



# notes on the pacsun avant garde

BY JAMAL



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*Fiction? That's what I do already. My characters are a number of crazy hypotheses which maltreat reality in various ways and which I kill off at the end when they have done their work. The only way to treat ideas: murder (they kill concepts, don't they?) — but the crime has to be perfect.*

*This is all imaginary, of course. Any resemblance  
to real beings is purely accidental.*

– JEAN BAUDRILLARD,  
*Cool Memories II* (1996)

NOTES ON THE PAC SUN AVANT GARDE



BY JAMAL

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# INTRODUCTION



The physical alarm clock sounds at 7:13 AM. The clock was set by pressing a button until the digits happened to align at this arbitrary time, and it has remained so ever since. He rises without thought, yet with a curious form of recognition for the clock's simplicity, its liberation from the tyranny of sleep biometrics, and from the performance of proper sleep hygiene.

The apartment sits equidistant from three strip malls in San Diego. He chose it when he saw the "Now Leasing" sign out front that afternoon and there were a few

balloons tied to the railing out front. The gray laminate introduces a coenaesthesia of use; it is a product of chemistry that destroys the sweetness of touch. The walls bear the scars of a failed patchwork, a desperate history of tenure performed in haste. The light is sufficient, providing a literalness that prepares the occupant to accept the room as a finished, ready-made world. Living here is closer to renting a waiting room than to occupying an apartment. This cocoon makes no demands of its inhabitant.

He brushes his teeth with the tube of Colgate Kids that was on the middle shelf at Ralphs<sup>1</sup> on his last visit. The paste cleans his teeth. He spits, he rinses, he leaves the bathroom.

Breakfast is whatever the refrigerator surrenders with the least preparation, usually a bowl of Kroger bite-sized shredded wheat under the half-gallon of 7Select whole milk he keeps on the top shelf, its expiration date forever three days away. He drinks a lot of milk. Milk over cereal, milk in his protein shake, a warm glass of Hershey's milk before bed. The milk is cheap, calorically dense, low effort, high in protein, and 7Eleven is two blocks away. His purchase of milk from 7Eleven is an instinctual recognition of its status as emergency milk, transient milk, as a utilitarian fluid relegated to the fringes of consumer space. His relationship with the milk transcends its functionality and he finds a form of communion impossible within the economy of perpetual signification. He loves the 7Select milk, no less than he loves a gallon of Strauss A2 Organic Grass Milk.

On the counter is a Best Buy credit card statement he has not opened. He applied for the card four years ago while purchasing a Vizio television, at the prompting of the salesperson. Since then he has used it sporadically, usually when a cashier saw the blue plastic in his wallet and mentioned the 5% back. The account's vitality is contingent upon his unconditional willingness to endure the nebulous excess of America's credit system. He takes the path of maximum resistance through commercial space without the burden of performing financial literacy.



A jacket hangs by the door. He bought it off a clearance rack at JC Penney on a tri-yearly mall visit, on a day he had come in to replace a pair of worn Cole Haan sneakers. The jacket covers the body for thirty-six dollars.

The commute to the medical device company in Sorrento Valley takes seventeen minutes in a 2013 Toyota Yaris. He likes his job. He likes that it "helps people." In six years he has migrated through several positions via the entropy of corporate restructuring, and his performance reviews remain consistently average, as excellence and failure both require intention, and for him the labor of intention is unachievable.

At lunch the car drifts towards his rotation of fast casual sandwich joints. He arrives at Jersey Mike's and orders his usual: a plastic bottle of Pepsi and the #12 Cancro Special (cold roast beef and pepperoni), a sandwich often declared "the worst" by clickbait articles and Reddit posts referencing the chain. He eats the sandwich in the driver's seat in roughly three large bites, enjoying each one equally.

In the evening he watches Netflix. Tonight, it is *Small Soldiers* (1998). At some point he falls asleep with the TV still glowing dimly on his dresser.

He wakes up, but before returning to bed he prepares Ovaltine chocolate milk in a Burger King promotional glass. He read online once that chocolate milk is a superior post-workout beverage, and he has never revisited the claim. He turns his phone off forty-six minutes before sleep. The number came from nowhere. He reads whichever book happens to be closest to the mattress.

*He has many dreams. He has no fantasies.*



# THE THREE PILLARS



**A**t the terminus of American consumer culture, where every purchase is simultaneously identity, position, and data, emerges a figure whose consumption cannot be archived. The cultural apparatus in him failed to boot. His consumption (if it can be called that) is metabolic. The objects he loves are objects the culture has finished loving.

He lives downstream of intention, choices are unprocessed arrivals. A product enters his apartment and exhausts itself as an object there. The Pac Sun Avant Garde is the shape that remains when the transactional apparatus around an ordinary American life has run to completion and no one has shown up to collect the meaning.

The Pac Sun Avant Garde, although archetypally male, is genderless: the beach jock with the board shorts, the Brandy Melville regular on her thirteenth identical tank, and the (any pronouns) teenager fluent in the entire vocabulary of their own commodification all inhabit the same relation to the figure, but none of them can claim the name themselves because the name only arrives from the outside.

The aesthetics that have approached this territory have approached it through strategy. Conscious genericness<sup>2</sup>; the model consumer whose interior has been wholly furnished by the market<sup>3</sup>; the tactical refusal of digital visibility<sup>4</sup>. These are postures available to a subject who has registered what the stakes are. The Pac Sun Avant Garde lives upstream of the stakes. He gravitates toward the dated café whose coffee is burnt and where no one there has asked him to perform any relation to the coffee.

Demand is the burden he cannot operate under; his consumption registers, to every system built on signification, as the static hum of a signal too varied. The model assumes the rare event is a signal pointing at a latent preference. In him the rare event is the floor of the dis-

tribution, uncorrelated with the routine and uncorrelated with itself. He is the case the model was built to exclude as noise.

He is to the regime of signs what noise is to music.

Three pillars define the Pac Sun Avant Garde:

## **I: The Pac Sun Avant Garde achieves selfhood without lack.**

Ordinary development proceeds by exit from immediacy. The infant begins in undifferentiated merger with its surround, in a pre-symbolic space<sup>5</sup> in which language has not yet carved out the category of absence. Separation from the primordial unity with the caregiver installs the machinery of lack: the recognition of want, the apparatus of desire, the pursuit of a coherent self through the objects one has chosen to acquire. The result is the thing we now call lifestyle.

Across the apartment building from him lives the figure who pays forty dollars for a tin of olive oil in a squeeze bottle and tracks single-origin pour overs across three countries, and who brings along a different color Trader Joe's tote bag on every grocery excursion. Each purchase in their life is a small promise, broken at the moment of fulfillment, to restore a wholeness that was surrendered at the threshold of language<sup>6</sup>. Their consumption is powered by the gap between themselves and their objects. They will die inside this gap.

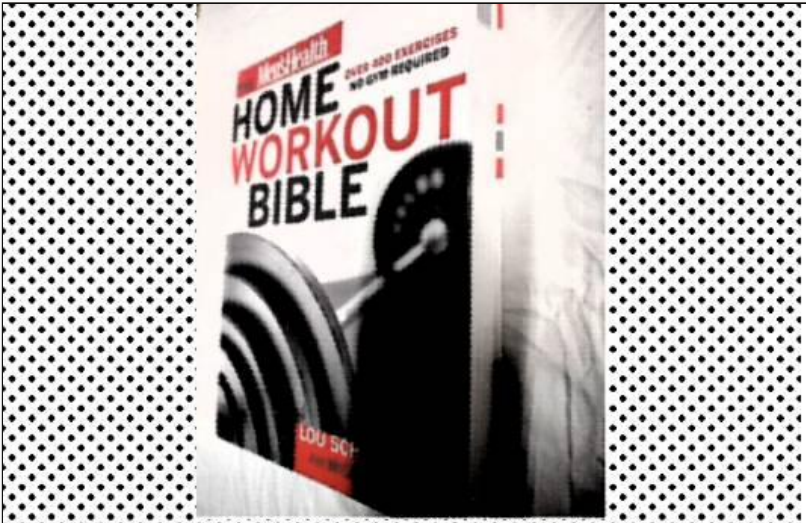
The Pac Sun Avant Garde has bypassed the machinery. The infant inhabits the pre-symbolic space where meaning has not yet arrived; he inhabits it as meaning has been used up. His is a post-symbolic indifference. What Freud named the oceanic feeling<sup>7</sup>, the dissolution of the boundary between self and world, is for him the ordinary weather of a Tuesday.

The system of objects runs on artificial scarcity<sup>8</sup>. Consumption requires that certain goods be held just out of reach, that certain milks be made scarce by where they are stocked, that certain bottles be rendered legible only to certain buyers willing to pay more for the gift of being seen. The 7Select milk at 7E-leven exists outside this economy entirely. It has been released from all the ways a milk can be held. Available at any hour, requiring no waitlist, no insider knowledge, no cachet, the 7Select has achieved the dignity of the object whose cultural work is finished. The Pac Sun Avant Garde drinks it.

## **Does your gut distinguish between a Big Mac and organic kale?**

Want requires an absence, and in him absence has never been carved. He desires outwards, productively, generating the object in the act of flowing towards it. The digestive tract continues to operate regardless of the quality of what it has been given.

The Men's Health Home Workout Bible occupies the coffee table. The spine is cracked in several places and the pages are dog-eared from use. He performs the exercises in the order illustrated, at the repetitions prescribed, every evening, without skipping or embellishment. Another reader would find in the book the promise of a future body, a horizon toward which the present body strains. For him there is the instruction and the flesh that receives it; what looks like discipline is the collapse of the interval between the verb and the motion that answers it.



In the economy of lack, the perfect body is prefigured in tomorrow, transformation always a horizon one approaches. He dissolves it through his communion with the text as a physical object, wearing out rather than shattering. The Men's Health Home Workout Bible ac-

completes, without knowing it, what scripture has always aspired to: the unity of word and flesh with the intercession of interpretation foreclosed.

## *II. The Pac Sun Avant Garde metabolizes abundance.*

Everything accumulates; new storefronts, new platforms, new colorways, new subscription tiers. Every season a collection. Every day a notification. America has drowned in its own abundance, and the deluge has become so total that conscious selection has drowned inside it.

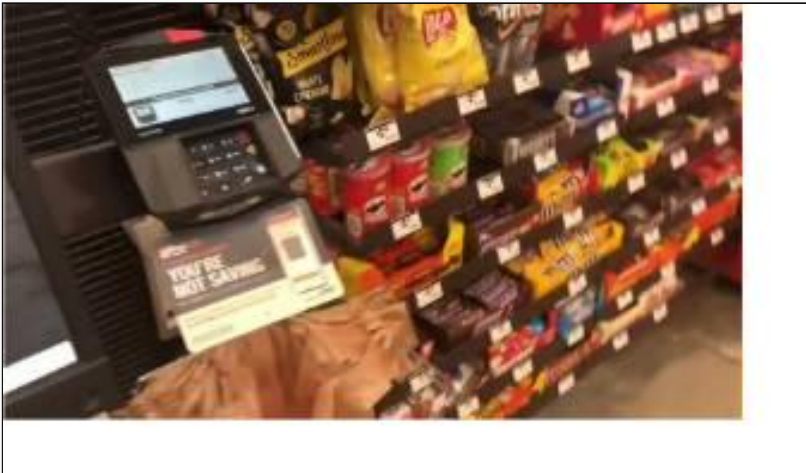
Each ecosystem develops its custodians. The ocean receives the oil spill and the dead fish with the same salt. The forest floor receives the redwood and the discarded couch with the same fungus. Once abundance crosses a threshold, metabolism becomes an environmental necessity. Fungi appeared on land through proximity to decaying matter that required dissolution, and they appeared without ambition. In the regime of total surplus, the remaining objective is breakdown.

The Pac Sun Avant Garde is the custodial organism American commercial abundance has evolved to handle itself<sup>9</sup>. His role in the ecology is passage: things move through him. No ideology organizes his movement through retail space.

The compliance module glows on his Dell monitor. Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Annual Training. Progress bar is at 12% with seven hours remaining. In the adjacent cubicles his coworkers click through the

slides like people fleeing a burning building, skipping each video the instant the mandatory three-second hold has elapsed, selecting answers without reading the questions. This is how corporate ritual is ordinarily survived, by withholding everything the ritual has failed to extort. He watches every video to completion. He reads every slide. He considers each question. He selects an answer.

The extended warranty on the Vizio takes three hours on hold to verify. The Cisco hold system cycles through a distorted Vivaldi, a MIDI Für Elise, and some funk-adjacent muzak with too much reverb. He cancels dinner plans with no complaints as he waits another hour on hold. The bureaucracy is the bureaucracy, and he moves through it at the speed the bureaucracy has set.



This institutional fidelity produces the only aura that has ever gathered around him. The seven-hour training generates a barrier more impenetrable than any delib-

erate isolation. The automated voice that asks him to please continue to hold generates a distance more substantial than geography.

When the can opener breaks, he orders a new one through Postmates from the nearest CVS. It does not occur to him to visit Amazon, or to compare prices, or to read reviews, or to register that CVS is the wrong store for this errand. He sees can opener in the delivery catalog and taps it. What arrives is a CookWell brand manual opener, thirty-seven dollars plus delivery fee, manufactured by a company that has no existence apart from the product listing. It is very likely the worst can opener currently available for purchase in the continental United States. It works. He opens the can.

He drives fifteen minutes to Home Depot for the peanut M&Ms displayed at the checkout. The habit began by accident, on an afternoon when he was there for an unrelated reason and has since calcified into routine. The trip is habitus stripped of its social dimension<sup>10</sup>, embodied history liberated from the work of class. Home Depot is not a place one buys peanut M&Ms. He buys his peanut M&Ms at Home Depot.



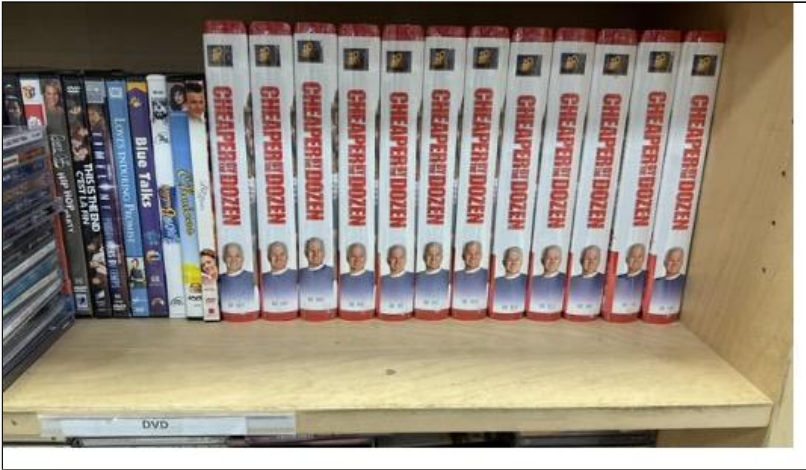
Comparative value requires a subject who can see that the object in front of him is one of many. For him the object is one, and after it there is only the next object.

While everyone he knows is engineering a life of friction-avoidance, he is passing through every friction exactly as its designers intended, and in doing so becomes unreachable.

### *III. The Pac Sun Avant Garde fully experiences the everyday*

Macy's, Tuesday afternoon. The white overhead lighting extends past peripheral vision in a grid of identical clarity, a shadowless perpetual noon in which the mannequins, the perfume counters, and the clothing racks

hang in the same suspension. The Pac Sun Avant Garde arrives as a body pulled toward a space whose only remaining request of a visitor is that he be present in it.



Customers who bought this item also bought: the sentence remains open.

The Pac Sun Avant Garde's life is one of pure immanence, lived at the level of the life itself, before a subject has arrived to organize the living into a story about who is doing it. The contemporary apparatus is that of the story. He is the small remaining region where the story has not yet been told.

On the laptop in the evening, the Netflix algorithm has been trying to predict what he will watch next. It has registered a penguin documentary completed on a Tuesday. Half an episode of Judge Judy abandoned mid-scene on a Thursday. Twenty minutes of Cheaper by the Dozen on a Sunday. From these data points the system is building a model of preference, but the model presup-

poses preference, and there is no preference in him to model. He did not select these things. He watched what the autoplay surfaced. He stopped when he stood up. Prediction is an instrument calibrated against expectation. It is wrong when it is correctly applied.



His routines hold for years and then, on a Sunday morning with no precipitating event, he drives two and a half hours to Yuma, AZ to eat at Cracker Barrel Old Country Store and visit a museum dedicated to preserving the old west. He returns the next morning and resumes his rituals. The detour leaves no trace in the subsequent week. No algorithm can fit a curve through this.

A coworker invites him to the Immersive Van Gogh Experience at the convention center. The discourse around these shows has been written in advance. The serious critic calls the show edutainment. The influencer prepares her poses. Everyone who has already ar-

rived at the show has already arrived at an opinion of it, and the opinion has been preloaded: "this is the market's final triumph over art, digitized commodity for the attention economy."

