DEAD LETTERS

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me
—Emily Dickinson

1.

Juan Reyes' technique for invisibility, if something so improvised can be called a technique, is to stand by Hotel Mitla's drained swimming pool and stare into its aquamarine cavity. There, in Oaxaca City, tranced by the depth measurements, a pool without water or people will also absent him. It's an innovative technique, but let's call it what it is: a superstition. Juan Reyes is not invisible. The eight standing with him, all local Oaxacans, these eight see him. They know he is a tourist. He's tourist uniformed: sneakers, cargo pants, crewneck T-shirt, sunglasses, Dodgers baseball cap—all faded, all American casual. And he's tourist white, at least by their standards, sun shy behind the baseball cap and glasses. What the eight can't see is what Juan Reyes sees. Right now, in Oaxaca, Juan Reyes is a specialist in the unseen. His clothes, for instance, are many things, but they are not tourist casual. I could tell you where they were purchased, who designed them, how much they cost—though *cost* here is inadequate. I can't say his sneakers *cost* more than eight hundred dollars, though they did. I also can't say his cargo pants *cost* double that—though, again, they did. These are not costs, not in any conventional sense. They are admission fees to a quantum universe where conventional laws of desire do not apply. No one can see this consumerist universe, access it, unless they, too, are specialists in the

differences among the high-end and the upmarket. The eight other passengers are not specialists; they could never be, nor do they want to be. Their current professions are, counterclockwise: an accountant, unemployed, a construction worker, unemployed, a repairman, a taxi driver, a florist, and a secretary. For them, the world of eight-hundred-dollar sneakers is an absurdity. Six years ago, Juan Reyes would have agreed. Juan Reyes, the director of *The City and the River* (1998), a film considered by most critics—American, Mexican, otherwise—to be the most accurate portrayal of indigenous communities in Chiapas to date. Juan Reyes, the director of *Coyote* (2005), a film praised for its Balzacian knowledge of migrant life on the Mexico-U.S. border. These films, all his films, have been compared to the best works of socially committed filmmakers such as Ken Loach and Costa-Gavras, not to mention Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. But it was these films that propelled him out of his economic class and out of his country; and now, standing poolside, waiting for a van to take him to Oaxaca's Pacific coast, Juan Reyes can do nothing but look into the pool and hope for invisibility.

2.

The van from Oaxaca City to Oaxaca's Pacific coast, the van for which they are all waiting, costs four hundred pesos, or roughly thirty USD. Juan Reyes, though, is not here because the van is cheap. What he gains in savings he loses in time: the trip, when and if the van arrives, will take at least seven hours. Maybe it will take eight hours—the woman at the front desk was noncommittal. Seven or eight hours, it's quicker to go to Oaxaca City's airport and book a Cessna. Even struggling against the downdraft, a buzzing four-seater gets to the coast in less than an hour. Or he could fly from

the capital. On a loaned private jet from D.F., insulated from everyone except stewards, there would be no staring into pools and pretending not to be seen. But there is a problem, and this is often the problem for Juan Reyes: the director is afraid of flying. Members of the Mexican press lampooned him for this weakness, but in his defense, and considering his profession, the phobia is not particular to Juan Reyes. It's said that the American directors Martin Scorsese and Wes Anderson, for example, do not fly. Stanley Kubrick, who held a pilot's license, did not fly. And Sam Shepard, the actor and occasional director who played Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff* (1983), also did not fly. (That is, it's said, until Chuck Yeager himself persuaded Shepard to fly with him.) Without Chuck Yeager's assistance, Juan Reyes should rent a car, but he did not rent a car, because Juan Reyes does not drive, either. Even if he did drive, the gnarled mountaintop roads dividing Oaxaca City from the Pacific beach would be impossible for the director and a gentle-voiced GPS to navigate. His remaining option is to take a bus to the coast. Thousands of luxury buses crisscross Mexico every day, drivers all amphetamine nerves and prayers to the Virgin, riders narcotized by karate films and deep-comfort seating. However, a bus, a simple option for most, is not a simple option for the director. Among his fears—and they aggregate every year—is a fear of kidnapping. Unlike his fear of flying and his fear of driving, Juan Reyes' fear of kidnapping is not unwarranted. The director left Mexico in 2005, three months after his cinematographer, Rodrigo Klein A.S.C., was kidnapped while shooting *Coyote* in Sinaloa. The cinematographer's family wired a fifty-thousand-dollar ransom to two faceless kidnappers, and the cinematographer was returned to his family minus one toe. After his release, the cinematographer used a cane to walk—which Juan Reyes found odd, since only a toe was removed—but when Juan Reyes saw the cinematographer and his cane shuffle to the set on the first day after his

