

Corn Maze

By Pam Houston

<http://www.hungermtn.org/corn-maze/>

When I was four years old, my father lost his job. We were living in Trenton, New Jersey at the time, where he had lived most of his life. With no college education, he had worked his way up to the position of controller at a Transamerica-owned manufacturing company called Delavalve. The company restructured itself and dismissed him. My parents decided to use his sudden unemployment as an opportunity to take a vacation, to drive whatever Buick convertible we had at the time from New Jersey to California. My parents loved the sun and the beach more than they loved anything except vodka martinis. They promised to take me to Disneyland. We stopped at Las Vegas on the way.

We stayed at the Sands, where my mother had opened, decades before, as a singing, dancing comedian for Frank Sinatra. I got to swim in the kidney shaped pool, and then we ate a giant slab of prime rib each for a dollar. My mother and I went up to the room to bed, and my father stayed downstairs to gamble. I woke up to my mother standing over my bed and sun streaming into the hotel room window. I was four and a half years old. "Pam," she said, "Go downstairs and get your father out of the casino."

I found him sitting at an empty blackjack table, looking a hundred and ten. I took his hand and led him through the hazy cigarette air, up the elevator and down the long hall with the zig-zag carpet to our room. He had, of course, lost everything. The money we were meant to live on until he found another job, the money for the trip to California, the money for the hotel bill. Even the car.

My mother's old boss at the Desert Inn loaned us enough to get the car back, to pay the hotel bill, to take me to Disneyland. A few weeks later my father started a new job in Pennsylvania, and we moved there, though when my mother ran away from Spiceland, Indiana at age 13 to Manhattan, because she had won the bet with her Aunt Ermie, who raised her, that *she could get straight C's*, and as a result had, for the first time in her life, fifty whole dollars, she'd vowed she would never live west of the New Jersey border again.

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About five years ago, I was asked to be one of four writers to participate in an evening called "Unveiled" at the Wisconsin Book Festival in Madison. Our assignment was to write something new that had never been tried or tested, and read it aloud to an audience of roughly a thousand. I not only accepted; I took the assignment so literally, I didn't start writing until I was on the plane to Wisconsin. I wrote for the entire plane ride, and all evening in my hotel room. I stayed up all night and wrote, and I wrote all day the day of the reading. When I started to panic that I would not have something ready in time for the reading, I told myself what I tell my students when they get *stuck*: *write down all of the things out in the world that have arrested your attention lately, that have glimmered at you in some resonant way. Set them next to each other. See what happens.*

By late afternoon I had twelve tiny scenes. I have always, for some reason, thought in twelves. I don't believe this has anything to do with the apostles. One scene was called Georgetown, Great Exuma. Another was called Ozona, Texas. Another was called Juneau, Alaska. Two hours before I was to read, I looked back at my instructions to make sure I had done everything the assignment asked of me. The only caveat, it said, was that the piece had to mention Wisconsin. I knew nothing about Wisconsin, so I left my hotel room and sat on a street corner downtown and waited for something to happen. In less than thirty minutes, something did, and I went back to my room and wrote it down. When I added Madison, Wisconsin to the original twelve, I had to take out Mexican Hat, Utah, but that was okay with me.

"Jesus, Pam," Richard Bausch said, after the reading, "Write a hundred of them, and that's your next book." I thought, "No, not a hundred, but possibly a hundred and forty-four."

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When I went on tour with my first book, a collection of short stories *called Cowboys Are My Weakness*, I was asked, more than any other *question, how much of this really happened* to you? "A lot of it," was my honest answer, night after night, but the audience grew dissatisfied with that answer and seemed, more than anything, to want something quantifiable, so I began saying, also honestly, about eighty-two percent.

Eight years later, when I published my first "nonfiction" book, and went on tour with it, I would often be introduced in some version of the following manner: "In the past we have gotten eighty-two percent Pam, and now we are going to get one hundred percent," and I would approach the microphone and feel the need to say, "Well, no, still coming in right about eighty-two."

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Between Davis and Dixon, California, in the heart of the Central Valley, just off the I-80, right under the historic sign where the cow jumps over the moon, is the Guinness Book of World Records' Largest Corn Maze. If you get off the highway and drive to it, you find out that technically speaking, it was the Guinness Book of World Records' Largest Corn Maze in 2007, and not in 2010. But, you figure they figure, once a winner, always a winner.