He stands in the center of the room for forty-seven minutes. When the projections cycle from midnight blues to sunflower yellows he turns his body slowly to follow the color across the walls. The apparatus that would have told him what to see has never arrived in him. Color and scale are what he sees. The yellow is very yellow.

"That was neat," he says afterward. "The yellow parts were so yellow."



The discourse is invisible to him. Those who defend the original canvas and those who celebrate the democratized screen speak a shared grammar that has never ar-

rived in his mouth. He has contacted the heart of the experience of art. Everyone around him is still arguing over who has the right to.

He has been released from the labor of meaning.



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# SAN DIEGO

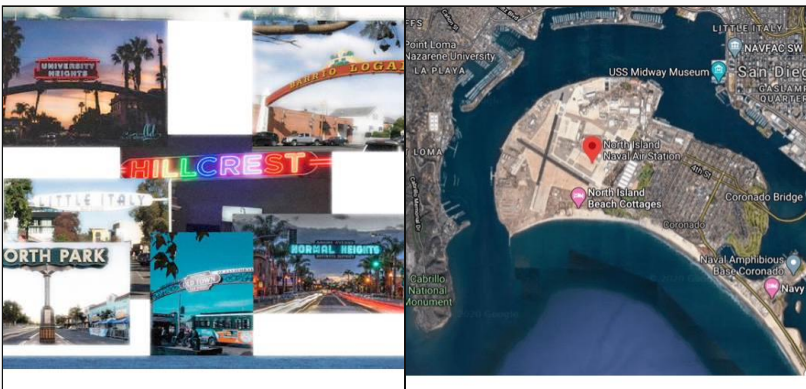


**T**he city performs an identity that evaporates the moment one tries to grasp it. The boardwalks, the fish tacos, the craft breweries, the surfboards racked outside the sandwich shop are all gestural signifiers, each one dissolving into ambience on contact with the actual city. Geography arranged this outcome with a

certain irony. The phantom had to materialize here, pinned between Mexico and Los Angeles, at the thin end of the continental pipe.

The strip mall is a microcosm of adult functions: the nail salon, the vape shop, and the Kurdish dry cleaner constitute a list of things the modern citizen finds unremarkable. Beyond it, the housing tract offers a shrunken, literal memory of the Mediterranean. The beige stucco and red tile are functional masks, prefiguring a world of sidewalks that exist only as an alibi for transit.

The ocean is fifteen minutes from any point in the city. It is mostly a backdrop to justify the economics. The surfers at Tourmaline at six a.m. are praying to a god the city quietly reduces itself to metaphor: this is just a surf town after all. The god, apparently indifferent, sends waves, but also defense contractors and pharmacology graduates who will set foot on the beach maybe once yearly, in sync with their condominium's 4% increase in rent.



San Diego hardly yields easily to the essayist's grip. Joan Didion mapped most of California<sup>11</sup> and left this stretch alone. Mike Davis lavished his attention on Los Angeles. Even Reyner Banham, who could find an ecology in any parking lot, did not write a book about it. Of all the major California cities, San Diego is the one most thoroughly absent from its own literature.

Other coastal cities yield to mythologies: Los Angeles has its noir, its freeway sublime, its industry that produces images of itself for global consumption. San Francisco has the Beat literature and the Summer of Love and the technology mythos that displaced both. San Diego has the zoo and Comic-Con and the largest concentration of active-duty Navy personnel west of Norfolk. The mythologies don't fuse but sit beside each other in the press releases.

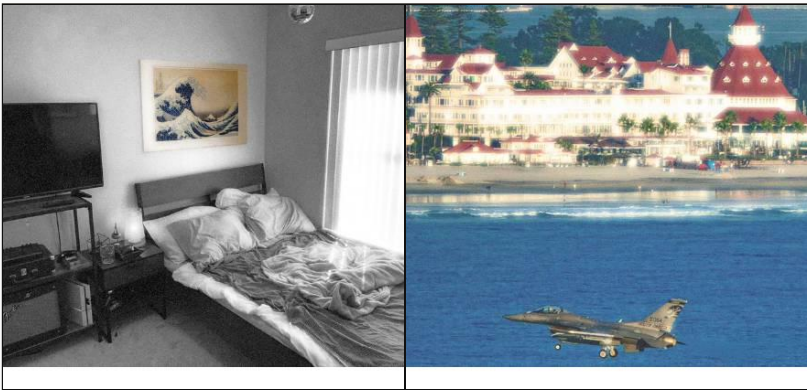
The city is a non-place<sup>12</sup> that managed to also be where people live. The downtown is a vacancy, a site that refuses the Western metaphysical requirement for a full and gathered center. The city's true core is at its limit, an indifferent blue expanse that forbids expansion and forces the urban movement to turn back upon itself. Hillcrest, North Park, and Normal Heights are not coherent neighborhoods but reticulated zones, disconnected fragments pinned between the freeway and the shoreline. Lacking a dense character to bleed organically into the next street, each zone requires proof of identity: large, suspended signs announcing the district like a literal postcard. This provincial feeling is stretched across seven channels of transit, each ending in the redundant plenitude of the strip mall. The over-

head sign and the strip mall serve as the only "marked sites" available, offering a shrunken, explicit reality in a place devoid of a central truth. The entire city becomes a system of detours, where the driver moves through a visible form of invisibility toward a center that has evaporated into the sea.<sup>13</sup>

San Diego is the terminal beach<sup>14</sup> of American culture. A perpetual middle state where time never needed to begin. The military-industrial complex achieves its most unguarded expression here in the form of casual militarism. In Coronado, a naval base shares its shoreline with luxury resorts. Aircraft carriers loom over beach volleyball courts. Navy SEALs conduct drills within view of cocktail bars. Tourists photograph warships the same way they photograph seagulls, with the same passing interest, from the same angle of cheerful distraction. The Hotel Del Coronado's Victorian turret and the Naval Amphibious Base sit in the same frame on the same coast on the same Tuesday, and no one who lives there finds this strange. The instruments of global warfare and the vacation infrastructure share a shoreline. The Pac Sun Avant Garde moves between these zones daily. Both zones register to him as climate, weight-bearing, useful. Both are flat facts of space.

Above his bed hangs The Great Wave off Kanagawa<sup>15</sup>, the print that has colonized college dorms, cannabis dispensaries, and beachside gift shops. What the image once said about Japan's relationship to the ocean has been entirely ground off. The print now hangs as decoration, the way a framed thank-you card hangs, the way a wall calendar will hang. He bought it for \$11.99 at

Ross Dress for Less. He stands at Torrey Pines or Sunset Cliffs every so often, looking at the ocean the way a person looks at weather. The surfers below are obeying physical law. The waves arrive, break, recede. In San Diego the ocean has been domesticated into backdrop, amenity, property value enhancement. The sublime has metabolized into "great surfing spots," "whale watching tours," "scenic views" printed on the menus of restaurants whose entrees cost forty dollars<sup>16</sup>. The Pac Sun Avant Garde encounters the ocean without nostalgia for some imagined prior relationship to it. He absorbs the Pacific as an environmental constant, like the mild temperature, like the cycle of hunger and sleep.



On the campus of UC San Diego is a field of modernist sculptures scattered through eucalyptus groves, assembled over decades as the Stuart Collection. Geisel Library's concrete brutalism sits on the hill like a spacecraft that stopped being interested in leaving. Do Ho Suh's Fallen Star house perches at a deliberately uncomfortable angle atop an engineering building. Jenny

Holzer's Green Table sits near the Muir College quad, a massive granite slab incised with the phrase MUCH WAS DECIDED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN and other warnings from her early Truisms period<sup>17</sup>. The texts were meant to provoke existential contemplation. The table is at a convenient height. The Pac Sun Avant Garde occasionally eats his sandwich there. Students study on its surface, their textbooks covering the incised phrases; the granite holds the laptop at a good angle for typing. The critique has become furniture.

The campus sits along Torrey Pines Road. Across the street: Illumina, Pfizer, Takeda Pharmaceuticals, glass facades facing the humanities classrooms. Academia on one side of the light, its commercial application on the other. He crosses between them daily. Both buildings carry a register that precludes wonder, requiring an ID badge to enter an interior with fluorescent lighting that is at once gross and hygienic.



San Diego sits between its coastal siblings and is overshadowed by both. Los Angeles has spectacle and cultural production. San Francisco has technology and the mythology of progress. San Diego has elements of each and recognition for neither. Its biotech industry rivals the Bay in scale; the narrative of technological dominance belongs to Silicon Valley. Skateboarding was born here, in its concrete parks and empty swimming pools, through Tony Hawk and Rob Dyrdek and the whole vert ramp revolution; cultural signification of skateboarding has nevertheless migrated to Malibu and Venice. Surf culture runs deeper here in the actual daily practice of it than anywhere in California; the mythos belongs to Malibu. Comic-Con brings 130,000 people to the convention center every summer and still registers as a pilgrimage site, as visitors arriving at a stage, never at a place. The art institutions are "good enough." LA is the capital. San Diego lives at the edge of the Pacific Wall<sup>18</sup>, at the place where America's westward motion runs out of continent, and a certain flatness enters the air that no one in the city has ever learned how to complain about.

His commute is invariable. "I always take the 805 to the 5." The route established itself the first time he drove to work and has never been altered, despite Waze's suggestions of surface-street alternatives during rush hour. The notifications go unseen. Waze's algorithms register his vehicle and extract no meaningful pattern from it. His routine behavior is perfect camou-

flage, a form of optimization indifference that the algorithm cannot model when the model assumes an agent trying to get somewhere faster.

The mild weather erases the work of seasonal adjustment. He wears the same clothing year round here. Junkspace<sup>19</sup> finds its fullest expression in San Diego's commercial infrastructure: the covered walkways connecting residential zones to commercial nodes, the parking structures floating in oceans of asphalt, the shopping complexes whose entrances dissolve into the buildings they connect. He moves through the background radiation of the leisure-military-consumer industrial complex as conductor. The strip mall is availability without commentary. Along Interstate 8, Mission Valley flattens into its own name, as the exits announce themselves: Hotel Circle North, Hotel Circle South, Qualcomm Way, Fashion Valley Road. The toponymy has surrendered: Holiday Inn, Hampton Inn, Courtyard, Residence Inn, Best Western, DoubleTree. Great Clips. Westfield. Subway. INOVA Drone Inc. Target. Jiffy Lube. Qualcomm Industries. Baskin-Robbins. Lockheed Martin RMS. Verizon. The hotel sits on Hotel Circle, and that is the whole sentence. The Pac Sun Avant Garde gravitates to San Diego where every sign declares itself completely and there is no shadow into which a second meaning might recede; the grammatical mood is indicative, present tense. The Pac Sun Avant Garde patronizes whichever business materializes along his drift path. Their distinctions are irrelevant to anything he needs, and the street agrees.



California itself is the precondition for the Pac Sun Avant Garde's existence, and San Diego is California's functional residue. The beach lifestyle that once signi-

fied rebellion has been converted into commercial infrastructure<sup>20</sup>. Revolutionary chillness has become background ambience. Rebellious nonchalance has become default setting. The taco shop called California Burritos is indistinguishable from Roberto's is indistinguishable from Rigoberto's. Each one sells the identical burrito stuffed with French fries, marketed to college students as optimal "munchies food." The Californian ethos has flattened into shelf stock. The Pac Sun Avant Garde could, in principle, materialize anywhere the California ethos has been transplanted and stripped of its spectacular elements: the sprawling developments outside Phoenix, certain zones of suburban Austin, the commercial corridors of Denver or Tampa or Charlotte. He materialized in San Diego because San Diego offered the undiluted strain.

The same flattening that converts rebellion into ambience converts the conditions for rebellion into real estate. An organic youth culture of the kind that registers as a sufficiently subcultural (Bushwick & Silverlake in the late 2000s, Neukölln in Berlin, Hackney in London) requires a few mundane inputs: cheap rent in a contiguous walkable district, density sufficient that strangers in the same age range encounter one another by accident, an oversupply of underemployed twenty-somethings, and proximity to the apparatus that will eventually photograph it. San Diego has none of these. Rent is high and dispersed across freeway distances; the population skews toward sailors, biotech postdocs, and retirees on fixed incomes; the city's mode of association is the parking lot. The Che Café has held the line at UCSD since

1980, hosting punk and hardcore shows out of a single building the university has tried to evict more than once, and it has remained, after forty-five years, a single building. It generates a scene the size of itself. San Diego has not had a moment in the way that other American cities have.



What a city in this position acquires, instead, is a developer. The state was built this way. Land is purchased before the city is; the master plan is drawn before the residents arrive; the village is designed and then a population is recruited to live inside the village. Spontaneous accumulation is the exception in California; engineered accumulation is the rule. The thing organic time would eventually have made is made in advance by an entity with capital and patience, and the residents move into a finished version of what they would otherwise have had to spend many years building.

The procedure scales down to nightlife. Consortium Holdings, founded in San Diego in the late 2000s, owns roughly twenty establishments distributed across North

Park and Little Italy: the Lafayette Hotel, Polite Provisions, Born and Raised, Morning Glory, Part Time Lover, False Idol, others. The firm's website explains that it does not build restaurants and bars but "public gathering spaces that help cultivate our neighborhoods through the fostering of creativity, dialogue, questions, and conversations." The tagline at the bottom of the page reads: We build environments that confront loneliness. The properties do not advertise their shared parentage; each of them performs a different aesthetic register. Polite Provisions does Victorian apothecary. Born and Raised does midcentury steakhouse. The Lafayette, reopened in 2023 after a thirty-one-million-dollar renovation, contains a hand-painted lobby ceiling, a twenty-four-hour diner serving "experimental deli food", a Oaxacan mezcalería with stained glass salvaged from a deconstructed church, and a two-lane bowling alley modeled on the Frick. A visitor moving between three of these rooms has the sensation of moving between three distinct establishments belonging to three distinct sensibilities until, in passing, the visitor realizes that the music has not changed as they went along. A server mentions that the 24/7 playlist is mandated at the corporate level and that staff is not permitted, under any circumstances, to change the tune.

This playlist is the tell. Aaliyah, the Pharcyde, Amine, Pablo-era Kanye the late-period output of a 2014 streetwear consumer who is now in his late thirties and works in marketing. The firm's mission statement insists that its goal is "neither rented nor revolutionary," that its concepts are "not about being all things to all

people," that "everyone is making a conscious decision to be here." Each clause is a prophylactic against the accusation the firm has anticipated and is trying to deflect. The consciousness of the decision is the alibi which only becomes necessary when the firm has already understood that what it is selling is the resemblance of an unengineered scene.

The buildings are beautiful, and the drink selection is respectable. The art has been selected with care. What has been removed is the disorganized population that, somewhere else, would have produced these establishments by accident, in cheaper rooms, with worse cocktails, over fifteen years. The firm has compressed the period into a single year, the way one might renovate a kitchen.

Inside any of these rooms on a Friday night, the clientele is the Pac Sun Avant Garde at the volume the establishment requires. He is wearing salmon shorts and an unbuttoned oxford. The blonde woman next to him is in a black bodycon dress from Aritzia. Neither of them registers a distinction between this room and the room at the fraternity house in Pacific Beach where the same two of them stood last Saturday. The room is dimmer here. The bartender knows what an Old Fashioned is. The crowd reads, to anyone who has spent fifteen minutes at a college bar in any state, as a college crowd. The room has been engineered to read otherwise.

The engineering was precise. The firm implicitly remodeled the Lafayette to appeal to someone specific: the man who knows which house JW Anderson is cur-

rently designing for, who can date a Japanese mill's switch to ring-spun yarn, who recognizes the salvaged glass as having come from a specific deconsecrated church in Tijuana and can place the windows within their era. Such was the man the firm projected and yet he failed to appear in the numbers the room required; indeed, one wonders whether he exists in such numbers at all, or whether he ever did.

This is where the two halves of the California gesture meet. The developer accumulates by plan; the Pac Sun Avant Garde accumulates through an aimless but ultimately earnest encounter with experience. Consortium Holdings constructs an interior that signals scarcity, taste, insider knowledge; the Pac Sun Avant Garde walks into it on a Friday because his friend's group chat picked it.

The hand-painted venetian ceiling registers as "pretty ceiling", the salvaged church glass registers as "colorful window" and the curated playlist registers as "trendy music" that is on. He likes the lighting and the drinks there. The firm has spent thirty-one million dollars producing an environment that he absorbs with the same passivity with which he absorbs the dive bar next door.

San Diego's dialectic resolves on his body. The most engineered room in the city and the least optimized consumer in the city require one another to function. The room cannot fill itself with patrons sophisticated enough to read the room; there are not enough of those patrons in the city to fill the room three nights a week. The Pac Sun Avant Garde will eventually turn thirty one and age

out of the frat house. The room and the Pac Sun Avant Garde will converge. The firm has built an interior whose only sustainable customer is the customer for whom the interior is invisible. The connoisseur, had he arrived, would have spent the evening reading the ceiling. The Pac Sun Avant Garde would have been the only one who spent the evening in the room.