release, Juan Reyes decided that Mexico was no longer safe. Shooting wrapped, and a chauffeur drove the director from the border to Los Angeles—not his first choice of a city, but a practical one—while his wife and assistant followed on a commercial airline.

3·

For Juan Reyes, the sunglasses and the baseball cap are an imperfect cover for what has been called an incredibly pigheaded trip to Oaxaca. I am quoting Deborah Morales Martínez, his wife, who called the director's trip *pigheaded* and claimed, probably truthfully, that she would not pay a ransom for his return. Deborah Garcia Ayon, his research assistant, said a similar thing to Juan Reyes, though her statement was less threatening than the wife's, since she is a paid employee and not his spouse. Unlike the two Deborahs, I sympathize with Juan Reyes' need to travel. The director's latest film, not yet titled, not yet edited, was due last fall. In October, the missed deadline was, for the director, a cause for minor anxiety. In November, he stopped replying to email. Around the New Year, he began ignoring his chirping cell. In February, he stopped going home and remained in the studio, where, for about four months, he had already stopped working. The untitled new film, a one-hour documentary about the Golden Records on the *Voyager 1* and *2* spacecraft, was supposed to be an easy addition to the curriculum vitae, as well as a vacation from the sociological drudgery he usually inflicted on everyone. But what started as a quick television documentary is caving under its outsize scale. The initial four interviews, all shot quickly in the spring of 2009, ended up leading to, over a period of one year, a total of forty-eight filmed and audiotaped discussions. If Juan Reyes' assistant, Deborah Garcia, were to watch

these digital clips back-to-back, it would require a month to review every question and answer, not counting the time it would take to properly catalog and cross-reference the clips. And this is exactly what she did. For one month, she took notes on the clips and then cataloged them, logged their time codes, cross-referenced and duplicated them onto an array of hard drives stored in Juan Reyes' soundproofed Los Angeles studio. Most of this cataloging involved applying short descriptive tags to each of the clips, forming an index that includes the phrases and words *extraterrestrial life*, *gold*, *photography*, *terminal shock*, *SETI*, *landscape*, *gambling*, *Descartes*, *constructed language*, *cosmology*, *Chuck Berry*, *nudity*, *uranium-238*, and *Dunbar equation*.

4.

When I interviewed Juan Reyes in Los Angeles, he stressed he did not like that this report focuses on him in such detail. This isn't because he is embarrassed about not completing his latest film, he added. He said he does not believe in the autobiographical, the first person. I told him the report focuses on him, yes, but it would not be in the first person, at least not his first person. He said that, still, he thought that too many narratives focused on those with above-average fame and income, or at least those people from the U.S. or Europe who could travel where they pleased, do what they pleased. He would rather me describe the lives of the eight passengers—*they* are what's important here, he added. For Juan Reyes, they are more meaningful than the author, more important than the individual. In the context of this report, the eight might be understood to represent not a single individual but the people, the man or woman on the street, the masses, the multitude. Regardless of which term you prefer, as the author of this report I ask that you not see them, the

eight, as symbols of anything. Juan Reyes might use this kind of symbolism, but I am not Juan Reyes, and this report is not one of Juan Reyes' films.