In the corn maze, as in life, there are rules. No running. No smoking. No strollers. No drugs. No inappropriate language. (The corn has ears too!) No tampering with the signs and the maze markers. If you misbehave you will be asked to leave, though in a corn maze, you understand, that is not always so straightforward. Surprisingly, dogs are allowed in the corn maze, and there is nothing in the rules prohibiting handguns. Sex in the corn maze is also apparently okay, as long as you use appropriate language.

The computer-generated grid that the corn maze sits upon runs from A through QQ and 1 through 52. It contains 2,193 squares. When you enter, they hand you a map. To complete the maze successfully, you will make approximately 189 right turns and 156 left turns, though there are a few places when more than one option will get you out, so your individual numbers *may vary*.

An ear of corn averages 800 kernels in 16 rows. A pound of corn consists of approximately 1,300 kernels. 100 bushels of corn produces approximately 7,280,000 kernels. In the US, corn leads all other crops in value and volume of production. The corn in this maze is as high as an elephant's eye, if we are talking the world's largest elephant, in heels.

I have a painting in my kitchen by my friend Mark Penner-Howell of a giant ear of corn *with the* word Hallelujah written in red letters running vertically up the ear and lots of little ghostly gas pumps in the background. When my boyfriend Greg eats corn on the cob his lips swell up so much we call him Angelina Jolie.

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The reason I have been afraid, until very recently, to make any kind of general, theoretical, or philosophical statements about women, writers, westerners, environmentalists, academics, western women, western women writers, outdoorswomen who grew up in New Jersey and eventually became academics, women who dreamed of running white water rivers and falling in love with poets and cowboys (though not cowboy poets), women who got on I-80 West on the other side of the George Washington Bridge one day and just kept driving...is that I have never felt comfortable speaking for anyone except myself. Maybe I had been socialized not to make declarative statements. Maybe I thought you had to be fifty before you knew anything about the world. Maybe I was afraid of misrepresenting someone I thought I understood but didn't. Maybe I was afraid of acting hypocritically. Maybe I have always believed it is more honest, more direct, and ultimately more powerful, to tell a story, one concrete and particular detail at a time.

So I did. I put my boat into the river, some things happened, and I took it back out on the other side. In time though, I began to suspect that linear narrative was not doing a very good job representing life as I experienced it, but I still tried to stretch the things I originally conceived of as Slinkies into straight lines. I don't mean to suggest that I was unique in this. There are so many of us out there, trying to turn Spyrograph flowers into rocket ships. In time I began to gain confidence in my Spyrograph flowers and Slinkies. Eventually, I began to speculate about where they came from. Just for starters, I never met any of my grandparents. Also, every single one of my relatives (except a second cousin in Alaska who is oddly afraid of me and his illegitimate son who likes me, but lives in Prague) is dead. Also, when both of your parents are alcoholics, one thing never leads to another. There is no such thing as how it really happened. When both of your parents are alcoholics, the only way to get to a narrative that is un-shattered would be to run the tape backwards, like a car accident in reverse where the windshield that is in a

million pieces magically mends itself. This is not necessarily the bad news. A mind that moves associatively (as my mind does and probably your mind too) like a firefly in a grassy yard on a late June evening, has more fun (and other things too, of course, like static, like trouble) than a mind that moves logically or even chronologically. Just the other day for instance, *someone* said the word tennis, and I saw in my mind's eye a lady in a pig suit with wings.

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Not too long after grad school, I was hired by a magazine to write an article about why women over forty take adventure vacations. I was barely thirty and had no idea why, but I needed the money so I called some power women I knew who had climbed Kilimanjaro or whatever and asked them. They gave flat and predictable answers like, "for the challenge," so I made up some smart, funny women who said surprising and subversive things about why they took adventure vacations, and wrote the article up.

When the fact checker called me, I said, "You're a what?" like an asshole fresh out of graduate school, "you actually believe in things called facts?"

The fact checker, whose name was Bethany, asked for the phone numbers of the six women I wrote about. I gave her the numbers of the three that actually existed.