Geographic waste accumulates in space and in time. San Diego exists in a perpetual present. The temporal rhythms and spontaneity that structure other cities have gone missing here. Seasons blur into one long mild weather. Historical markers appear on plaques without context. Time is ambient, a background condition, a hum.

*His presence in San Diego is*

**coincidence.**

*The coincidence is structural.*




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## PAC SUN



**T**he denim jacket with cloth hood. Blue denim body, gray jersey hood, metal zipper, two chest pockets. The tag reads: 65% polyester, 30% cotton, 5% spandex. Made in Sri Lanka. \$19.93, marked down from \$70.00. Sun + Stone, a Macy's house brand.

The jacket has a lineage it can no longer carry. The denim body descends from the Type III Levi's trucker, itself descended from the workwear of nineteenth-cen-

ture miners. From the Western shirt to James Dean to the Ramones to the man in the Brokeback Mountain poster, each generation embedded the denim jacket with a new layer of meaning, and to wear one was, at each of those moments, to make a claim. The cloth hood cancels the claim. Someone in a conference room above a factory district in Guangzhou saw the Type III silhouette on a mood board and saw the gray jersey hoodie on an adjacent mood board and proposed combining them. The garment is what comes back from the factory floor. A century of denim signification has been converted into coverage. Soft where it touches the neck, stiffer where it touches the shoulders. The claim the jacket now makes is that the weather outside is a little cool and the wearer wanted his body covered.

It is helpful, with this jacket, to remember that fashion was never the garment, but a conversation the garment was made to have with itself in three different rooms at once.<sup>21</sup> In the first room is the real garment: the physical thing on a hanger, fabric and stitching, an object that holds heat. In the second room is the image: the same garment photographed, lit, posed against a backdrop, reduced to a flat surface of signals. In the third room is the description: the caption beneath the photograph, the runway note, the editorial paragraph that tells you what the lapel means. The three are never the same garment. The real one is warm. The image is thin. The written one is long. Fashion happens in the traffic among them. A coat becomes a coat only when the photograph and the paragraph have circulated long enough to send a shopper to the rack.

The cloth-hooded denim jacket was never properly photographed by anyone whose photographs entered the system. It was not styled in a magazine, nor did it appear in the trend forecasts that ran before the season. The Sun + Stone listing on the Macy's website carries one flat product image, lit like inventory, captioned with the words Tsunami Wash. The jacket has technically entered the language, but the system did not pick it up.



The fashion system has worked aggressively, throughout the present age, against the possibility of his owning it. The Fall 2025/Winter 2026 menswear coverage named the jacket of the year as the cropped wool blouson, or the café racer in waxed leather. The garment had been quietly retired by the trade press around 2015, after a single season at Zara and brief runs at a few other fast-fashion houses. The infrastructure of taste, having

moved on, did not want him to find one. He found one anyway. Macy's, on a Saturday afternoon, two days before a club night his coworkers had organized. He needed something cleaner than the original he had been wearing for the last decade. The original was something he had bought without knowing it would become a ten-year garment that had outlasted three apartments and four phones.

The grammar of fashion was always micro-permutation.<sup>22</sup> Two jackets identical in every respect except the collar are two different jackets. One is the executive, one is the student; or one is this season, the other is last; or one is serious, the other is playful. The meaning is in the difference the collar makes inside a system that has already decided what the alternatives are. The cloth-hooded denim jacket is the result of a permutation no system authorized: the executive's collar and the student's hoodie have been combined, and the system responds the way a grammar responds to a combination outside its rules, with silence, or with a shrug, or by reclassifying the garment as something unworthy of notice. Macy's has stocked the violation.

Subcultural style operates by bricolage.<sup>23</sup> The mod selects the military parka, the Italian suit, the Lambretta, the soul record, and arranges them into a grammar none of them carried alone. The punk reassembles the safety pin, the bondage trouser, the dog collar into a semiotic affront that insiders read as affront and outsiders read as wreckage. The bricoleur is a maker of new sentences from borrowed words. The transgression is visible when the words still carry the memory of their

original sentences. The Pac Sun Avant Garde's closet looks, to a passing observer, like bricolage. Dockers slim-fit trousers from 2008, purchased for an interview at Baskin-Robbins. A mesh On the Byas jersey with bold 00 numerals and tribal-inspired sleeve bands from Pac-Sun, 2015, bought for Cancun. Cargo shorts from American Eagle, era indeterminate. A Pendleton wool flannel he was given at a white elephant exchange. The closet is the shape left when fifteen years of Tuesdays have deposited a pile of clothing against a wall.

The closet looks like a record of drift, and it mostly is, but the drift contains punctures. Among the Dockers and the cargo shorts hangs a single Issey Miyake pleated shirt purchased for thirty-six dollars at a consignment store in Encinitas in 2019, on an afternoon he had gone in for a belt. He has worn it twice. The shirt sits in the closet at the same weight as everything else.



To call the Pac Sun Avant Garde a passive consumer would be to describe his closet from the outside. Through retrospective analysis, his purchases are an unintentional position taken against the entire forecast. The system made its case, at full volume, for the cropped blouson. He went to Macy's and performed obscenity by buying the jacket the system had given up on. He liked the jacket and has continued to do so for a decade. He will pair it, on Saturday night, with whatever shirt was nearest the top of the drawer, which is to say with something the system did successfully place in his closet, a graphic tee absorbed in some half-remembered transaction at a mall, and the pairing will look, to anyone watching, like the casual coincidence of a man who does not think about clothes.

The accuracy of that reading is partial. While the shirt is an object of passive drift, the jacket is one of reverse osmosis. It is a faithful and complicated object, selected against the field and carried home as a trophy of specific but entirely accidental resistance against the currents of trend cycles. The Pac Sun Avant Garde walked through the 2025-2026 season and extracted the most impossible garment that could be found. The system fails through his total absorption of the specific; he consumes the lost signal and allows the remainder of the world to fall away as inert material.<sup>24</sup>

*The Daoists may have called the Pac Sun Avant Garde pu 樸, referring to the piece of wood the carpenter has not yet shaped into furniture. The fashion system's labor is the carving and the sequence of operations by which raw cloth is converted into a system of signs legible to the trained reader. The cloth-hooded denim jacket sits at a stage of the work the system abandoned partway through.*

The industry has a phrase for the figure it has been trying, with mixed results, to manufacture: the "intuitive dresser" or the person who dresses without reading. Stylists are hired to produce the effect on celebrities. Magazines mockup editorial spreads to instruct the reader on how to perform it. The whole apparatus is downstream of a single intuition, which is that the most desirable customer is the one who looks as though no apparatus has reached him. He is what the spreads are trying to depict. He arrived at the condition by the only path the magazines could not print, which was to have never opened the magazines.

Every act of dressing performs two motions at once<sup>25</sup>. The wearer affiliates with a group and, inside that group, distinguishes himself. One dresses in the manner of a set, and inside the set one dresses earlier, better, with more irony. Conformity, individuation: the older argument insists they are the same motion seen

from two sides — and perhaps they are. The Pac Sun Avant Garde is the case in which neither motion executes. He dresses without distinction. Both engines have failed on the same morning. He goes out the door in the jacket he likes and sometimes the jacket is a suit.

The eponymous PacSun and the Pac Sun Avant Garde operate through the same logic. The Pac Sun Avant Garde shops there through a shared ontology: his, the store's and what is left of California once its ethos has flattened into shelf stock and planned cities.

Pacific Sunwear of California (Pac Sun) was founded in 1980 in Newport Beach. The origin story is the genuine article: a surf shop that made good, Southern California cool commodified and distributed to landlocked teenagers in Ohio strip malls and by the 1990s mall boom, had opened hundreds of locations. The blue-and-yellow storefronts became standard fixtures in American mall directories, their presence so ubiquitous as to become invisible. The bonfire and Toes on the Nose iconography of the early 2000s, Quiksilver, Billabong, Hurley, Volcom, Roxy, passed through PacSun on the way to becoming nostalgia. By 2010 the store had abandoned coherent identity. Its inventory became aggregation without argument: whatever licenses were available (Playboy, Nintendo, Thrasher), whatever collaborations materialized (John Galt, LA Hearts, Brandy Melville), whatever the buying team encountered at trade shows.

In the years immediately preceding the arrival of the cloth-hooded denim jacket on its hanger, PacSun began to do something stranger. In October 2022, the com-

pany announced a multi-year partnership with the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>26</sup> PacSun would now, in collaboration with the Met's curators, produce baby tees, hoodies, oversized totes, and crew socks featuring works from one of the largest art collections in the world. These included Greek and Roman sculptures in fall 2023, New York iconography in summer 2024, The Met Cloisters Holiday Collection, and a spring 2026 release drawing from rarely-seen seventeenth-to-twentieth-century works, photographed against the cliffs of Big Sur. Roman marble heads of athletes, the Three Graces, Renoir's Bouquet of Chrysanthemums were converted into screen prints and embroidery by the same factories that produced the cloth-hooded denim jacket. The Met's head of retail and licensing, in the press release, described "the enduring resonance of art." PacSun's chief merchandising officer offered his version:

*"At PacSun, art is one of the core pillars of our brand and a powerful way we connect with our community. Our customer is deeply influenced by culture, and our collaboration with The Met bridges historic design with modern self-expression through style."*

Both statements emerge as a corporate prose so thoroughly denatured that its language slips past the reader's resistance, asserting a perfect exactitude wherein the art object is seamlessly transfigured into merchandise. Here, the commodity itself constitutes the very site

of the art's encounter with the consumer; there is no concealment, only a structural equivalence where the textual mechanics of the press release perfectly mirror the physical presentation of the retail rack.



Alongside the marble heads and the chrysanthemums, PacSun also produced garments bearing only the Met's wordmark, the logo isolated against the blank field of the shirt, nearly a decade after the logo-mania of the mid-2010s had supposedly exhausted itself. The two kinds of shirt hung on the same rack on the same day. One puts a piece of art on the body. The other puts the institution that authorizes art on the body. The Met itself would announce, as the theme of its 2026 Gala, that fashion is art, and the discourse would proceed: the columns and the panels and the explainers each taking up a side of a question that had already been articulated, from opposite sides, decades earlier.<sup>27</sup> Such a

discourse relies upon maintaining a provisional distance between fashion and art, a boundary established purely to stage the spectacle of its own overcoming. Yet the retail space dispenses with this dialectical necessity, flattening the cultural hierarchy by proffering both the classical image and the institutional wordmark as simultaneous, co-equal signs available to the casual gaze of the passerby.

The website is more revealing than the rack. On *pac-sun.com*, the Met collaboration shirts are photographed on a model whose body is at three-quarter angle, the printed artwork compressed by the fold of the fabric and partially obscured by the model's arm. The caption naming the work appears on the actual garment, beneath the image, in a small typeface; on the website the typeface is blurred to the point of illegibility. The code of the museum is overwritten by the code of commerce: the product listing names neither the painting nor the painter, but merely the size run, the price, and the fabric content. A visitor seeking to decipher what is on the shirt receives, in place of information, the shirt itself. The apparatus by which one might still operate the old question of whether fashion is art has been quietly withdrawn at the level of the catalogue, and the label that names the work is printed at a scale legible on a body, where the gaze of another wearer becomes the mirror in which the shirt finally resolves itself as a fully realized sign.

It is worth pausing on the word art and what has happened to it. For much of history art was a trade: the painter belonged to a guild and apprenticed in a work-

shop. The buyer commissioned a painting, a useful object that was also beautiful, like furniture. There was no ideological strain between making art and making decoration, between making art and making a living.<sup>28</sup> This changed slowly over the nineteenth century, when the word *avant-garde* arrived in art criticism borrowed from military vernacular.<sup>29</sup> The term named the small unit sent ahead of the main column to map terrain the column could not yet hold. To call an artist *avant-garde* in the 1820s was to make a claim about position: the artist was the unit ahead of the column—the public, the academy, the patron, the parlor.

The position became a movement and the movement became the dominant idea of what art was. The trade-and-craft tradition was renamed "decorative art" and to be a fine artist meant to negate. The collector and the curator learned to want the discomfort the artist sold, and the public arguments of the late twentieth century were arguments inside this premise. One side held the categories of art and fashion distinct. The other held that the gesture of negation had been so thoroughly absorbed by commerce that art's claim to autonomy was a fiction, in which case fashion, having always admitted its commercial life, was the more honest practice.<sup>30</sup> The positions look opposed and share a frame: art is a category requiring a stake, requiring the line between art and not-art to be policed and crossed.

Fashion took up the *avant-garde* openly; the Paris runway of 1981 received a collection of asymmetrical black garments from Yohji Yamamoto who had spent the previous decade reading continental philosophy and

dressing women in clothes that refused the western tailored silhouette.<sup>31</sup> Within the next decade the style was canon; within twenty it was a uniform. The all-black palette, the dropped shoulder, the unfinished hem, the deliberate excess of fabric became the costume of a class: architects, gallerists, curators, design critics, the senior editor at the small magazine, the philosophy postdoc with the small grant. To dress in Yohji was to identify oneself, at sight, as a member of the brigade.

In November 2024, PacSun announced a 21-piece capsule with Wildside Yohji Yamamoto and Formula 1, dropping at the Las Vegas Grand Prix. The Wildside line is a diffusion line: racing-cut jackets, jersey aero tees, bucket hats, the words Yohji Yamamoto across the chest in block letters; a wordmark, sold separately, at the price of any other jacket at a mall.<sup>32</sup>

The metaphor returns to its source: fifteen minutes away from the largest Navy base on the U.S. west coast at a Westfield shopping mall. On a Saturday afternoon the Pac Sun Avant Garde buys a Wildside racing jacket and two Renoir shirts in the same size. The first is the shirt he wants. The duplicate sits on the shelf above the dresser in its plastic sleeve for an indefinite period that may be months and may be years before the original wears out. The fashion system has no language for the purchase: the garment is not collected, since to collect would be to maintain a relation to its scarcity, nor is it hoarded, since hoarding implies anxiety about supply. The mode is closer to the way the refined dresser approaches the white tee. The refined dresser has spent years in the search: the Hanes, the Uniqlo Supima, the

Whitesville loopwheel, the Merz b. Schwanen 215, the four-ounce versus the seven-ounce, the boxy versus the slim, the GAT versus the tubular knit. The search terminates in a single shirt, and the shirt is purchased in quantity. The blank is the unit of a refined wardrobe, the surface against which everything else is measured, and to find the right one is to be released from the question of shirts for the foreseeable future. The Pac Sun Avant Garde performs the same operation through a different door. On a trip to Target in 2022 he picked up a navy blue T-shirt printed with a faded Captain America shield. The shirt was acquired the way most of his shirts are acquired, which is in the course of buying paper towels. He wore it twice and registered the weight and feel of the cotton as superior to most of what he owned. He drove back to the same Target the following Tuesday and bought nine more of the same shirt. By purchasing the shirt for its base materials, “Captain America” is liberated from the shackles of intellectual property while the licensed image sits on the front of the shirt the way the tag sits on the inside: as information.

The shield itself, considered as a shape, is an exercise in the Bauhaus movement. A red circle, a white circle, a red circle, a blue circle, and a five-pointed white star at the center: the same exercise Josef Albers ran in the foundation course at Dessau, Germany with color held against color in concentric registration until the eye accepts the surface as flat. The character behind the shape was invented at Timely Comics in 1941 to sell war bonds, and the character has accumulated, in the eighty years since, a vast apparatus of plot and

reference and cinematic universe. None of that apparatus survived the journey to the Target on Mission Center Road. What arrived at the rack was the shape: four concentric circles and a star, screen-printed at low fidelity onto eight ounces of cotton in Honduras. The refined dresser arrives at his blank through subtraction, paring the field of shirts down to the one that carries nothing on it. The Pac Sun Avant Garde arrives at his blank through indifference, which subtracts more thoroughly than refinement does. The character is treated as ornament and the ornament is treated as ground. The ten shirts stacked in his drawer function as undershirts, as gym shirts, as shirts to mow the lawn in, as the shirt nearest the top of the drawer on a Saturday night his cloth-hooded denim jacket requires a layer beneath it. The system had labored for eighty years to produce a sign and he had bought ten of them and used them as material.

The fashion press cannot quite address the store. Vogue does not run features on PacSun. Neither does Hypebeast. The Wildside Yohji collaboration was covered, at the time of its release, by PRNewswire — a wire service that exists to redistribute corporate announcements to other corporate employees, the press release passing from one inbox to another without ever crossing the threshold into anything a reader might encounter. The store has stopped offering the press anything to address, and the press professional has stopped trying. What the store offers instead is a literature it produces itself. In May 2026 PacSun's chief executive Briane Olson published *Co-created: The Cultural*

*Strategy That Redefined PacSun* with Simon & Schuster's Forbes imprint, a thirty-two-dollar hardcover on a cross-country tour through New Orleans, San Francisco, Miami, Washington, Boston, Los Angeles, London and Paris, culminating in a private dinner at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The book's epilogue concerns a TikTok influencer named Lyla Biggs, whose pre-Black-Friday 2023 video featuring the company's Casey low-rise baggy jean in the Astrid wash precipitated sales of several hundred thousand pairs. The episode is offered as proof of a strategy in which legacy brands become, in Olson's phrase, "purpose-driven" by shifting their culture toward "community" and "empowering" that community through the "creator economy". The vocabulary is the lexicon of every quarterly earnings call held in the last decade and has been thoroughly polished to the point of frictionlessness; it is language that signals competence to other speakers of the same dialect and means nothing to anyone outside the room. The Pac Sun Avant Garde will never hear it, but the book is for him, not for the "community". It is also for the analyst at Wells Fargo, the merchandising executive three doors down at the same Westfield, the apparel-industry conference attendee in the Charlotte airport who might also own a Captain America T-Shirt he wears on Sunday afternoon outings.