5·

The van is twenty minutes late when it arrives at Hotel Mitla. The driver, a thin man in his forties with a mustache and a disastrously high-pitched voice, climbs out of the van and says to Juan Reyes that he, the driver, is honored to meet an artist of such stature. Juan Reyes, trance broken, smiles. It is beyond the scope of this report to investigate what paranoia and disorientation this smile conceals. It is also beyond the scope of this report to know whether the driver detects any paranoia or disorientation. It is enough to report that Juan Reyes does not want to take the van. Instead, he will spend the week in the city. As the driver is speaking to the woman at the front desk, Juan Reyes resolves to stay at Oaxaca's Camino Real, a hotel befitting his sneaker expenses and one that, unlike Hotel Mitla, has a full pool. Contrary to this resolution, however, Juan Reyes puts his Louis Vuitton suitcase in back of the van. He is trying to remember Camino Real's address when he slides into the row of seating behind the driver's seat. It doesn't matter: the taxi driver will know the hotel's address, he thinks. All he needs to do is get out of the van, grab his bag, and walk to the front desk. A man sits down to his right, a man he does not look at and does not plan to look at for the next few hours. Juan Reyes thinks he, the director, should get lunch at the market before checking in. The food is always good in the market, especially those fruit shakes served in plastic bags with a twisty straw sticking out of the top. In the rear of the van, three passengers find seats, and then another three sit between the back row and Juan Reyes' row. Those watermelon shakes are delicious.

A woman, maybe thirty, takes the passenger seat. And he could get one of those chorizo sandwiches: very simple, just a roll and some spicy sausage, but always satisfying, the closest thing to comfort food Juan Reyes knows. No one buckles his or her seatbelt. Juan Reyes reaches for his seatbelt—he could order two sandwiches and save one for the hotel—but when his hand searches over his left shoulder, he finds that the belt strap has been removed. That's the thing, he thinks, expensive food in Oaxaca is no better than the market food, because market food is so good. He loves Oaxaca City. And it is when the van leaves Hotel Mitla's parking lot, leaving Oaxaca City, that the unseatbelted director remembers that the hotel is near the Zócalo, a beautiful spot in the old colonial city, a place he will not be returning to for at least a week, maybe more.

6.

I can skip the drive's first few hours. Merging, exits, lane changes, burning roadside tires, misplaced signs, military trucks, ignored hitchhikers. For most of this time, Juan Reyes makes plans for the beach. He thinks of the time there he can spend doing nothing, tanning and reading. If he deaccessions his worries, puts himself on the right beach, in the right position, with the right drink and the right book, the right ending for his film will find him. Like his technique for invisibility, this is also a superstition. He knows that, no matter what book he chooses, no matter what sun he faces, his chances of finishing his film are zero. *My chances are zero*, he repeats to himself. In different contexts, he has said that phrase often, though not always ending them with the word *zero*, sometimes instead with *half*, sometimes with *pretty good*, sometimes with *excellent*. He finds himself, as he finds himself now, to have become a compulsive prognosticator,

taking up an inventory of odds based on nothing. Juan Reyes doesn't know why he is speaking in invented figures and the plausible; he doesn't understand probability, not really. Chances of, probability of, one in four, one in fifty, one in a hundred million—small eruptions of alien speech now colonize his conversation. It's gamblers' lingo, and the more he uses it, the more risk he avoids. It started, the gamblers' lingo, in the offices of the UNAM sociologists who consulted on *Coyote*. He's willing to believe it was all that recent, only a decade ago. He can't remember the discussions, but he remembers this sentence: *The probability of a Mexican child without a grade school education becoming involved in organized crime as an adult are higher than a child who has a grade school education.* He remembers the same man saying: *You stand a higher chance of dying violently in Ciudad Juárez than in Baghdad.* Higher or lower. More or less. One in however many. He has a box full of audio recordings of this kind of talk—monologues on a nation at risk. Now, on the way to the beach, it's the chances of being kidnapped in a van versus a bus, the chances of dying on a private jet versus a commercial airline, the chances of finishing his film versus not.

7.