"What about Katherine and Louise and Samantha?" she said.

"Well, Bethany," I said, "I made them up."

There was five seconds of silence, then she said, "Well, I guess we don't have to call them then, do we?"

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In 2010 in Las Vegas, in a gondola, in the canal that runs from Barney's New York to Kenneth Cole (upstairs in the mall they call the Palazzo), a very young man is proposing to a very young woman. He is on one knee, and the acne faced gondolier in his straw hat and red kerchief steadies the wobbling boat. The shoppers pause a minute to look over the railing and watch. The girl is either genuinely surprised or good at pretending. She whispers yes, and then shouts it for the small crowd. The twenty-five of us gathered clap and cheer, and the boy stands up and pumps both fists, the same exact gesture he uses, one imagines, when he hears that his fantasy football quarterback has gone 18 for 24 with four TD's and no interceptions. The gondolier turns the boat around with his single long paddle, and pushes them back toward Bed, Bath and Beyond.

Every day in Vegas is upside down day. Walking along the canal, young men in wife beaters say sentences into their cell phones that, if they were not in Las Vegas, they would never say. "I'll meet you in an hour in St. Mark's square," or, "I applied for a job with the KGB," or, "Let's meet up in time to see the volcano erupt." People pay money—

a lot of it—to see Donny and Marie Osmond. On the poster for the Garth Brooks show in the Wynn Encore theater, there is a picture of Garth in his big black hat and a one word review *from* the Los Angeles Times: Genius.

We are staying at the Golden Nugget, downtown, a hotel where, if you want to, you can go down a water slide, which is really more like a water straw, through a 200,000-gallon shark tank. At the guest relations desk there is a very pretty girl with quarter-inch thick make up and long blonde hair that has been dyed so many times it is leaning toward burnt sienna, and the kind of ultra thick, ultra blunt square false eyelashes that only transvestites wear, and the whole ensemble makes her look like somebody cross dressed as herself.

Every time we leave the hotel, the junkies are sitting on the steps of the church across the street shooting up under their toenails. The lady in front of the sign that says Hotel-Wedding-Cuban buffet, looks right through the driver's side window into my eyes and says, "Put a muffler on it you fucking bitch," right before she sits down in the middle of the street and tries to scratch her own *scalp* off.

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When it was decided (When was that again, and by whom?) that we were all supposed to choose between fiction and nonfiction, what was not taken into account was that for some of us truth can never be an absolute, that there can (at best) be only less true and more true and sometimes those two collapse inside each other like a Turducken. Given the failure of memory. Given the failure of language to mean. Given metaphor. Given metonymy. Given the ever-shifting junction of code and context. Given the twenty-five people who saw the same car accident. Given our denial. Given our longings.

Who cares really, if she hung herself or slit her wrists when what really matters is that James Fry is secretly afraid that he's the one who killed her. Dear Random House Refund Department: If they were moved, then they got their twenty-four dollars worth.

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Back in the nineties, a magazine sent me to the Ardeche region of France. They wanted me, among other things, to kayak the Ardeche river canyon, one of the five river canyons the French call the Grand Canyon of France. But they sent me in late October, the days were short and getting shorter, all the kayak rental places were boarded up tight for the year, and it was 36 degrees with freezing rain. So I hiked the canyon of the Ardeche, thinking it would be an acceptable substitute.

When I turned in the article the editor said, "We really wanted you to kayak the Ardeche."

"I know," I said, "but it was too cold, all the rental places..."

“No,” she said, “we really wanted you to kayak the Ardeche...”

“Ah...” I said.

“And while you’re at it,” she said, “could you make it rain a little less?”

I found her request neither difficult nor surprising. The river had, at that time of year, hardly a riffle on it, and would have been a pretty, if chilly, float. To spice things up, I added a water fight with three Italian kayakers. There was some good-natured flirting across the language barrier. It didn’t rain that day at all.

Some years later, the editor of an anthology asked my permission to reprint that essay. He said, “I really liked your story, especially the part about the three Italian kayakers.”

“Funny,” I said, “I made that part up.”