The store has also begun, in the same period, to sell itself back to itself. In December 2025 PacSun launched PS Vintage, a resale platform stocked with the kinds of garment that hang on poles at flea markets in cities like Los Angeles or San Francisco: secondhand denim, vin-

tage workwear jackets in recognizable heritage brands like Carhartt, vintage Harley-Davidson tees and fleece, and graphic tees tied to music, motorsports, and legacy brands. A Harley-Davidson tee sold at the Harley-Davidson flagship in 1999 for twenty-two dollars; resold at a vintage store in East Williamsburg in 2018 for fifty; resold at PS Vintage in 2026 for one hundred and ten and on eBay for thirty-eight. The platform expanded in April 2026 to sixteen physical stores, including the location at the Mission Valley Westfield. The divisional merchandise manager described the new section as a more curated and discovery-driven experience, organized by era, size, and style, rooted in the thrill of finding something truly one-of-a-kind. Vintage, as a fashion category, has spent the last fifteen years drifting from one definition to another. The word once denoted construction quality: a vintage jacket was a jacket made by hands that no longer made them, in fabrics that were no longer milled, with seams that no factory was now willing to pay for. The word now denotes a signal sent to other people who own vintage. The garment performs taste, knowingness, refinement, the suggestion that the wearer has access to a circulation outside the mall, a signal PacSun has detected and reproduced in a corner of the mall.

The customers the section addresses are difficult to locate. The shopper with the vocabulary to read vintage as vintage is not driving fifteen minutes from the Naval base to buy an 90's Oxford University Graphic T shirt at the Mission Valley Westfield, he only wears 60's vintage. The section is built for a phantom: a body that has been

notified, through some downstream tributary of culture, that vintage is the thing, and who would be willing to pay one hundred and ten dollars for a faded tee provided the faded tee is presented at the rack he was already walking past, with the lighting overhead and the size-organized rail and the small printed card explaining the era. Whether this body materializes in sufficient volume to justify a sixteen-store rollout is the empirical question the rollout is, in real time, trying to answer. PS Vintage is to fashion merchandising what peanut M&Ms are to the front of an Ace Hardware: vestigial appendages designed to capture the energy of impulse.

The simulacra are doing their own work in this corner of the floor. PacSun spent the late 2010s and early 2020s printing graphic tees that simulated vintage: distressed Dr. Pepper logos, fake-faded Coca-Cola scripts, pre-rumpled Marlboro typography, screen-printed on new cotton in Bangladesh and shipped to the rack with the wear already on them. The store now stocks, on the adjacent rack, the actual Dr. Pepper tee from 1991, sourced from an estate sale in Riverside, marked at one hundred and twenty dollars. The two shirts hang within arm's reach. They are, for visual purposes, identical. The price difference is the entire content of the category. The Pac Sun Avant Garde, on the Saturday afternoon in question, walks past both racks without registering the distinction. He has, somewhere in his closet, a Billabong tee from a 2007 PacSun trip his parents took him on for back-to-school shopping, kept because it still fits and washes well. He encounters, on the floor, two Billabong shirts. The first is a

2026 reissue at the front of the store with fresh ink, fresh cotton, the original early-2000s graphic reprinted at twenty-four dollars, marketed as the "OG Billabong" capsule. The second hangs ten feet away on the PS Vintage rack, an actual surf tee from the same period, faded, in a different colorway priced at seventy-five dollars and tagged as one-of-one. He buys both. The reissue replaces the one with the hole in the hem. The vintage one will hang in the closet

The Pac Sun Avant Garde is an international phenomenon. In Seoul, the populace wears Sports Illustrated wordmarks across their chests with no relation to American sports journalism. National Geographic operates storefronts throughout South Korea selling puffer jackets to people who don't know the brand is a magazine stateside. CNN has become a lifestyle brand, its logo appearing on backpacks and bucket hats in Dongdaemun Fashion Town. These are full retail ventures at the scale of PacSun itself, with storefronts, advertising budgets, and region-specific marketing teams. <sup>33</sup> Their editorial purposes have dissolved out of the cloth and collapsed entirely into signification. What is left is the shape itself: the red bar, the yellow rectangle, the serif of a headline font released from the institution that once owned it. The intellectual property has, once again, been freed from its captor.



The Pac Sun Avant Garde, pulling on a Budweiser tee in the opposite hemisphere, performs the same operation in reverse. The dualism is that the same gesture, repeated at scale, becomes its opposite. For him the unmoored logo is encountered as a private appreciation of a red shape, an indifference to what the red shape implies. For the Korean teenager in the National Geographic puffer, the unmoored logo has been re-anchored as uniform. He wears it as obligation with minimal interest in the scientific process or outdoor exploration. The puffer has been re-installed, on arrival, as the local sign of a coherent look one is expected to perform. The same gesture liberates the image in one body and conscripts it in another. The intellectual property escapes its first owner and is recaptured by a second order of conformity, no longer the brand's but the peer group's. What was a National Geographic magazine in 1987 becomes a square yellow shape in 2026 becomes, by Friday, a piece of the dress code at a particular high school in Jungnang-gu. The sign drifts free and is grounded

again, and the difference between art and uniform turns out to be the difference between the wearer who lets the shape be just that and the wearer who needs the shape to facilitate the labor of belonging.

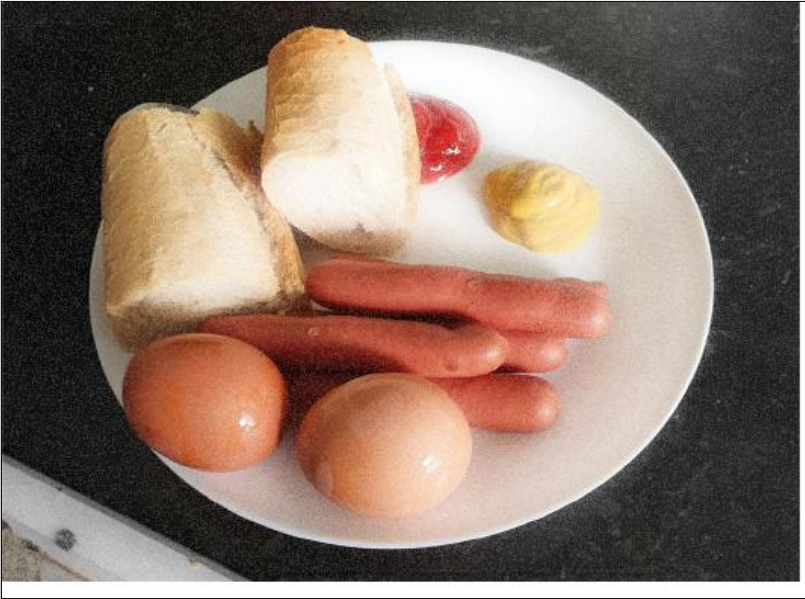
The Pac Sun Avant Garde is what the fashion system terminates in: American brands become Korean lifestyle accessories become American mall inventory become global commercial infrastructure. Each crossing strips another layer of original context, running the system's semiotic machinery down. The wearer is asked to supply the meaning himself, and the Pac Sun Avant Garde is the wearer who supplies a meaning the system did not anticipate, which is "I have liked this for ten years and I would like a clean one."

The architecture that contains the Pac Sun Avant Garde is the mall, which is ostensibly in decline, and ostensibly on the verge of a comeback, and both reports arrive every season without reaching him. He moves through its corridors past the Vietnamese nail salon that has been grand opening for three years, past Wetzel's Pretzels emanating its synthetic butter atmosphere, past the calendar kiosk that still exists in a world that no longer buys physical calendars. E-commerce is not an existential threat to him. He will appear at whichever commercial infrastructure replaces the mall, and absorb whichever products happen to be available, and continue to seek out, with the same unannounced determination, the few specific objects he has decided he wants. His presence is metabolic for almost everything and pointed for almost nothing, and the ratio is what makes him difficult to see.

He emerges from Pac Sun and Macy's with two paper bags. The receipts are crumpled in the bag, then forgotten. The transaction leaves no psychological impact. He processes commercial culture the way the body processes air. Continuously. Unconsciously. Except for the small, almost invisible filter through which a single garment, every ten years or so, passes from the field into the closet on terms he has set himself.

# IV

## FORAGING



***F**riday evening, 8:37 PM. The Ralphs parking lot spreads as an ocean of asphalt, each space demarcated by yellow paint already fading. He has parked in the same row for six years, four spaces in from the cart corral. The automatic doors hesitate before opening, then admit him into the air conditioning, which*

*is calibrated to exactly sixty-eight degrees. Avicii's "Wake Me Up" plays from the speakers above the produce, the vocals tinny and compressed, fighting against the hum of refrigeration units. He recognizes the song. He likes it.*

The Whole Foods sits directly across the street from his apartment complex, a three-minute walk if he wanted. The Aldi is twelve minutes south on Genesee, and a complete grocery run there would cost him forty percent less than what he is about to spend at Ralphs. The Trader Joe's, the Food-4-Less, and the 99 Ranch Market are all within a fifteen-minute drive. He has never been inside any of them. He drives the almost thirty minutes to Ralphs every Friday, against traffic on Balboa, the way someone visits a relative he is fond of. Less inferior than unapproachable, the Whole Foods is a store that requires a labor he is unable to perform. The fifteen varieties of single-origin olive oil, the small sign listing the farm where the eggs were laid, the employee in the apron handing out samples and explaining the difference between two indistinguishable yogurts all presuppose a shopper who has agreed to spend cognitive labor on the differential between products. The Trader Joe's fails him for the opposite reason by asking him to find pleasure in a quirk he cannot read. The hand-lettered chalkboards, the Hawaiian shirts on the clerks, the products renamed for whimsy (Trader Ming's, Trader José's, the Speculoos cookie butter, the Everything But the Bagel seasoning) present a wall of references he is

being asked to find charming. The store is performing a personality at him, and the performance requires him to perform back, to register the wink, to understand that the cracker is funny. He recognizes none of the products and he spends over 20 minutes trying to figure out which aisle contains the milk.

Ralphs makes no demands of him at all. There is nothing in Ralph's that is implied, nothing held just out of reach, no atmosphere that requires deciphering. There is a "peanut-butter aisle." Thriving in this glacial brightness, the overhead lights emit a frequency (roughly 5500 Kelvins) at which everything appears more real than real. The red on the Hormel can achieves a saturation impossible in daylight. The condensation on the frozen-food doors forms perfect droplets, each a tiny lens magnifying the products behind. Under this illumination a strange democracy emerges. The thirty-dollar prosciutto di Parma and the three-dollar (Ralphs house brand) bologna sit on adjacent shelves at equal weight, equal presence. He passes both, having long ago settled on the six dollar Oscar Mayer, which he has eaten since elementary school. He likes the way the slices peel off the stack. The prosciutto is a substance from outside his life, and his life has not asked it to come in.



The store operates on the principle of overwhelming abundance. Seventeen varieties of sandwich bread. Forty-three breakfast cereals. An entire wall of yogurts differentiated by fat percentage, fruit mix-in, probiotic strain, country of origin. He moves through the excess on the route his feet have learned, approaching the chili first and scavenging twelve cans of Hormel for his Sunday ritual. His reflection appears in the foggy glass of the freezer reserved entirely for Stouffer's lasagna; four boxes of the same brand his mother kept in her freezer in 1996 (the taste of which has not changed in any way he can detect) enter his cart. Upon his arrival in the snack aisle for plain Ruffles (family size), he decides to buy not two but three bags this week. The dairy run yields six packs of Yoo-hoo; he has tried other chocolate-milk drinks and they were not Yoo-hoo.

In the breakfast aisle he pauses: boxes of instant oatmeal in flavors that bear no relationship to their named fruits line the shelves from floor to ceiling from Wild Berry, which contains no berries, to Peaches & Cream, which involves neither peaches nor cream. His hand reaches for Maple & Brown Sugar. Neither the maple tree tapped in Vermont nor the sap boiled through winter nights exists in the box. Inside the box: corn syrup solids, natural flavor, caramel color. What persists nonetheless is not maple exactly, but the memory of the idea of maple, a third-order simulation that has forgotten its original, liberating the oatmeal from disappointment. No one opens the packet expecting actual maple syrup. The product delivers what it promises, which is one hundred sixty calories of quick-cooking oats with a sweet brown flavor. The box goes into his cart.



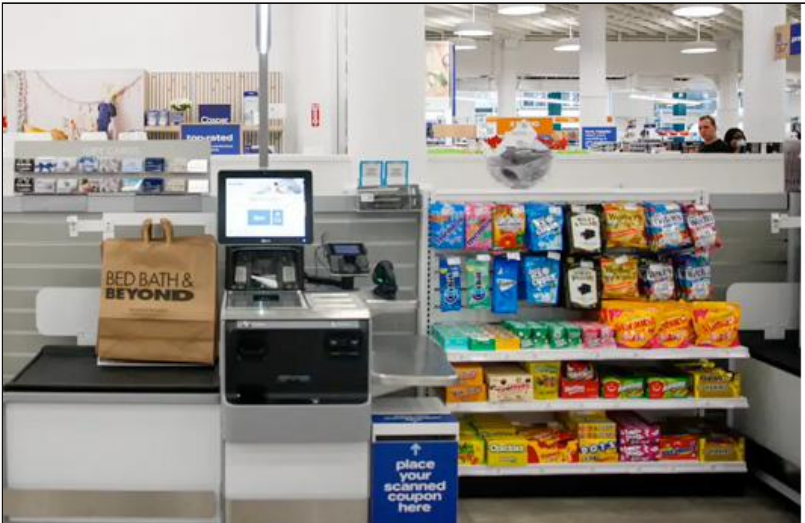


In the canned-tuna aisle, an older man stands for forty seconds in front of the StarKist Tuna display, conducting an internal calculation about sodium and mercury. A woman in yoga pants two aisles away fills her cart from a list on her phone, each item checked off with a small satisfaction her cart will radiate at the cashier. A father with a toddler in the seat reads the unit-price stickers below the shelf. The figure of the modern shopper is the figure whose food is the portrait of her self.<sup>34</sup> Every cart that passes him is a portrait the cart's owner is currently composing. His cart is twelve cans of chili stacked on top of two family-size Ruffles.

Across the city, the most refined operators of this system are at work. They are queueing for three hours outside a restaurant that serves only toast. Sourdough cultured from wild yeasts captured in Big Sur, topped with avocado varieties no one has heard of, finished with

pink salt harvested by third-generation salters in Pakistan. The meal costs forty-seven dollars. Each bite is photographed and uploaded; the captions referencing Proust and gluten sensitivity in the same sentence. The avocado toast, the kale crunch bowl, the seventeen-dollar smashburger, the hand-rolled bagel from the bakery in Lower Manhattan are each a small ideology served at a particular price. The Pac Sun Avant Garde walks past the toast with the same step he walks past the bologna. He has never entered the system in which a meal is a portrait, and the portraits accordingly fail to assemble around him.

In the produce section he picks up a bag of baby carrots labeled Triple Washed! Ready to Eat! The washing happened in Bakersfield, where industrial machines sprayed chlorinated water across tons of carved orange cylinders. Baby carrots are regular carrots lathed down to uniform size, their skins removed, their irregularities erased; they do not exist in nature. He puts the bag in the cart on top of the Stouffer's. The cart fills along no organizing principle except frequency of use, items accumulating like sediment at a river delta, the heaviest deposits at the bottom and the most recent on top.



At checkout the total reaches one hundred ninety-seven eighty-two. He pays with the credit card. The machine prompts him to sign on the screen and he signs without looking. The teenage cashier says "Have a good one" to the space he recently occupied; he is already moving toward the exit. In the parking lot, loading the bags into the trunk of the Toyota Yaris, the evening light catches the half-gallon of 7Select milk he bought three nights ago, still in the car, forgotten. The milk has spoiled in the heat. He places the new groceries around the old jug.

On the way home, the Del Taco drive-thru. He has eaten the Double Del Cheeseburger maybe three hundred times in his adult life, and the prospect of eating one tonight has been with him quietly since the third aisle of Ralphs. He orders, and the contradiction (a burger at a taco chain) does not register as such; it re-

gisters as the burger he came for. While he waits, he watches other cars cycle through the drive-thru. The burger arrives wrapped in yellow paper, inside a bag, inside a second bag.