The Golden Records, the subject of Juan Reyes' unfinished film—the Golden Records never stood a chance. Two identical twelve-inch copper discs, LPs, both gold plated, both containing images and audio samples from our solar system. Pictures of a factory floor. Pictures of a woman breastfeeding. Pictures of Jupiter, leaves, dolphins, a gymnast, a crocodile. Recordings of Urdu, Turkish, and Wu greetings. The sounds of wind and thunder. All this and more thrown out into space in 1977. The Voyager spacecraft collected data on Jupiter, then Saturn, then Neptune; and now that *Voyagers 1*

and 2 have passed into the solar system's termination shock, they are implausible time capsules. Why anyone would do it, and what these pictures mean—that's what interested Juan Reyes. He thought he could ask the same scientists, those still alive, to make the record again now, in a new century with new pictures and sounds. Then the director thought that he could ask the village he worked with while shooting *The City and the River* in the highlands of Chiapas—he could ask them to make their own record. Neither project happened. Instead Juan Reyes interviewed the surviving scientists, and then he interviewed the scientists referenced by the first group of scientists, and then he interviewed a third group of scientists mentioned by the second, until the film began to put on weight, accrue hours, amass dilemmas, and what had started as a simple film about a frivolous subject turned into an entanglement of indecision and postponement.

8.

At this moment the van is on a mountainside, navigating hairpin turns. Juan Reyes is watching the hairpin turns unwind: turns within turns, each turn opening into Oaxacan nighttime, each absolutely blind. Juan Reyes has not seen a guardrail for two hours. He is no longer thinking about chance; he is thinking about guardrails. Never before has Juan Reyes thought about guardrails—who pays for them, who makes them, who places them wherever they appear. But now, for the first time, he is thinking of the good men and women of transportation authorities worldwide—unacknowledged, unglamorous—who have made it their duty to flank roads like this one with comforting, decent, and absolutely life-saving guardrails. Four hours earlier, when the car was closer to sea level, and the mountain was only part of the much-praised Oaxacan landscape, the road

had guardrails. Large, thick, reflector-decorated guardrails. Four hours earlier, the road needed no guardrails: the road had two lanes and was straighter. It also had a generous shoulder. Now, on the mountain road, a road that is not straight, a road with many hairpin turns, a road without shoulders, guardrails are absent. And although the road lacks guardrails, it does have, to Juan Reyes' left, past the absent guardrail, a cliff of several dozen yards. The depth estimate is mine. For Juan Reyes, everything beyond the van is notional, and this notional status is due to the fact that the road, the van, the trees, and the mountain are obscured by fog. Other than the interior of the van and a patch of road extending four or five feet in all directions, Juan Reyes can see nothing but fog, which is to say he sees nothing at all. It's for the better, then, that Juan Reyes cannot see past the fog. When Juan Reyes eventually does see past the fog, the fog clearing for a heartbeat, he sees an immense drop, probably deeper than my previous estimate. At the bottom of this drop is a desiccated pine forest. (The director and I are guessing it's a pine forest, since, like me, Juan Reyes has spent his entire life in cities and can barely tell a pine from an oak.) This pine forest looks like every pine forest he and I have ever guessed was a pine forest except for the fact that it has all the moisture extracted from it, drying it to near death. The entire landscape, actually, is near death. The trees are near death, the road is near death, Juan Reyes is near death. But Juan Reyes is not thinking about this near death. He is, in fact, focusing on life—his life. To add to the concern for his life, the road, the condition of which can rarely be seen, is wide enough for only one car. Out of the fog void, at velocities rivaling that of the director's van, appear cars, vans, motorcycles, bicycles. At one turn appears a dead dog, its cracked body still steaming from a previous, unwitnessed collision. At least four times an hour the van jolts to a stop and rolls past another vehicle, the drivers folding in their

side mirrors and waving to each other cheerfully. Every encounter with another vehicle is cause for a medium- to large-size crisis in Juan Reyes. Approaching fifty, Juan Reyes believes that this ride will induce him to have a heart attack. Or a subtle stroke whose effects on his cognition he will notice the next day when he tries to read the papers, safe in the beachside resort, and finds that the articles have been scrambled into perplexing cryptograms.

9.