Maybe I should have anticipated the depth of his outrage, but I did not. This was pre-James Frey, of course, and who would have ever anticipated that? The editor called back a few days later and said he had removed the kayak trip from the essay. He had added a scene in which I carry my kayak down to the river’s edge, and a fog bank rolls in, and I decide not to go.

“I don’t want to be an asshole,” I said, which of course wasn’t true either, “But if I can’t make up three Italian kayakers, I don’t think you can make up fog in my *essay*.”

It is hard, all these decades after *The Things They Carried*, to stand here and say the scene with the three Italian kayakers is the truest thing in the entire essay (though, of course it is) even though it never really happened. Nor would I turn an entirely deaf ear to the complaints of those who actually use travel magazines to plan trips. Not to mention war crimes, genocide, sex offenders, presidents who lie about weapons of mass destruction... certainly I do believe that sometimes it is necessary for us all to pretend together that language can really mean.

But *if you* think about it, the fact that I did not really have a flirty exchange with three Italian kayakers doesn’t make it any less likely that you might. I might even go so far as to argue that you would be more likely to have such an exchange because of my (non-existent) kayakers, first because they charmed you into going to the Ardeche to begin with, and second, because if you happened to be floating along on a rainless day in your kayak and a sexy, curly-haired guy glided by and splashed water on you, you would now be much more likely to splash him back.

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Due north of Newfoundland, there is a small rocky island in the Labrador Straights called Quirpon (pronounced Kar-poon). The island is roughly ten miles long and three miles across, and on the seaward tip there is a lighthouse and a lighthouse keeper’s house—

both painted a bright red and white—and no other buildings to speak of. Inside the house, two tough and sweet women named Madonna and Doris fry cod, dry clothes, fix mugs of hot chocolate, and hand out maps to soggy hikers who've come to stay the night.

Marked on the map along with the fox den and the osprey nest is an old townsite called L'Anse au Pigeon, and underneath the name in parentheses it says, "site of mass murder." When I ask Doris about it, she tells me she isn't much of a storyteller, but when I press she takes a deep breath to get into what I recognize as the Newfoundlanders' story telling mode, a half performance/half trance state that suggests stories are serious matters, whether they are about mass murders or not.

"And now," she says, "I will tell you the story of the mass murders on Quirpon Island." She brings her hands into her lap and folds them as if she's getting ready to pray. "A long long time ago," she says, "not in this time, but in the time before this time, there was a settlement—several fishing families, living together on Quirpon Island. And one day the government saw fit to send them a schoolteacher. Now this schoolteacher mind you, he was a handsome fellow, young and smart, and one of the fisherman's wives fell head over heels in love with him. And the husband was terrible jealous, terrible, terrible, so he decided to trick the schoolteacher into drinking a little bit of the stuff—what is it? I don't know what the stuff is called...."

"Arsenic?"

"No, it's the stuff they use in the lanterns."

"Kerosene?"

"Like kerosene, but different from kerosene."

"White gas?"

"Like white gas, but different from white gas....anyway, he gave it to him a little, a little, a little at a time, and finally the poor handsome schoolteacher died."

Doris nods her head as a kind of punctuation, unfolds her hands and stands. "And that is the story of the mass murder on Quirpon Island."

"But Doris," I say, "why call the death of one schoolteacher a mass murder?"

Doris sighs heavily. She sits back down and brings her hands back into her lap. "A long long time ago," she begins, "not in this time, but in the time before this time, the fisherman who had given the school teacher the poison to drink became more and more afraid that the men in the town were getting ready to confront him. There wasn't law back then like we have in these times, so he probably would have gotten away with it, but his guilt made him believe his friends were not his friends. So deep deep into one dark night he soaked one of the fishing boats with the liquid that goes into the lanterns...."

“The same liquid?” I say, “that he gave the schoolteacher to drink?”

“The very same!”

“The white gas?”

“Like white gas,” Doris says, “but different from white gas.”

“Didn’t they smell it?”

“This is the liquid that has no smell. Anyway, all the men in the town went fishing the next morning and one of ‘em struck a match to light his cigarette and the whole lot of them burned up or drowned or died of hypothermia. You can’t last long in that iceberg water,” she says, nodding her head towards the window. “And that is the story of the mass murder on *Quirpon Island*.”