The forager's path in the literature is not the straight line the supermarket assumes; his are long stretches of short local steps punctuated by rare, disproportionately large jumps in arbitrary directions, the jumps statistically uncorrelated with anything that preceded them.<sup>35</sup> The jumps are real and they are unpredictable by design. One Tuesday his cart contains a jar of pickled herring he has never eaten and will not eat again.

Halfway home he remembers the Toblerone chocolate that he craved, vaguely, for a week. He pulls into the Bed Bath & Beyond off Friars Road. The store is mid-clearance, the lighting still bright, employees walking past pallets that have not been unpacked in some time. At the register endcap, between a display of compression socks and a cardboard tower of scented candles, sits a small wire rack of Toblerone bars at \$4.99 each.

To observe these anomalous food products situated outside their logical retail taxonomy (the \$8.99 beef jerky adjacent to the Home Depot checkout, the pasta at Ross Dress for Less, the vacuum-sealed smoked salmon positioned near the printer ink at Office Depot) is to glimpse the physical infrastructure of his metabolism. These displaced commodities operate on a highly specific, almost spectral demographic premise that he perfectly embodies. To watch him shop is to watch the collapse of behavioral economics, of consumer psychology, of the entire apparatus of attention research that distin-

guishes a primary purchase from an impulse buy. The apparatus assumes a subject who can be diverted, persuaded, or upsold. He is none of these. He nullifies the research by failing to obey its logic. When he acquires the chocolate bar at Bed Bath and Beyond, he actively closes an economic circuit by obfuscating spontaneity and deliberation. His gesture provides an entire network of distributors, brokers, and category managers with the exact feedback necessary to maintain and reproduce their own spatial logic. Once more, his desire is productive.

At home he puts the groceries onto the counter and opens the refrigerator to find space for them. Stacked along the bottom shelf, four unopened Home Chef boxes, the ice packs inside long since thawed and refrozen by the cycling of the compressor. He signed up in 2022, after a coworker mentioned it at lunch, attempted the first kit (a lemon-herb chicken with farro), abandoned it halfway through when a step required a kitchen tool he did not own, and has not cooked from a kit since. The shipments arrived weekly. He did not cancel the subscription, since canceling would have required logging into the account, and he had not retained the password. Eventually he wrote the company an email and the shipments stopped. The four boxes that arrived before the expiration are still there.

He eats the Double Del at the counter, standing, not bothering with a plate. The wrapper is the plate. The counter is the table. By the time the burger reaches him, the cheese has melted into the meat, the pickles

have released their brine into the bun, the whole assembly has compressed into something dense and particular.

On other nights of the week, the routine he has developed for himself plays out. Tuesdays are hot-dog night. He opens a package of Oscar Mayer hot dogs and places three in a small pot of water, the way his father did in Riverside, CA in 1993. While they boil, he eats baby carrots out of the bag he does not bother to wash. The hot dogs go onto white bread with no condiment and the water sits in the pot for three days. Wednesday nights are different: a microwave Pop-Tart, sometimes two, eaten standing at the counter with Spam fried in a pan and pushed onto a tortilla; or instant ramen with a Kraft single melted into the broth. Thursdays sometimes a Hot Pocket, sometimes a Bagel Bite tray, sometimes the Lunchables he buys for the small pleasure of unsealing each compartment. The week's eating includes the most primitive form of consumption (raw sushi-grade tuna eaten cold from the paper wrapping, an apple, a handful of dry cashews) alongside the most industrially processed foods available (cheese product from an aerosol can, Vienna sausages eaten directly from the tin, Hawaiian Punch straight from the bottle). His liking does not differentiate the two registers. Both are foods he has come back to for years.

The Hot Pocket goes into the microwave for two minutes and is taken out with fifty-two seconds left on the counter; two minutes is what the box says but the stomach says otherwise. He has located, on the shelves of every store on his route, the foods he eats, and he

moves across the landscape on routes that do not require navigation, the way a man walks the rooms of his own apartment. The supermarket is full of intention and his motion through it adds none of its own.<sup>36</sup>

René Redzepi at Noma in Copenhagen sends his staff out onto the Danish coastline at dawn to gather what is edible: sea buckthorn, beach mustard, the lichen growing on a specific kind of stone.<sup>37</sup> The diners pay roughly seven hundred fifty dollars for the meal that results and wait years for the reservation. The condition Redzepi is engineering, at this expense, is the condition of eating without the apparatus of recognition between the eater and the food, of being returned to the prelinguistic encounter with what the landscape happens to offer. The condition his kitchen is engineering is the condition the Pac Sun Avant Garde's Tuesday already has.

This rhymes with the original human relationship to food: foraging. The pre-agricultural human moved through the landscape eating what was edible and walking past what was not, the catalogue of edibility passed down through generations, supplemented by habit and instinct. He forages through commercial space along routes that have already been read. The signs that scream SALE or NEW or LIMITED TIME address a buyer who is still being courted. The courtship has already concluded in him. To him, these are poisonous plants.

Three nights later, the milk runs out. 2:47 AM and he drives the eight blocks to the 7-Eleven on the corner of Genesee and Balboa Ave. The electronic chime announces his entry into fluorescent eternity. Behind the

register, the night cashier sits hunched over his phone playing a mobile game with aggressive sound effects. Swords, coins, a level-up fanfare. He does not look up. The Pac Sun Avant Garde nods at him anyway. The cashier and he have not exchanged words in the entire history of their nightly encounters. The nod is the relationship. The relationship is sufficient.

He moves through the store on the route his feet have learned. The dairy case occupies the back wall, forcing customers to traverse the entire floor, what marketing textbooks call the golden path. The principle assumes a customer who has not yet committed and might be diverted by the displays along the way. He passes the Hostess endcap, the wall of energy drinks, the stale sprinkled doughnuts that have been resting in a plastic case since noon yesterday. The rotating hot dogs turn under their heat lamp the way they have turned every night for six years.

It is increasingly fashionable, on the regions of the internet that produce fashion, to insist that this store is a degraded version of its Japanese counterpart. The discourse has solidified around a recurring caption: American 7-Elevens could never.<sup>38</sup> The Japanese konbini, in the videos that circulate, contains pristine aisles of onigiri, fresh sushi, the famous egg sandwich, high-quality ready meals. The American 7-Eleven contains rotating hot dogs and nacho cheese dispensers and microwave burritos. The hierarchy is clear, and in the hierarchy the American store is the place of last resort, of neglect, of desperation. The Japanese store is the destination. The hierarchy is a piece of cultural capital, and

the cultural capital is the function of the hierarchy. The Pac Sun Avant Garde is indifferent to it because the store on Genesee and Balboa is, for him, his store. The konbini in Shinjuku is not better, the way a friend's apartment is not better than your own.

He reaches the cooler, the glass is clouded from the handling of every previous customer, and takes a gallon of 7Select Milk<sup>39</sup>. He has tried other milks during periods when the 7Select shelf was empty. They were the wrong milk. He returned to the 7Select on his next trip with mild relief, the way one returns to a familiar bed after travel. At the register the cashier looks up briefly, runs the jug across the scanner, mutters the total at the screen between him and the doors.

Outside, the parking lot is empty. The sign hums above the door. The bag with the milk swings against his hip as he walks to the car. He drives the eight blocks home in the dark, pours an inch of milk into a glass at his kitchen counter, and drinks it standing up. Tomorrow he will be hungry again, and he will know what to do.

V

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**AURA**

**H**is Yahoo Mail inbox contains 15,473 unread messages dating back to 2006. Instagram's red notification badge has reached its numerical limit and now displays a mute ellipsis. Netflix stopped asking Are you still watching? a long time ago and has begun offering increasingly desperate recommendations: Top 10 in Your Area, Trending Now, Because You Watched the Of-

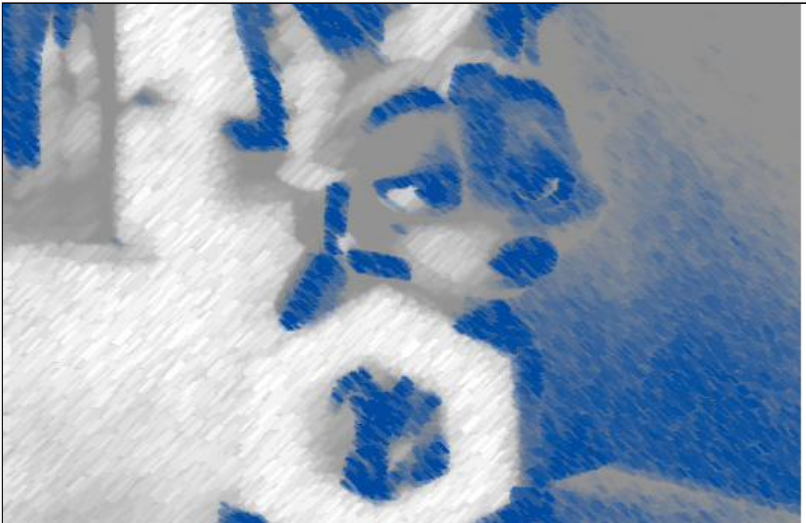
fice Once Three Years Ago. Tonight, he is watching *Finding Mr. Right* (2014) on the Hallmark Channel via Hulu TV+ for the third time this year.

His browser is Opera. A college roommate told him in 2014 that it was more secure, and the recommendation took, and the path remained. His Facebook profile picture is the default gray silhouette. The prompt to upload a photo was dismissed at account creation and never revisited. His Instagram avatar is a slightly blurry image of a public transit schedule he once captured to remember a departure time. This is, now, his permanent digital face. His captions, when he writes them, are bizarrely literal. Tree beneath a photograph of a tree. Walking home saw this without context.

On his desk: a small collection of figurines. Fox McCloud. Tails. Renamon. He picks up Fox sometimes when he's on the phone. He likes the weight of the figure in his palm, the way the tail balances against his thumb. A coworker stopped by to borrow a stapler once, glanced at the figurines, and asked, "Oh, are you a furry?" The question hung in the air without resolving. He bought the Switch six years after release at full price; the bundle came with a choice of figurine, and he chose Fox over Mario or Link without hesitation. Sly Cooper is his PlayStation avatar. When the algorithm recommended *Beastars* one evening, he watched all the episodes in order over the course of a weekend, and on Sunday afternoon he was a little sad it was over.

The category furry presumes a subject who recognizes his own attraction as a position inside a culture that has names for its positions. His relationship to Fox

McCloud or Nick Wilde or Sly Cooper exists before any such recognition: "The fox is cool." "The mask is cool." He looks at the figure with mild and continuous pleasure while the hybrid form speaks to him through the same ambient channel by which he immanently encounters human masculinity and its configurations: the bear, the otter, the silver fox, equally weighted. Suspended between the human and the animal, the archetypal werewolf perfectly mirrors the Pac Sun Avant Garde's own suspension between strategic and non-strategic engagement with the world. Here, the "companion species"<sup>40</sup> becomes something else entirely. The complex, historical entanglement of human and animal flattens into a hybridized surface that speaks directly to his condition of categorical indifference.



The Pac Sun Avant Garde cannot recognize aura, because he is the only person in this essay who has any.

Aura, in the original sense theorized in the 1930s,<sup>41</sup> was the unrepeatable presence of an artwork in the place it happened to be that was stripped away by reproduction. What was once the property of the artwork has become, through the imposition of critical distance, the property of the person who can correctly name it. The museum visitor who can identify the Agnes Martin is carrying more recognition than the painting. The friend who can identify the pickle brine in the cocktail is carrying more recognition than the cocktail. The artwork has been drained, and its contents have been poured into the subject who knows the artwork's name, its period, and the reason you were supposed to stop caring about it last year. The curator owns the receipt for having located aura, not the aura itself.

The aura itself has found somewhere else to live. It went into hiding. It moved into the people who never picked up the receipt.

Tuesday night, ten-fifteen, the overhead lighting at maximum intensity in his bedroom casting a harsh white glow onto his bed until he shuts them off with a remote on his bedside table and immediately falls asleep, no latency between "phone" and "pillow." His thumb is scrolling the home feed of an application he opened by accident at the airport three years ago and stayed inside out of mild interest. The screen offers him a sequence of small panels through which other lives are being narrated. He does not understand most of what he is looking at. He likes the colors.

*A panel arrives. Soft natural light through an adjacent window, a woman's hands holding a ceramic mug above an unfinished oak table on which sits a single fig, halved, on a small linen napkin. The Hasami Porcelain mug is glazed in a particular beige. The napkin is the color of unbleached flour. The caption is a single lowercase line: slow morning. Beneath the photograph her tile shows three more squares. A sourdough loaf shot from above on the same linen. A pair of Birkenstocks at the threshold of a bedroom whose blue paint has been mixed to an exact value. A paperback of Normal People by Sally Rooney on a windowsill above a sprig of rosemary in a glass.*

The post has nine hundred likes. He gives it a thumbs up and continues. He does not know that the apartment is a one-bedroom in Greenpoint into which the woman moved in 2017 and which has been, since then, the subject of a slow furnishing organized around the surfaces it produces in photographs.<sup>42</sup> The mug is one of two that photograph well. The other is in the dishwasher. Her actual breakfast mug, a free promotional cup from Schoolsfirst Credit Union she received after opening her first bank account in 2012, lives in the cabinet behind the closed door above the sink. The fig was bought for the photograph. The loaf is the third Sunday's loaf, the first two crumbs being not the right kind of crumb. The Birkenstocks were placed at the threshold by a hand

reaching out of frame. The paint on the bedroom wall was sampled against four other blues over a fortnight, and the rosemary in the glass has been there only since the morning. She has, in fact, read *Normal People* twice. She is being honest about that part. Her captions have, over the last four years, drawn the attention first of an editor at a small magazine and then of a literary agent, and an essay collection is in the early stages of acquisition. The Pac Sun Avant Garde, looking at the post, has registered a hand and the color cream. He has gone on.

*A different panel, three swipes later. A clavicle in low light, a silver chain across it, a Chrome Hearts cross resting against the skin, the image blown out at the highlights and grainy in the shadows in the way phone photographs were grainy in 2009. There is no caption. The display name is four letters, all lowercase, "zhyr" , purchased on a username aftermarket<sup>43</sup>. An audio track plays underneath, a Mandarin verse from an up and rapper by way of Chengdu who coincidentally experienced virality on both sides of the fire-wall. The post has one hundred and eleven likes. The staccato rhythm of the comments from his "boys" (mad aura fr) hang there like coordinates. He gives it a thumbs up and continues.*

He does not know that the man whose clavicle has been photographed maintains an account whose post count varies between zero and four; any post that exceeds four is deleted within the week. The chain is the second of two. The first, which the man wears more often, would have been recognizable to a particular ex-girlfriend. The display name was assigned in a basement in Bushwick during a conversation about Russian phonemes; the man does not himself speak Russian. The post will be deleted by Thursday morning. The man will have stayed up until four checking the like count against a private threshold the threshold will not have met. The post is for a hopeful audience of approximately fourteen people, of whom two are women he has dated, two are women he wants to date, and ten are other men whose own posts he monitors with a similar arithmetic. The Pac Sun Avant Garde is not on the list. The Pac Sun Avant Garde, looking at the post, has registered a chain on a person and the color black. He has gone on.

*A third panel, the next morning, while the milk soaks the cereal. A man in his early twenties in a parking garage in what looks like Miami, both hands on the open driver's-side door of a rented Aston Martin DB12 the color of a swimming pool. He is wearing Minions-print pajama pants whose elastic has been folded down to expose two pairs of boxers, a holographic snapback that reads CRIME PAY\$ thrifted from an inner-city Goodwill, a cropped tee shirt with the Captain America shield motif, a Goyard St. Louis tote slung from the wrist with the canvas faded and the handles overstretched into uneven loops, and white socks pulled up to mid-calf inside slip-on Gucci slides. He is looking down. The flash is on. Behind him a second man holds a lit lighter at arm's length to the camera for reasons internal to the composition. The caption is the diamond emoji six times. The post has forty-one thousand likes. He gives it a thumbs up and finishes the cereal. He does not know that the Aston Martin is on a four-hour package from a luxury-rental concierge in Brickell whose business model depends on this category of customer. The Minions pants were five dollars at a Ross the wearer has driven to twice this year specifically to obtain. The Goyard tote was bought in 2023 from a friend whose mother had stopped using it for groceries.*

The layering of the shirt and the pants and the tote was practiced in a hotel mirror for sixteen minutes before the elevator. The wearer maintains a SoundCloud account on which he has released eighty-three songs in the last eighteen months, the most-streamed of which has twenty-three thousand plays and describes the wearer's purchase of a watch he has not in fact purchased. He is, in his own assessment, up. The upness is registered in the comments by approximately seven hundred replies of up bro and the prayer-hands emoji. His mother, in a three-bedroom house outside Tampa, has texted him call me at 10:06 the night before, and he has not yet returned her call. The Pac Sun Avant Garde, looking at the post, has registered a person in front of a car and the color blue. He has gone on.

The three posts are the same wager arranged at three distances from each other in time, each generation organized by the rejection of the one preceding. The mug arranged its room so the photograph would record a person living thoughtfully inside it. The chain arranged its post so the photograph would record a person too cool to be photographed; it did so by negating, item by item, what the mug had built. The car arranged its post so the photograph would record a person too unbothered to care what was photographed; it did so by negating, in turn, the chain.

