer.

“Kathryn,” she said.

“That’s more egoism than I’d ever dreamed of in a human,” I grinned.

“It’s individualism,” she declared, and took off her gloves. Her hands looked soft and delicate, and I thought what a great thing it was that gloves were invented to protect such hands. “Don’t say artist. But we’ve already established this.”

“Yes. You’re Kathryn,” I said slowly. “So what’s the Kathryn work that’s going on?”

“Unclear. It’s incomplete,” she said, shooting a glance at the dozen-minus-one skulls on the pedestal in the middle of the room. A smile crept onto her face. “Why don’t you try and guess?”

“Alas, but it is a great tragedy,” I clutched at my heart and made as if to fall off the chair. “I’m an idiot.”

“You really are,” she said dryly. “I’m thinking something about eggheads like you lacking the individualism to develop your souls into anything more than a runny yolk.”

“All this, for a pun?”

“Unclear. It’s incomplete.”

I wasn’t satisfied with her answer, and she was not satisfied with my prodding, and we carried on evading each other. After a while, I gave up and tried for a different tactic.

“Did you ever wonder how I found you the first time?”

“It didn’t seem very important, no.”

Outside the window, the sun had begun to set and I realized how cold it was inside the studio. It smelled like iron and woodchips, paint and coffee – my idle eyes landed on a cup, and I began to see them everywhere like cairns marking her journey through her creativity with her supplies – and I noticed that my lips had dried over the hours.

“Jesus, it’s cold in here.” I shrank into myself, drawing my body inwards like a fist.

“Heat and moisture do bad things to wood and glue.”

This, she said as if it were obvious, and I suppose that it was. “I see. But anyway, I was actually visiting a small gallery in Brooklyn a couple weeks ago.”

Kathryn checked her watch. “It’s time to close up. There’s nothing left here for me.”

She pulled down the blinds on the windows, massive cloth sails with tiny tassels of ropes dangling down – she was short, so watching her jump and struggle to reach the ropes made me smile.

“And in the gallery – wouldn’t you believe it – I saw something pretty interesting.”

“Tell me about it,” she said, her voice floating flatly across the room.

“See, there was something titled *Artifice*, it was this butterfly contraption made out of gears and scrap metal and rebar. Had this sloppy paint job like a monarch butterfly, and the sign said it was something like food coloring. It was stuck up on this rod completely coated in rust. And, you know, it was probably the most interesting thing in there.”

“Really. What’d you think?”

“What I thought it meant?” I asked, and the quiet was waiting for my answer. “I don’t know. It was something about that article in the *Post*, say they’re becoming endangered now. All the metal, it meant technology? Industrial society?”

I shrugged, although her back was still turned, reaching for the last blinds on the far left. “The dripping food coloring suggested consumption – all in all, I’d have to say it’s about environmentalism. Civilization today being built off the backs of nature, and now that we’ve hit critical mass it’s becoming less and less easy to disguise our impact on it.”

It was still quiet except for the sounds of stretching cloth. I was forcibly reminded of my struggles in filling up the spaces for English papers in Uni.

“And we’ll say the rusty rod represents technology again, and that’s what’s holding up the entire thing and stopping it from collapsing. It’s on the verge of breaking, and it implies that if civilization keeps going and polishes itself up, it’ll save everything – at the cost of allowing us to believe that nature has any more power in the world.”

She flicked a switch and the lights shut off, leaving only the sodium light of the entranceway bleeding into the room. I could only make out her silhouette, her walk was quick and a bit bouncy as she approached me.

“Not half-bad, Nate.” she beamed, and grabbed my hands and we whirled across the floor of the studio, around in waning circles and towards the entrance. We drifted through pools of sodium lights and the pale shade of evening blue creeping in through the glass doors. “Seems you aren’t beyond saving yet, Mister Programmer.”

“I surprise myself sometimes.”

“Now,” she twirled me and unhooked her hands from mine. “Get the fuck out, I’m closing shop. Let’s get coffee soon.” She smiled at me approvingly, and disappeared back into the studio in a storm of clanking as she sorted through the junk.

I pushed into the street to call a taxi. It hadn’t been a request, but I didn’t mind.