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I was driving over Slumgullion Pass listening to Ashes of American Flags at volume 50. There were three feet of new snow on the ground, and I watched a herd of two hundred elk gallop through it. I had spent hours the night before on baby naming websites trying to find something I could search and replace for Pam in my forthcoming novel of 144 chapters. The book is more or less autobiographical. I have, of course, taken massive liberties with the truth.

In past books I have used Millie, Lucy, and Rae. For the sake of sentence rhythm, I was leaning towards something with one syllable, but it would also be convenient to the book if the replacement name meant *something* as embarrassing as what the name “Pamela” means: which is all honey. I had considered Melinda, which on some sites means honey and could be shortened to Mel. I had considered Samantha which means listener, and could be shortened to Sam. But in the car with the elk in the pasture and the snow on the road and Jeff Tweedy in my ears I was all of a sudden very angry at whoever it was who put all that pressure on Oprah Winfrey. This book was in danger of missing the whole point of itself if my name were not Pam in it. If my name were not Pam in it, who was the organizing consciousness behind these 144 tiny miraculous coincident unrelated things?

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About ten years ago, I was looking for an epigraph for a book of my travel essays. I arranged a lot of my Asian travel in those days with an excellent San Francisco outfit called Geographic Expeditions, a company famous for their catalogues, which are full of heart-stopping photos and quotes from writers like Goethe, Shakespeare, Chatwin, and Plato. *That year’s catalogue contained a quote from Seamus O’Banion: Eventually I realized that wanting to go where I hadn’t been might be as fruitful as going there, but*

for the repose of my soul I had to do both. I found it wise and pleasingly self-effacing, and I shamelessly stole it for my epigraph, without taking time to find the original source.

A season later, I was invited to a cocktail party at the offices of Geographic Expeditions, and since my new book contained essays about trips they had arranged for me, I brought them a copy. “And look,” I said, “I thieved my epigram straight from your catalog,” and showed them the O’Banion quote.

When they could contain their laughter long enough to explain it, they said, “There’s no such person as Seamus O’Banion. We made him up, one late night several catalogues ago, and now we bring him back whenever we need him to say something profound.”

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When I told my friend Shannon how rattled I got in Vegas, she twisted up her mouth and said, “Well, it seems to me that Vegas is the distillation of American-style capitalism, where what is desired is a facsimile of old world decadence (Venice) exchangeable only by complete ignorance of its actual cost (the wasteland at its margins). And that the lower-middle class who go there with their obese children are the real fools, because it’s their money that keeps everyone else either rich or poor.”

For the first time in my life I truly understood the difference between a writer and a cultural critic. A cultural critic goes to Vegas and lets it serve as proof of everything she’s been trying to say about the world. A writer goes to Vegas, and it makes her want to kill herself.

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It is possible that I will be advised to change the character Pam’s name to Melinda. It is also possible, though less so, that I will be advised to change the names I have changed back to the actual names, or that I will be advised, the first time I introduce a character called Rick to say “the man I’ll call Rick.” It is possible I will be advised to do that with all the characters’ names I have changed, which is somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty. In the instances where I have combined two or more real live people into one character, and thrown a little something in there to make them blend—a little storyteller’s petite verdot—or even made a character up all together, this method becomes even more problematic.

The Rick I’ve put on the page bears only a modest resemblance to the man I love and live with—less and less with every draft. But the point I am trying to make here is that the two wouldn’t resemble each other much more than they currently do if I called him by his real name and tried with all my might to make the two characters match. Nor would the Pam on the page resemble me any more or less than she currently does (which is only so much) if I am made to call her Melinda. Except in as much as her name would be Melinda, and my name would still be Pam.

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I understand that it is in bad taste to love Venice, the real version. The city exists, now, more or less for the tourists who number an astounding seven million a year. None of the employees can afford to live there, and the whole city shuts down by ten thirty each night because the waiters have to run for the last boat/train/bus for the city of Mestre, where there are apartments they can actually afford. Eighty percent of the palazzo windows are dark at night because they are all owned by counts or bankers or corporations, and now, because of the wave action of speedboats, the wood pilings that have stood strong under the town for more than a thousand years are finally rotting, and the whole city is sinking, slowly but surely into the Adriatic Sea.