Each movement enters the apparatus calling the previous one false, and exits it being called false by the next. Aura farming, a term imported from gaming and dispersed through TikTok in 2024,<sup>44</sup> named the second move; the third has not yet been named, and is being

practiced with the intensity of an art form whose practitioners are racing the naming<sup>45</sup>. Inside each generation an olympics of authenticity runs at full volume, with its own vocabulary for who did the thing first and who is biting whose swag and who the room is currently cooking. The vocabulary is unintelligible across generations and is the engine that drives one cohort to overthrow the next. Underneath the vocabulary there are two operations only: the minimalist withholds until nothing can be parsed and the maximalist deposits until nothing can be parsed. Restraint is presented as nothing-to-show; excess is presented as everything-at-once-and-therefore-nothing. Freud described, a century ago, two organizations of the body that learn to handle a substance that should not, by the body's lights, be handled at all: one that holds it in, one that lets it go.<sup>46</sup> The grid is the substance now. The continuum from austerity to chaos has been folded back on itself and the two ends have met in the same room. The porcelain mug, which had occupied the middle of that continuum, has been left standing in a position no one is currently arguing about, which is the position from which the apparatus has, for the moment, moved on.

What the chain and the car share, across the volume difference, is the form of the image they produce: what was once called the poor image.<sup>47</sup> Low-resolution, compressed, traveling fast across networks that did not pay it. The poor image was, in its first life, the leak, the surveillance still, the fourth-generation copy of a film passed between hands a customs officer never inspected. Its degradation proved its escape from the institu-

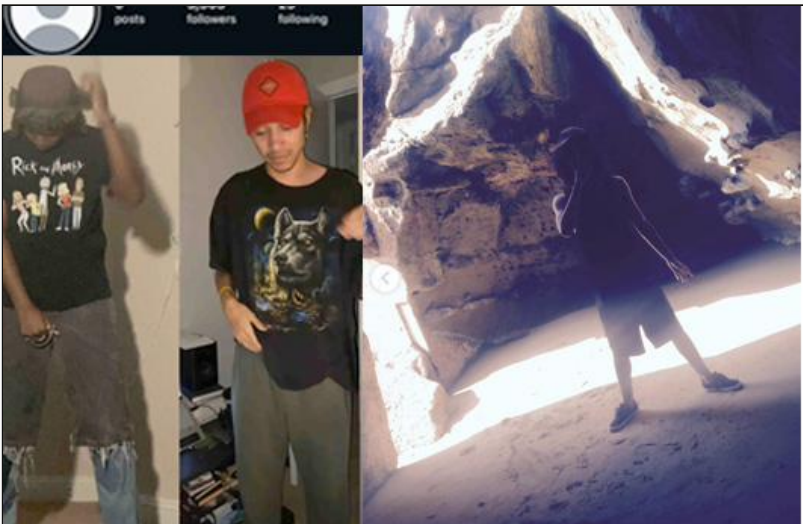
tional channel that would have polished it. By the late twenty-tens the channel had closed: the camera in every pocket was producing images so smooth that the proof of escape had to be manufactured. The dirty lens, the underexposed frame, the flash at full intensity in a lit room, the screenshot of a video downloaded from one platform and re-uploaded to another. Each of these recovers, by hand, the degradation the camera has been engineered to remove. The poor image is now a costume the rich image puts on. The blurry photo wears it through deprivation; the Aston Martin wears it through flooding. The mug photograph is the thing both are running from. It went the other way, recovering the conventions of large-format domestic photography from a hundred years ago: the morning light, the paper-grain, the careful surface. The mug is the rich image at full volume, and the chain and the car are both performances of the poor image against it.

What none of the three is, however, is a photograph by someone who is not trying to be photographed. That photograph still exists; it lives in the camera roll of a person whose phone is four years old, whose lens is smudged, and who has not learned to turn the flash off.

The threshold of the contest falls each season faster than the apparatus can fall with it. Last year the photograph could be slightly composed; this year it has to look as though the phone took it by accident; next year, perhaps, the phone will have to actually have taken it by accident, and the user will be reduced to walking around hoping for the right slip of the thumb. At the limit of the practice is the account with no posts at all,

only a profile picture, the user having concluded that any image will betray him. The first grid had, at minimum, the consolation of being looked at as aspirational. The latest ones have only the dread of being caught in last month's posture, and the cycle has shortened to the point where last month was last week, and where the figure who held it correctly has already aged out of his own coolness.

There is a difference between art that imitates the cause of a feeling and art that imitates its effect: the former is harder, the latter is easier, and the easier is what most of the world wants because the easier requires nothing of the looker. The mug had pre-loaded the response thoughtful; the chain had pre-loaded aura; the car had pre-loaded up. The Pac Sun Avant Garde has pre-loaded nothing.



The cultural apparatus has been hunting for the capacity to encounter an object without first routing the encounter through a question about what the object will say about its owner. The Pac Sun Avant Garde is one of the few people in the contemporary mythos who is enjoying himself without supervision.<sup>48</sup>

A visitor to San Diego, staying in the Gaslamp District for a work trip, crosses paths with him in a Ralphs parking lot. She is from Brooklyn. She works as an editorial assistant, freshly graduated from Parsons. She has come down for a shoot. She sees him loading Frosted Mini Wheats into the trunk of the Yaris and thinks, that guy is the whole thing. She takes a flash photo with her digicam from a discreet distance and posts it to her Close Friends story with the words "Pac Sun Avant Garde" written in the white default typeface. Her friends send it around and it is reposted to a popular meme account. A stylist screenshots it. Within forty-eight hours a mood board circulates among the stylists of three editorial productions. Within three weeks a mid-tier American brand has quietly re-run a cloth-hooded denim jacket in a slightly lower-saturation blue. Within eight months the look is in the windows. A trend account posts a compilation. The compilation is set to a song from 2011. The compilation is captioned with a name for the look that did not exist yesterday. He does not know any of this has happened. He has gone back to 7-Eleven for more milk. He gets a Slurpee while he's there.

A partial inventory of the objects he encounters throughout the day. A bottle of Irish Spring 5-in-1 men's soap. The perforated silver foil over the top of a Yoplait, Boston Cream. A bottle of V8 Splash. A Bic Round Stic ballpoint from a multipack of ten. A Glade PlugIn refill in Hawaiian Breeze. The promotional desk calendar from a regional auto-glass company, three months out of date, pinned to the corkboard. A sleeve of saltines from a soup ordered at Souplantation in 2019. A Brawny paper towel against the cheek after a sneeze. The digital photo frame from his mother, gifted in 2014, cycling the same forty JPEGs she loaded onto the SD card the night she gave it to him, including three that are sideways. A bottle of Bath & Body Works hand sanitizer clipped to a navy blue REI backpack zipper. The laminated menu at IHOP, slightly sticky. The lid of an I Can't Believe It's Not Butter tub, washed and repurposed since 2021 for leftover rice. A TJ Maxx gift card in his wallet with a pale magnetic strip. A pair of brandless earbuds purchased at a rest-stop convenience store eight years ago on the drive to Santa Cruz, currently playing a YouTube playlist titled 2017 BEST Tropical House Summer 12 HOUR MIX, which has been the background of his workout for an indeterminate period of months.

The mode in which he meets these objects is the oldest psychological mode there is, the mode of the surface and the hand. The mug warm in the palm, the foil yielding to the thumb, the cellophane crinkling against the saltine. A floor of sensation underneath the symbolic life, registering, before any caption arrives to interpret it, that the day is happening and the body is in it. The

mode is not extinct. It runs underneath the symbolic life of every adult and provides what psychoanalysis has called the rhythmicity of being. When it is intact, the world feels textured. When it has been severed from the symbolic life above it, the world begins to feel like representation. The contemporary apparatus has performed the severing at scale. The Pac Sun Avant Garde has been spared.

The internet has begun, in the last several years, to describe this condition, when it notices it, as autistic<sup>49</sup>. I'm so autistic about this band. Autistic obsession with the sound design of one specific video game from 2003. He gives autistic energy. The word, in this register, has been pried loose from the diagnostic category and is now used for a person who appears unmediated, who likes a thing without first calculating what the liking will signify, who fails to perform the ambient irony the platform requires. The substitution is diagnostic of the population making it. A culture that has converted every act of attention into a performance of taste develops a predictable need of a category for non-performed attention, and the closest pre-existing word was the one for people whose attention was assumed not to be performed. The reach for the condition is now visible across the apparatus and is the unifying motion behind both of its poles. The minimalist reaches for it through withdrawal: the cropped body, the deleted post, the audio in a language the user does not speak. The maximalist reaches for it through regression: the pajama pants, the cartoon character chosen because the visible unembarrassed attachment to a children's image will read, on the feed, as a

refusal to be embarrassed, and the refusal to be embarrassed is the costume of the condition the wearer has not been able to find any other way to wear. The maximalist is the one closer to him. The whole apparatus of the third movement is an attempt to occupy normie consumption: the Hot Pocket, the Ross basketball shorts, the gas-station snapback, and to wear them at a frequency that registers as transgression. The Pac Sun Avant Garde is wearing them at the frequency they were manufactured at. Both routes pass through the body at the same depth: the surface, the hand, the thing held without commentary. Neither route arrives. The diagnosis is wanted; the floor is not.

The Pac Sun Avant Garde cannot use any platform correctly. He presses buttons the way an infant presses a colorful toy, for the feedback of the press itself. The like button gets pressed because his thumb hovered near it and the press produced a satisfying response. The share function gets deployed after he noticed it existed and wondered what it would do. He posts at random hours, replies to weeks-old content without embarrassment, deploys the poll feature and the emoji slider and the question box with the experimental curiosity of someone who finds them genuinely fun. His own posts, when they appear, arrive either captionless or with the zero degree of literal description. Sunset. Burrito. Occasionally, the text bearing absolutely no relation to the image it anchors. The sequence of photos: years of complete desertification (nearly 2 years between photos), followed by a rapid sequence all on the same afternoon. There are thirty three photographs in total. The posts

collect between four and nine likes. Two of those likes are from his uncle and a bot. The platform designers, believing they were building instruments of curated self-presentation, have built him a playground.

Every platform has evolved a social grammar so elaborate it now requires anthropologists. The timed like: immediate signals enthusiasm, several hours later signals calculated indifference, several days later signals digital archaeology. The strategic story view: in the first fifteen minutes shows interest, deliberately deferred until afternoon projects casual detachment. The serial like: three posts in a row suggests romantic pursuit, a like on a post from five years ago suggests surveillance. The difference between a reply and a quote-tweet. The distinction between a sticker and an emoji. The hierarchy of communication escalation, from public comment to DM to text message to voice note to video call, in which each step signals an increase in intimacy. The knowledge that a 3 AM text lands differently than a noon text. The follower-to-following ratio that must be maintained on the correct side of one. The arithmetic by which a person becomes, at some moving and ever-earlier age, the person whom younger users will refer to in the diminutive reserved for someone's older male relative — a threshold once located somewhere in the late thirties and now drifting into the mid twenties, the drift itself being one of the things the user is supposed to track.<sup>50</sup> Mastery of platform-specific linguistic register: Twitter's quippy brevity, Reddit's citation-heavy argu-

mentation, LinkedIn's earnest professional passive voice, TikTok's fluency in eight overlapping youth dialects at once.

He does none of this. He moves between private and public communication without awareness of implied escalation, maintains identical personas across platforms, and replies to rhetorical questions with literal answers. The symbolic order of online interaction dissolves in his presence into exploratory play, which is what an interface used to be before anyone got serious about it.

What is unnerving about the Pac Sun Avant Garde, to anyone fluent in the grammar, is that this same illegibility extends offline. He is not socially incompetent; he is socially functional with a fluency that bypasses the ranking system entirely.

Friday night, ten o'clock, the half-empty space of Spin Nightclub in San Diego is playing Alice DJ's Better Off Alone for the fourth time at their monthly Y2K Club Night, an event whose name is itself the literalism the irony requires and which has been running, on the third Friday of each month, since 2023. Fog machine bursts produce momentary atmosphere in the intervals of fluorescent clarity. The crowd is mostly office workers from nearby Sorrento Valley biotech firms, post-work happy hour bleeding into halfhearted dancing. Nobody who seriously identifies with electronic music culture would be caught here. He stands near the speakers. He likes when the fog hits him in the face. He likes the song the four times it plays. He had expected the Calvin Harris tracks that sometimes come on at the gym, and this is better than that.

Three months later, David Archuleta's comeback tour arrives at the North Island Credit Union Amphitheater. Tuesday night, eight o'clock. The American Idol runner-up performs to a venue at thirty percent capacity, his cultural relevance long since reduced to historical artifact. The crowd is mostly women in their early forties who voted for him during his season, their enthusiasm now layered with nostalgia and the conscious embrace of an outdated reference. The Pac Sun Avant Garde's own presence in the third row follows no such narrative. He bought the ticket because a flyer was lying on the sidewalk on his way to 24 Hour Fitness, and he had heard Crush before and thought it was a good song. He knows every word. He sings.

The Pac Sun Avant Garde takes his Saint Laurent wax denim-wearing art major roommate to Lazy Dog after a gallery opening. The roommate spent the gallery hour in conversation about the artist's relationship to post-internet image circulation, and is now sitting in a vinyl booth under a wall-mounted mountain bike and a chalkboard advertising the seasonal pretzel platter. He recommends the Angus Sliders. There is a moment where the roommate considers saying something antagonistic about the venue and then doesn't, because the air conditioning is comfortable and the sliders really are good.

The Pac Sun Avant Garde conducts first dates at the Cheesecake Factory because it happened to be visible from the parking lot and he remembered the ambience being fancy. The downtown speakeasy with its elaborate password entry and its eighteen-dollar cocktails registers at the same amplitude as the Applebee's off the

I-5 with its laminated happy hour menu. The Starbucks inside Target that he initially patronized through locational convenience becomes a deliberate destination. After approximately fifty two consecutive daily visits to the store, he cultivates an enduring friendship with Jerry, the barista who knows his order: iced coffee with six pumps of vanilla syrup.

## **The Pac Sun Avant Garde is homosexual but not gay.**

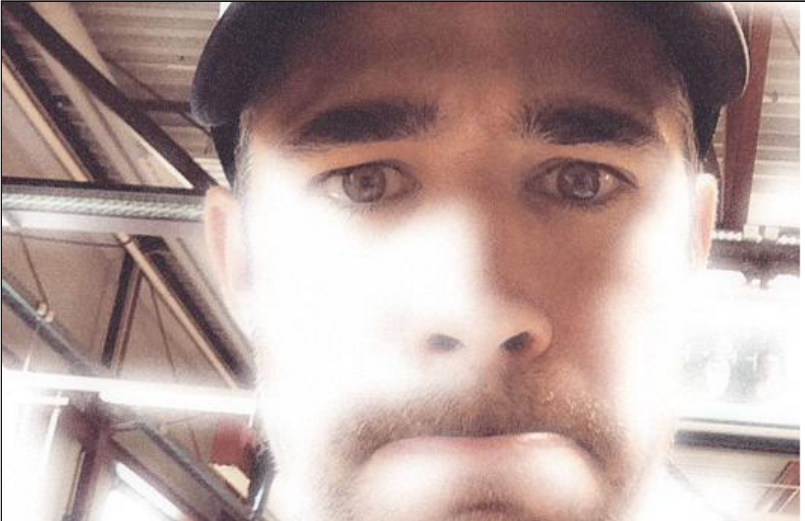
The distinction matters because attraction has, in the past twenty years, completed its conversion into a curatorial exercise. Desirability is now a function of demonstrated authority over cultural references. A dating profile is a meta-consumption document in which the arrangement of bands, films, books, foods, ironies, and platform-specific reference moves determines a position in the marketplace. The anima and the animus have migrated outward into curated feeds. To fall in love is to recognize, in another person's profile, a taxonomic position complementary to one's own. The lovers meet as curators, each seeing in the other the confirmation of their own classificatory authority, the proof that they have been naming the world correctly.

This playlist totally gets me. You captured my vibe perfectly. These are not descriptions of a partner, but reviews of their work. Love in 2026 is a recognition transaction between two people who have spent years arranging themselves into positions from which each can recognize the other's arrangement.

Of all the regions of contemporary intimacy in which this curatorial grammar has settled, none has become as densely furnished with categories as the one in which men pursue men. The grammar is older than the apps and survives the apps; the apps merely formalized it. Bear, otter, twink, jock, daddy, cub, wolf, top, bottom, vers, masc, fem, dom, sub, side. Each term is a position in a system that requires every other term to mean what it means. To answer the question what are you into is to enter a sentence the language has already begun without you. Its grammar admits fine permutation: a masc4masc bottom is not a vers top, and the difference is crucial to someone's evening. The categories are the available language, and most users arrive having already learned it. The Grindr grid is, among other things, a Linnaean exercise. No Fats, No Femmes. The cruelty is well-rehearsed and is sometimes mistaken for plain speech. It is in fact a maximally encoded utterance, fluent in two taxonomies at once.