And still, leaving the rent-a-car at the San Marco carpark, and slipping onto a Vaporetto at 8:00 pm on a foggy January night, leaving the dock and watching the first Palazzos come into view, some of them still adorned with Christmas lights, pattering past a Gondola, its Gondolier ram rod straight in his slim black coat, passing under the bridge of sighs, with the dark water lapping softly against the bow, it is hard not to feel like you have entered the world's single remaining magical kingdom.

And when you tell the Sicilian owner at Beccafico, "we have only one night here, so just make us whatever you think is best," and he brings a whole fish cooked *in wine* and capers and olives and so fresh it is like the definition of the words fresh fish in your mouth, and afterwards, your sweetheart buys you for your birthday a small piece of venetian glass, various shades of umber, in the shape of a life preserver to wear around your neck, and you drift off to sleep in a room that has had fancy people sleeping in it since at least the 1400's, you think, if the worst thing they ever say about you is that you have an underdeveloped sense of irony that might be quite alright.

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Did I mention that when James Frey was an undergraduate, I was his creative writing teacher?

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In San Francisco, at Alonzo King's Sherherazade there was one dancer who was head and shoulders above the others. I mean that literally—he was a giant—and figuratively—every time he leapt onto the stage all of our hearts leapt up too.

It was a difficult problem, I imagined, for the choreographer to solve, to have one dancer, in a troupe, who was so outstanding, so lithe and fluid, so perfectly free inside his own body, that he made all the other dancers, who I am sure were very fine dancers, look clunky, boorish, and uncontrovertibly white (even the black ones). And yet, having seen that dancer perform, wasn't it Alonzo King's duty to let us see him, even if he couldn't be on stage the entire time, even if every time he left the stage, we all died a little bit inside?

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I did not actually believe, for example, until I saw the signs with my own eyes, that several places in Vegas offer drive-through windows for weddings.

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It has been five years since my trip to Madison, Wisconsin, and I have 144 chapters. 132 of them are titled with a place name, divided into groups of 12 by 12 single stories that take place no place—on an airplane, 39,000 feet above the ground. I had to make a decision as to whether the airplane stories would count as 12 of the 144, or over and above the 144, but that turned out to be easy. If I stuck to 132 non-airplane stories, I needed just 12 airplane stories to serve as both dividers and bookends. If I wrote 144 non-airplane stories, I would have needed 13, which would have ruined everything.

In the final stages of editing, I sent an email to my editor saying, “is it wrong of me to want to call myself Pam in this book? Should I just change my name to Melinda and be done with it?”

She wrote back saying, “No, I like Pam. I think we want people to think it is both you and not you,” and I sat in front of the computer and nearly wept with gratitude.

Six months before my father lost his job and we drove to Las Vegas, he threw me across the room and broke my femur. I think it’s possible he meant to kill me, and I spent the rest of my childhood, the rest of his life, really, thinking he probably would. Speaking only for myself, now, I cannot see any way that my subsequent wellbeing depends on whether or not, or how much, you believe what I am telling you—that is to say—on the difference, (if there is any,) between 82 and 100 percent true. My wellbeing (when and if it exists) resides in the gaps language leaves between myself and the corn maze, myself and the Las Vegas junkies, myself and the elk chest deep in snow. It is there, in that white space of language’s limitation that I am allowed to touch everything, and it is in those moments of touching everything, that I am some *version of free*.

When my agent read the first draft of my forthcoming book, she said in dismay, you haven’t taken us anywhere and yet you have taken us everywhere! I know what she was asking for was more resolution, which she was right to ask for and which I subsequently provided, but I still don’t know how to inflect her sentence in a way in which it doesn’t sound like praise.

One thing I am sure of, having spent the last five years inside a shattered narrative, is that time is a worthy opponent. It does not give up quietly. It does not give up kicking and screaming. It does not, in fact, give up at all. Time is like when you break a thermometer and all the mercury runs around the table trying like crazy to reconstitute itself. Or like the way PCB can start out in a glass transformer in Alabama and wind up on the island of

Svalbard, inside a polar bear cub's brain. A shattered narrative is still a narrative. We can't escape it; it is what we are.