What gay culture has elaborated is the most context-saturated regional dialect of desire any culture has yet produced. Every garment is reading. Every haircut is reading. The bar is reading the patron the moment the patron crosses the threshold; the patron is reading the bar back. A man enters a room and the room arranges him before he has spoken. The information density is so high that to move competently inside it is itself a kind of expertise. Aura is everywhere in this culture, manufactured continuously, because the culture's first labor has always been the production of distance where, anatomically, there is none. The boy across the bar likely has

the same chromosomes as the body looking at him. Aura must therefore be supplied by the leather, by the harness, by the mustache, by the ten years older, the ten years younger, the more muscled, the less, the role one has chosen, the role one has refused. The category is the spell that separates the lover from the beloved enough for the beloved to be desired.



## *The Pac Sun Avant Garde walks into the room without the spell.*

His attraction to men arrives through none of the channels the system has prepared, formed through the registration of a familiar physical presence. He likes broad shoulders, much like his own. He likes a forearm with a vein down it, and his own forearm has a vein down it.

He likes himself enough that he likes, in the other man, what is closest to home. If asked to describe his type he would describe a specific person rather than a category.

The figure who experiences no lack cannot be organized by the apparatus that converts lack into desire. Desire, in the psychoanalytic account, is structured around the missing object: the breast that has been withdrawn, the wholeness that was forfeited at the threshold of language, the woman who is constructed as that-which-the-man-does-not-have and is therefore endlessly grasped at. The lexicon of straight masculine sexuality is often that of resource and scarcity, of the prize and the pursuit, of the Madonna who must remain elevated and the whore who has betrayed the elevation. When she appears without makeup, when she eats a full meal, when she is plainly a person, the desire collapses into its underlying disappointment. The aura is the distance. The distance is what permits the want.

The man across from the Pac Sun Avant Garde is a present body and the recognition is direct: I know what that is, I have one, I like mine, I like that. There is no pedestal from which the beloved can fall.

This is also why his presence on dating applications registers as static.<sup>51</sup> His Grindr profile is identical to his Hinge profile. Neither contains posed photographs or strategic self-descriptions. The mandatory text fields hold whatever words emerged at the moment of account creation. He responds to whoever messages him first without triaging profiles for legibility. The obscene pho-

tograph that would have broadcast available for a very specific type of encounter to even the least fluent reader broadcasts nothing to him.

## **The Pac Sun Avant Garde is just not like the other boys.**

*There are no symbols to be decoded. There are presences to be met.*

Aura, in the contemporary economy, is attentiveness directed at the big Other<sup>52</sup>, and the Tyranny of the Image<sup>53</sup> has made it nearly impossible to direct attentiveness anywhere else. Love under this economy is the mutual confirmation of simultaneous attention to the image, which has long predated mass communication: the category, the type, the good, the moral, the man, the worthy. The gap between the immanent and the ideal is the gap that allows this version of desire to continue. The Pac Sun Avant Garde's desire is oceanic. It arrives continuously, the way the Pacific arrives, with no horizon line where it begins and no shore where it ends. The figure across from him has been in the same water the whole time.

**Maybe there was never  
anything to curate. Maybe the  
thing the apparatus was  
protecting us from was a guy  
who was having a nice time.**

●

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# EULOGY

## 1.

I knew him first at nineteen, in a freshman dormitory at UC Santa Cruz, in the spring of a year I have otherwise forgotten; the dormitory had emptied for the break and we were among the few who had stayed. I came back to the room one afternoon to find him watching General Hospital on the common-room television, alone, eating Fritos Chili Cheese Flavored Corn Chips out of the bag with the volume on a setting somehow too quiet for the situation it called for.

Ten years on I had been to Goldsmiths, then Athens during the crisis, then Mexico City, and he had drifted to San Diego after a job interview in 2018 he later described to me, on the phone before I flew out, as fine. The gallery in La Jolla offered me a residency in the spring of this year: six months in exchange for producing work that would, in the residency director's careful phrase, speak to the La Jolla collector base and the stipend would not survive an Airbnb. I texted him. Four days later he replied: sure, have spare futon.

## 2.

The apartment is on the third floor of a complex off Friars Road, adjacent to an Islands Fine Burgers and Fries whose exhaust vent runs up the back wall and gives the bedroom, on certain afternoons, a faint smell of cooking onion. He lives there alone and eats at Islands almost three times a week, usually takeout. The lease is in his name and the rent has gone up by 3-4% every year.

The futon I was meant to sleep on was, on the night I arrived, still in its plastic, leaning against the wall in the living room beside an unopened cardboard box from his last move. He helped me open the futon and we set it up on the floor, and the box stayed where it was for the rest of my residency. I asked him what was in it on the second week. He said he wasn't sure, and opened it to reveal a mass of Christmas lights, a licensed Ellen DeGeneres tableware set from Ross with the tag still on it, a PlayStation 3, a broken tennis racket, and the two copies he owns of *Jak & Daxter Remastered*, one in its case and the other loose.

The objects in the rest of the apartment have arrived along similar routes. The IKEA lamp on the bedside table is the first one he saw at the store on the day he needed a light. The Mr. Coffee on the counter came with the apartment and he has not replaced it. The promotional navy blue lanyard hanging over the back of the kitchen chair is from the 2019 La Jolla National Veterans Service Fund half marathon, which he ran in two hours and forty-six minutes and which he has not, since the lanyard was placed on the chair on the afternoon of

the race, moved. The bathmat is from Target and features a Halloween pattern with Jack O'Lanterns and Skeletons.

In the morning he stands at the kitchen counter eating shredded wheat, and the light comes through the blinds in horizontal stripes. In the evenings he watches whatever is on. One night I asked him if he had a favorite show. He thought about it for some time and said, I like Wheel of Fortune, I guess, and then he said, I like the bonus round, and the conversation moved on.

The check-engine light of his car has been on for fourteen months. He took the car to a Pep Boys on Convoy Street in February, the technician told him a sensor was bad and the car was otherwise fine, and he has not had it looked at since. When I rode with him to the Ralphs Grocery Store, he turned on the radio and the radio was tuned to Amor 102.9 FM, the local Spanish language adult contemporary station, and at no point during the two months of riding with him to the Ralphs did the station change.

One night in the third week I came home late and he was at the kitchen table eating a Hot Pocket with a fork directly off the countertop. He looked up, he raised the fork in a gesture of acknowledgment, he asked if my thing had gone well. I said it had gone fine. He nodded and went back to the Hot Pocket. The exchange contained no observation of me, no tracking of how I had answered, no preparation for a follow-up question. He had asked the question and received the answer and the matter was closed.

I have been inside many rooms in many cities. I have not been inside one like this.

### 3.

In October I brought him to New York. My gallerist needed installation photographs and I had been looking for an excuse.

Friday a poetry reading at Café Forgot: vintage Margiela next to Chopova Lowena, Wales Bonner sneakers distressed to the right degree, two young women with decora hairstyles braided through with Visual Kei accessories, the featured poet reading autofiction poetry with themes surveying algorithmic governance and the commodification of dissent. He stood by the wall in clearance Nunn-Bush sneakers and a distressed yellow t-shirt that read EL CAJON HARVEST FESTIVAL 2017 — VOLUNTEER. A buyer for Dover Street Market spent ten minutes asking him where the shirt was from. He said it was from the El Cajon Harvest Festival. She asked what that was. He said he had volunteered at it. She nodded for a long time.

Afterwards we went to Basement, New York's answer to Berghain. I lost him in the crowd. At three in the morning I found him at the bar surrounded by a circle of the most carefully positioned people in the room including the gallery director in Prada Mohair Pants looking him up and down with the expression of a person who has located a glitch and cannot decide whether to report it. She asked him, eventually, how did you get in here. He said, the bouncer let me in. The circle broke

and reformed on the other side of him. He bought another Modelo. He went home with a man and came back to our hotel the next morning.

#### 4.

In the tenth week of the residency, I started a writing in a notebook, which I kept in the drawer of the kitchen table under a stack of takeout menus from a Vietnamese place on Convoy St. and an unfilled ballot for a 2021 city-council recall election. The pages filled. I underlined some of these and circled others. I had been trained, by years of practice and "critical theory", to know what was happening at the table. I had lectured in three countries on the operation by which observation crosses over into description and description crosses over into name.

I had written essays on this operation before— on the dandy named by Baudelaire and dead by the Belle Époque, on the beatnik named by Herb Caen in 1958 and over by the time Kerouac was on television, on the hippie named into existence by the press in 1967 and finished at Altamont, on the yuppie named in 1980 and a slur by 1987, on the hipster named on the blogs of the mid aughts and a marketing category within the next three years, on the e-girl made legible by TikTok in 2019 and on indie sleaze a few years later. None of it stopped me. I am not certain any of it had ever been intended to.

#### 5.

It was a Tuesday at 11:47PM. He had gone to bed. The phrase that has become the title of this book arrived in the notebook with the kind of small click a deadbolt makes when the key has finally caught. By the time he woke up in the morning he was the Pac Sun Avant Garde: a category, a thing the third person could be performed on. I had reached for Baudrillard four times before I had reached for conversation with the man across the table. Bourdieu arrived to explain a trip to Home Depot. The citations were what I had instead of him. The sheet of theory I inserted between his face and my eye that night has not, in the months since, come out.

The installation opens tomorrow. Four color-field paintings with vaguely wave-like patterns, destined for medical offices and biotech lobbies in Sorrento Valley. The paintings are corpses dressed for sale. I have made them on purpose. The part of my practice that has spent its career critiquing this transaction has been, for these months, at the kitchen table doing something else.

This manuscript will be published by the end of the month. Hopefully in print in four months. Discussed on "X" (formerly twitter) and several theory meme pages in six. By the second summer the figure I have spent the chapter trying to describe will have been replaced by the picture of itself, the photograph the algorithm has retroactively chosen to stand for him. He'll never know this. He does not read the publications or use the platforms very often.

I leave Sunday. I have not told him. I will tell him Saturday and he will say sure, that makes sense, and he will help me carry the bags down past the Islands Fine

Burgers and Fries to the car. We will hug at the curb. I will leave a copy of the essay in the apartment, where it will sit untouched on the table.

This is the eulogy. It is for the figure who existed before the phrase was written. The man in the kitchen is, this morning, both The Pac Sun Avant garde and the surviving body of the man who inspired him. He is also — somewhere in the cabinet behind the closed door above the sink—every reader who still owns one object the author never finished writing into the script. Tomorrow he will be only the body, and the Pac Sun Avant Garde will be only the phrase, and they will never be the same person again.



## NOTES & REFERENCES

1. A Southern California supermarket chain owned by Kroger. Sister chains operate under different names depending on region: Fred Meyer in the Pacific Northwest, King Soopers in Colorado, Smith's in the Mountain West, Harris Teeter in the Southeast. The international analogue is Tesco or Loblaws. Ralphs sits in the exact center of the regional grocery landscape, and is considered to be a "default" American grocery store.
2. The figure is Tiquun's, from *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (1999, English 2012). Tiquun's Young-Girl is the form of life that consumer capitalism has perfected: a subject whose interior has been wholly furnished by the market, whose desires arrive ready-priced, whose body has become a brand managed across platforms.
3. Normcore was coined by the trend forecasting group K-HOLE in their 2013 PDF *Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom*, which proposed it as an escape from the obligation to differentiate. Within four months the fashion press had converted it from a tactic into a look. Steve Jobs's New Balance 991s appeared on Vogue.com. The argument was repurposed by exactly the system the argument was warning against. The career of the term is the argument it was making.

4. Hito Steyerl (*The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation*, 2012) argues under conditions of total algorithmic visibility, the politics of opacity is a politics of survival. The tactic presupposes a subject who can be seen and is choosing not to be.
5. The chora is Plato's term, from the *Timaeus*, for the receptacle in which becoming takes place: a space prior to form, prior to the distinction between being and non-being. Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) imported the term into psychoanalysis to name the pre-symbolic, pre-linguistic space of bodily drives and rhythms that the infant inhabits before language has carved out the categories of self and other.
6. The structural definition of desire as the recognition of an absence belongs to Lacan, *Écrits* (1966), and behind Lacan to Hegel, who supplied the underlying claim that consciousness becomes self-conscious by recognizing what it lacks. The 1950s American advertising industry, having absorbed a generation of European émigré psychoanalysts including Edward Bernays (Freud's Nephew), learned to manufacture lack and to sell its momentary suturing as the function of the product.
7. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), opens with Freud's correspondent Romain Rolland describing a feeling of limitlessness, of oneness with the universe, which Rolland identified as the religious feeling and which Freud, sceptically, named the oceanic feeling. Freud read it as a regression to an infantile state before the ego had installed its boundaries. The use being made of it here keeps Freud's structure (the dissolution of self/world boundary) and discards his pathologizing diagnosis. For the Pac Sun Avant Garde,

- the oceanic feeling is not a regression as there was no advance from which to regress. It is the resting state.
8. Jean Baudrillard, [*The System of Objects* (1968)] argues consumption operates through a system in which signs are positioned relationally, so that artificial scarcity and perpetual differentiation become the engine of desire.
  9. The fungal turn in ecology, particularly Merlin Sheldrake's *Entangled Life* (2020), has popularized the observation that fungi appeared on the terrestrial environment in response to its accumulating dead matter as the metabolic answer to a problem the dead matter posed. The metabolic role precedes the metabolizing organism.
  10. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (1990). Habitus names the embodied, dispositional inheritance by which class reproduces itself through apparently spontaneous action: the way a person holds a wineglass, the music they put on at home, the temperature at which they keep their butter.
  11. Joan Didion mapped most of California before she died and managed to leave San Diego unmapped. Her *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) belongs to Sacramento, Haight-Ashbury, the Central Valley; *The White Album* (1979) belongs to Los Angeles and the freeway grid; her later essays belong to New York and the federal government.
  12. The term is Marc Augé's, from *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1992). The original examples were the airport, the supermarket, the motorway service station: sites where one enters

- only as a contractual abstraction (ticket, receipt, barcode) and passes through without belonging.
13. On the deep structure of the American strip, the canonical text is Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), which taught architects to read the commercial vernacular of signs, parking lots, and freeway-facing storefronts as a legitimate grammar of place. The book was widely understood as a defense of vernacular taste.
  14. J. G. Ballard's 1964 story "The Terminal Beach" strands its protagonist on Eniwetok Atoll, a decommissioned nuclear test site in the Pacific, where he begins to live among the concrete observation blocks the Americans left behind. Historical time has halted on the atoll. The man is happier there than he was anywhere else. The terminal beach is what remains after the end of the world has failed to interestingly arrive.
  15. Katsushika Hokusai, *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* (c. 1831), the first image in *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*. The print was made late in Hokusai's career, using a Prussian blue pigment that had only recently arrived in Japan from Berlin. The little boats caught under the wave are delivery craft running fish to Edo. The poster version, often seen in college dorm rooms, tends to crop the boats out, which converts a working seascape into a landscape, which is a different image entirely.
  16. On the conversion of the sublime into amenity, Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) argued that late capitalism dissolves the older aesthetic categories (the beautiful, the sublime, the picturesque) by making every landscape and every vantage point available as

- property, as view, as backdrop for the photograph that will prove someone was there.
17. Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* (1977-79) are one-line aphorisms Holzer originally pasted anonymously around lower Manhattan and later moved onto LED tickers, benches, t-shirts, and granite slabs. The works depend on the collision of a critical utterance with a surface on which one does not expect to read criticism.
  18. The phrase is Jean-François Lyotard's, from *Le Mur du Pacifique* (1979), written while Lyotard was teaching at UC San Diego. Lyotard named California the absolute West: the place at which the westward history of states and their settlements runs out of ground and confronts an ocean it cannot cross. The Pacific Wall is invisible and therefore the most real of the walls that have been erected around the American project.
  19. Junkspace (Rem Koolhaas, 2002) is the air-conditioned, flowing, exit-less interior that continuous commercial expansion has produced, and the essay's own unbreathing syntax enacts the space it describes.
  20. Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* (1997) tracked the conversion of 1960s countercultural style into 1970s and 1980s advertising copy, and showed that the conversion was not a betrayal of the original but the completion of its logic: the counterculture had always been selling something, and what it sold was a newly flexible consumer subjectivity that advertising would learn to address directly.
  21. Roland Barthes spent three years reading *Elle* and *Le Jardin des Modes* in the basement of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, taking notes on the captions but not

- on the photographs. He was interested in the language and thought the photograph was already obvious. *The Fashion System* (1967) is the book this method produced. By the time it was published Barthes had decided he disliked the book and had moved on to writing about Japan.
22. The commutation test was imported from structural linguistics, where it served as the basic tool for isolating meaningful units (phonemes, morphemes) against meaningless variation. Barthes applied it to clothing: if changing a feature of the garment changes the social meaning the garment is reading out, the feature is semantically operative; if not, it is noise. The method assumes a system of possible alternatives already in place.
23. Dick Hebdige in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) borrowed the term bricolage from Lévi-Strauss, who had used it to describe the mythic thinker's recombination of pre-existing elements into new ritual wholes. In Hebdige, the mod's parka and the punk's safety pin are bricolage: found objects repositioned into a semiotic guerrilla operation. Bricolage requires a bricoleur who knows what each element is for and chooses to misuse it. What looks like bricolage without a bricoleur is just a pile, except in the rare cases where one of the objects has been picked out with intention, in which case it is something the existing vocabulary, written for political subjects with manifestos, has not yet found a name for.
24. The structure of this gesture is described in Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (1983), which reverses the standard logic of resistance: rather than opposing the system from the outside, the figure pushes the system's

own logic past the point at which the system can recognize itself. The object becomes more object than the system can metabolize; the consumer becomes more consumer than the system can address.

25. Georg Simmel in "Fashion" (1904) argued imitation and demarcation as co-constitutive drives of social life. Through imitation, the individual finds membership in a collective and is relieved of the burden of personal choice; through demarcation, fashion provides a sense of distinction and individual nuance. The "life" of a fashion depends on this tension: as soon as a trend achieves total conformity, it loses its power of distinction and ceases to be "fashion," necessitating the creation of a new form.
26. The PacSun deal was brokered by Beanstalk, a licensing agency whose business is the placement of museum and entertainment IP onto consumer goods. Beanstalk also placed Met merchandise with Champion and Levi's; its other clients have included the AT&T trademark and the estates of Bob Ross and Pelé. The agency exists at the seam where the institution stops being able to handle its own commercialization and outsources the embarrassment. The Met's head of global licensing, in trade press, described the appeal of the PacSun deal as a way to give a 153-year-old institution "a bit of an edge" with the under-thirty demographic.
27. Karl Lagerfeld's "art is art, fashion is fashion" and Andy Warhol's "fashion is more art than art is" are usually cited as the two poles of the question. The two of them knew each other in the 1970s. Lagerfeld appeared in Warhol's 1973 *L'Amour* and was photographed by him for the Polaroid archive, though he later dismissed it publicly. Warhol's project was the dissolution of the line

between art and commerce, and Lagerfeld's persona (the white ponytail, the fan, the fingerless gloves) was a piece of branded image-making that could only have been produced inside the conditions Warhol had described.

28. Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (2001). The argument is that the modern category of "art" — the autonomous, useless, exalted thing the museum exists to house — was assembled in the eighteenth century out of a set of older practices (painting, sculpture, music, poetry) that had previously been understood as trades. Before the consolidation, a portrait painter and a furniture maker were members of the same general professional class.
  
29. The earliest sustained use of *avant-garde* in the art-critical sense is generally credited to Henri de Saint-Simon and his circle in the 1820s.
  
30. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (1939): 34–49, argued that once the old aristocratic and bourgeois buyers stopped supporting serious art, the avant-garde survived by turning inward and making the nature of painting itself its real subject. He defined this avant-garde against kitsch (the mass-produced, commercial, easily consumed image) which is the move that quietly exiles fashion from the category of serious art before the argument even begins, since fashion is commercial by definition and changes by season rather than by conviction.
  
31. Yohji Yamamoto's *My Dear Bomb* (Japanese 2011, English 2014) is structured around the question of whether what he does is art and whether the question is the right question to ask. He answers in different

- directions on different pages. In one passage he insists that fashion is the lowest of the arts because it is functional and obeys the calendar. In another he describes the moment of cutting fabric as a confrontation with the impossibility of perfection that he understands to be the same confrontation a painter faces with the canvas.
- 32.** Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) studied the historical avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s (Dada, Surrealism, the Russian Constructivists) and his diagnosis was that the postwar neo-avant-gardes were performing the gesture without the structural condition that had once given the gesture its force.
- 33.** Doobo Shim, "Hybridity and the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia," *Media, Culture & Society* 28, no. 1 (2006). Shim's account of the Hallyu explains why the CNN bucket hat is not a subcultural appropriation but a commercial loop: the imported sign is hollowed on arrival, filled with a new local use, and re-exported to the culture that sent it.
- 34.** Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *La Physiologie du goût* (1825). *Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es* (Tell me what you eat, I will tell you what you are). Brillat-Savarin meant it as a parlor trick a clever man could perform at dinner. The marketing departments turned it into homework.
- 35.** The Lévy flight was first described in foraging behavior by physicists studying albatross GPS data in the 1990s and has since been documented in bumblebees, deer, sharks, and human hunter-gatherers. The signature property is that the distribution of step lengths has no

- finite variance. The largest step is always larger than any model trained on the previous steps would predict, rendering the pattern scale-invariant. These 'long tails' in probability ensure that the searcher eventually breaks from local clusters to explore distant territory which optimizes foraging efficiency when resources are sparse.
- 36.** *Ziran* (自然) appears throughout the *Daodejing* (300 BCE) as the Daoist ideal of spontaneity or "self-so-ness." It describes action that is effortless and uncontrived, standing in direct contrast to *wei* (為)—action driven by deliberate, self-conscious intention. While the Han dynasty saw it as a cosmic principle of non-interference, modern Mandarin uses it to mean "nature."
- 37.** At René Redzepi's three Michelin starred *Noma* (Copenhagen, 2003–), diners pay roughly \$750 to eat foods the kitchen staff has gathered from the Danish coastline that morning. The implicit argument is that gathering is the more authentic mode and that the modern eater has lost access to it. The medieval European peasant, who did exactly this for several centuries, considered it the food of poor people and would have been baffled by the reservation list.
- 38.** On japonisme, see Siegfried Wichmann's *Japonisme* (1981), which traced the nineteenth-century European appetite for the Japanese print. The current iteration runs on phone cameras and concentrates on the konbini, the vending machine, and the egg sandwich. The pattern is unchanged. A Japanese object is photographed, decontextualized, and circulated as evidence of a refinement the photographer's home country has misplaced.

39.



The milk that arrives at the back of the 7-Eleven cooler at 4:30 AM on a Tuesday in a refrigerated truck out of a distribution center in Vernon was produced by Holstein cows in Tulare County, in dairy operations of a scale nobody could not have imagined. Ten thousand cows in corrals stretching to the horizon. The milk moves through stainless-steel pipes from the udder to the tanker without contact with daylight. It is homogenized, pasteurized at 161° Fahrenheit for fifteen seconds, cooled, and bottled in high-density polyethylene jugs whose blow-mold tooling has not changed appreciably since the 1970s. The whole infrastructure (the genetic manipulation of the Holstein, the mechanization of milking, the interstate highway system, the electrical grid maintaining the cold chain at every point between cow and cooler) collapses, in the moment of the purchase, into a single gesture: he reaches for the jug. 7-Eleven itself began in Dallas in 1927 as an ice house, the Southland Ice Company, when ice was still being delivered to home iceboxes and the ice house was a logical place to also sell the perishables that depended on the ice. Bread, eggs, milk. The hours that gave the chain its name (7 a.m. to 11 p.m.) were a 1946 innovation, novel at the time because most grocery stores closed at six. The chain expanded, dropped the hour limits altogether in 1962 in Texas, and now operates

over 85,000 stores in nineteen countries. The Japanese subsidiary acquired the American parent company in 2005. The 7Select line itself is a private-label program launched in 2009 to give the chain margin on basic groceries it had previously been buying from outside vendors. The milk in the cooler is therefore, in some technical sense, 7-Eleven's own milk, although 7-Eleven does not own dairies and the milk is contracted out to whichever regional bottler the chain has currently negotiated with. The jug itself is the latest in a sequence of milk containers each of which had a brief reign. The American urban household at the start of the twentieth century received its milk from a milkman, in glass bottles delivered to a porch box before dawn, the cap a foil disk that the housewife (the assumption was the housewife) lifted with a thumbnail. The glass bottle persisted into the 1950s in some markets and survived as a niche product into the 1970s in others. Its replacement was the gable-top paperboard carton, patented by John Van Wormer in Toledo in 1915 but not widely adopted until the 1940s, when wartime metal restrictions and improved wax coatings made the carton commercially viable. The gable-top carton has the small architectural pleasure of a roof: the consumer pries open the peak, pulls the spout outward, and pours from a folded paperboard nozzle that is almost always slightly wrong, leaking down the side of the carton on the third or fourth use. The plastic jug arrived in the 1960s, was perfected for industrial bottling in the 1970s, and is now the dominant container for fluid milk in the United States. The HDPE plastic of the 7Select jug is recyclable in principle and almost never recycled in fact. The handle is integrated into the blow-mold. The cap is a separate piece of injection-molded polypropylene, threaded onto the neck of the jug at a torque specified somewhere in a process document at

the bottling plant. The price of 7select (\$5.89 at the time of this publication) is a function of the unique status of milk in American consumer economics. Milk is a loss leader, a product priced at or below cost to draw shoppers into the store, the assumption being that once inside the shopper will purchase higher-margin items. The loss-leader status of milk is itself a residue of the New Deal-era dairy subsidies and the postwar mythologization of milk as essential nutrition, the Got Milk? campaign and its predecessors, a public-private alliance that produced two generations of Americans who believed without examination that milk was the cornerstone of a healthy meal. Until approximately 2005, the consequence of this arrangement was that milk in the United States was exempt from the consumer-choice burden that organized the rest of the grocery store. Most shoppers bought the same milk every week, in the same fat percentage, from the same store. The dairy aisle is now organized as a small Borgesian classification system. There is organic milk, certified by the USDA, produced without synthetic pesticides on the feed crops or routine antibiotics on the animals. There is grass-fed milk, which means the cows ate grass for some percentage of their lives, the percentage being a matter of considerable industry argument. There is A2 milk, sold on the proposition that the protein structure of certain breeds of cow is gentler on the human gut than the protein structure of the standard Holstein, the science here being thin and the marketing being heavy. There is ultra-filtered milk, branded as Fairlife and owned by the Coca-Cola Company, in which the lactose has been mostly removed and the protein concentrated. There is lactose-free milk for the lactose-intolerant. There is whole, 2%, 1%, and skim, the four-tier hierarchy that has organized the American refrigerator since the 1970s. And there is,

at the outer edge of this dairy aisle and not in fact in the dairy aisle but in some adjacent shelf-real-estate the store has not quite known what to call, the wall of alternative milks: almond, oat, soy, coconut, hemp, flax, rice, pea, macadamia, hazelnut, cashew, banana, potato. None of these are milk in any sense most regulating bodies would recognize. They are emulsions of plant matter and water, sold as milk. Outside this dairy aisle, in a parallel market the FDA has spent thirty years trying to suppress, raw milk has become a quasi-religious object. The raw-milk consumer pays sixteen to twenty-two dollars a gallon for unpasteurized milk obtained directly from a small dairy, in many states through a cow-share arrangement that is the legal fiction by which the consumer notionally co-owns the cow and is therefore drinking her own milk rather than buying someone else's. The FDA explicitly warns that raw milk can carry Salmonella, Listeria, E. coli O157:H7, and Brucella, and the warnings are accurate; outbreaks occur every year. The raw-milk consumer is unmoved by this fact, believing that pasteurization is a violence done to the substance, that industrial dairy is a violence done to the cow, and that the body absorbs nutrients from raw milk in some way that pasteurization profanes. The raw-milk Facebook groups, which are private and require approval to join, are full of testimonies of healing. The position is unfalsifiable, in the sense that no quantity of scientific evidence will alter it; it has the structure of a religious commitment.

40. Donna Haraway in, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003). studies the human-dog relationship as a long, mutually shaping entanglement, neither side standing apart from the other or recognizing the relation.

41. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), Walter Benjamin wrote that reproduction strips the artwork of aura. The unspoken hope was that the loss might be redistributed. The actual outcome was that the loss was monetized at the level of the receipt, with the painting reduced to the occasion for the certificate of having seen it.
42. Vincenzo Latronico, *Perfection* (Italian 2022, English 2024). Expat protagonists Anna and Tom have moved to Berlin and arranged a beautiful apartment with monstera and natural light. The novel is a satire of the late millennial tendency to live in a very curated reality.
43. A small secondary economy has grown up around four-letter and dictionary-word usernames on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), where short handles are scarce and have therefore acquired a price. Brokers maintain spreadsheets. Transfers happen through a combination of escrow services, account-recovery exploits, and quiet handshake deals on Discord and Telegram
44. *Aura farming* entered general circulation in 2024 by way of clips from a Brazilian goalkeeper's pre-game ritual that were ironically captioned with the term and proliferated through TikTok and X. The verb *farming* arrives via online gaming, where it has meant, since the early 2000s in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*, the repetitive killing of low-level monsters by paid laborers in air-conditioned warehouses, who sold the resulting digital currency on secondary markets to those who did not have time to grind. The verb spread: gold farming, XP farming, karma farming, engagement farming, and now aura farming. Each names a labor that produces a resource the system was meant to distribute only as a byproduct of play. Aura was supposed to be the thing

labor could not produce. There are now warehouses for it.

45. This style, or something proximal to it, was dubbed #SWAG Dadaism in May 2026 on episode 156 of *Nymphet Alumni* (<https://www.nymphetalumni.com/p/ep-156-swag-dadaism>), a fashion and cultural criticism podcast. The hosts read the impulse as a generational response to global instability and technological vertigo, and as the antithesis of refinement culture.
46. Freud, *Character and Anal Erotism* (1908), proposed that early bodily organization around retention and expulsion produced two adult character structures: one organized around holding (orderliness, parsimony, control), and one organized around its opposite (mess, generosity, refusal). Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share* (1949) reread the same opposition at the scale of an economy. The question for any society in surplus is not how to produce more but how to spend what cannot be retained. The minimalist post withholds. The maximalist post deposits. They are the two solutions to the same problem and the problem is that the body has more material than the body can hold.
47. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux journal* 10 (2009). The poor image is Steyerl's term for the low-resolution, compressed, often pirated copy that travels fast across the internet: the bootleg film, the meme JPEG re-saved a hundred times, the news photograph screenshotted off one platform and uploaded to another. Its degradation was the price of its escape from the institutional channel that would otherwise have polished it. The essay was widely read in art school over the next decade and produced a recognizable photographic register: the flash on a pile

of garbage, the off-center crop of a gas station at three a.m., the digicam shot of a friend mid-sentence with red-eye, the deliberately ugly scan, the screenshot of a screenshot.

48. The phrase points at the older psychoanalytic problem of the superego, recast for contemporary conditions. Freud's superego was a prohibitive agency: do not. Lacan, in the Ethics seminar and after, identified a secondary, obscene face of the same agency, which issues the inverse command: enjoy. Slavoj Žižek and later Todd McGowan extended the reading: capitalism in its present phase has converted enjoyment from a prohibited surplus into a duty. The subject is now obligated to enjoy, to be seen enjoying, to enjoy correctly, and to post evidence of having enjoyed. Pleasure is supervised by the same apparatus that once supervised its prohibition.
49. Thomas H. Ogden, "On the Concept of an Autistic-Contiguous Position," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 70 (1989), and *The Primitive Edge of Experience* (1989). Ogden's psychology assumes that underneath language and self-awareness there is an older layer of experience organized entirely around the senses: the weight of a blanket, the rhythm of a familiar walk, the texture of a shirt against the neck. Ogden inherits it from a tradition of child psychoanalysts (Frances Tustin in particular) who had been working with autistic children and noticed that the sensory floor, which the rest of us run underneath without noticing, was where these children spent most of their time. Ogden generalizes the observation into adult life by claiming that when this floor stays intact, the world feels textured and real. When it gets cut off from the language and image-life above it, the world starts to

- feel like representation: glassy, flat, somehow not quite there. The clinical category of *autism* itself has drifted considerably since Ogden was writing. It once named a narrow set of severe presentations in children but in the last decade, been picked up online by alienated youth as a way to circumscribe their own alienation through a legitimizing clinical category.
50. The slang for the figure who has aged out of coolness has its own period (at the time of this publishing in mid 2026, it is "unc") that the body of the essay declines to record on the principle that a category that fades within eighteen months should not be archived in a footnote.
51. *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (2007). Eva Illouz argued that the structures of capitalist rationality had penetrated emotional life through the forms by which emotional life was organized and expressed. To use a dating app in the intended way is to represent oneself as a finite set of "choose-able" attributes.
52. Jacques Lacan's term, the "big Other", from *Écrits* (1966), describes the invisible audience everyone is silently performing for: the unwritten rulebook of language and social life, the position from which one feels watched and judged even when alone in the room. What you want, in Lacan's account, is shaped from the start by what you assume this audience wants.
53. Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's *third* (*The Bonds of Love*, 1988) is what two people generate between themselves when they manage to actually meet: a shared space that lets each one register the other as a person rather than as an object of need. It exists in the relating between each other and has to be sustained by

both parties. Her diagnosis is that trouble arrives when the third stops holding the relationship open and starts swallowing it, so that the two people end up performing for it simultaneously rather than meeting each other through it. The Tyranny of the Image names what happens when the third is swallowed in turn by the endless circulation of images, such that people relate to each other through these image rather than through one another.

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# CREDITS

NOTES ON THE PAC SUN AVANT GARDE, by Jamal.

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## §

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