The driver is paying attention to the road in minimum installments. His left hand is on the padded wheel, his right hand is triangulating between the radio, a bag of pistachios, and his neighbor's shoulder. As the van coils along its route, the passengers pendulate in their seats. Juan Reyes' left temple rhythmically thumps the cold glass window to his left, and his right hand grips the four or five inches of vinyl seat between his right thigh and his neighbor's left thigh. As noted, Juan Reyes is not wearing a seatbelt. Both of Juan Reyes' armpits, his crotch, his forehead, the back of his neck, and his lower back are draining perspiration. Additionally, Juan Reyes has realized the driver is *accelerating* into each turn. Approaching each turn—and they are always approaching a turn—Juan Reyes can see the driver's right leg stretch, pushing his foot *down* on the gas pedal. Leaving a turn, Juan Reyes can see the driver's right foot switching to the brake. This style of driving concerns the director. He knows that the opposite should be true: gas should follow brake, or it should be brake all the way down. Perhaps the driver doesn't notice the hairpin turns, he thinks. No, it's impossible he doesn't notice them; they're everywhere. Or perhaps the driver *does* notice the turns, and he is *defying* the turns. Let me suggest an answer: the driver is full of defiance. It

is clear to me, as it is clear to every passenger in the van except for Juan Reyes, that each acceleration and grip of the wheel by the driver is an act of defiance against all rules of Mexican land transportation. It could be said that each grip and acceleration is in violation of all rules of gravity and nature as well. What you and I and Juan Reyes and everyone in Mexico obeys, either by choice or physical necessity, does not and will never apply to the man currently driving the van. The origin of this monstrous defiance is unknown. What parental slight or slights might have instigated his defiance—a denial of motherly love or an abuse of patriarchal power—are known only to the driver, and even he may have buried the memory of the slight or slights in some inaccessible compartment of his unconscious. However, since the driver is willing not only to disappear himself into vehicular ruin but also to take an entire vanload of passengers with him, we can probably agree that it was a slight of the most obscure and sinister kind. Juan Reyes has come up with a theory that may put all of this questioning to rest. The driver's first attempts at navigating this road were not unlike what anyone would have experienced: he saw the route's basic insanity; he was horrified by every thoughtless twist of the road. The driver's first trip took him days, not hours. Cashing in all his karmic credit to pay for his safe arrival at the beach, the driver sobbed beachside and resolved to quit his job, become an ex-driver, find employment that would pose him absolutely no risk whatsoever. But the next morning, when he awoke naked and hungover on the same beach, he searched for his clothes and remembered that he needed the job. Today, as he transports Mexico's greatest living director and a van of Oaxacans to the beach, he doesn't realize how much these impossible trips have fueled his basic defiance and abolished his common sense.

10.

In the distance, the Christmas lights, red and yellow, dot up and down one mountain and up and down the next. They are a single line of light, a track of festiveness in an otherwise unilluminated landscape. The director wonders how and why anyone would light up the countryside with a single five-kilometer-long track of Christmas lights. How do they get the power out here, he asks himself, a place that doesn't even have electricity for many of the houses? And why would anyone celebrate Christmas in the middle of March?

11.

One hand, the left, is on the wheel. The right hand is in the bag of pistachios that the driver has placed in the open ashtray in the dashboard. At first, the bag of pistachios doesn't interest Juan Reyes. He has more important things to worry about. The turns in the road, for instance. Or the steaming dead dog. Or any number of living creatures that find comfort on a fogged road at 11 pm. In fact, on the list of things threatening his life presently, the pistachios are somewhere near the bottom. But as the driver works his way through the bag, cracking and extracting, chewing and reaching, the driver is finding it harder to extract an edible nut. The problem is that instead of tossing the shells out the window or onto the floor, the driver is throwing the shells back into the bag. Thus, after eating half of the nuts, the majority of the nuts the driver grabs are depistachioed. He is coming up with a shell every time. And since the driver isn't fully splitting the shells, just cracking them open enough to suck out the nut, tactile investigation of each nut isn't sufficient. The driver has to examine each nut—study its qualities as a candidate for consumption,

probe it, scrutinize its shape. With each attempt, the driver digs his hand deeper into the bag, feeling the nut with his hand and then bringing it between his eyes and the road for a more thorough inspection. There is just enough light being thrown off by the van's headlights to silhouette the nut, and although the director thinks it should only take a second for any human being to tell the difference between a full pistachio and a depistachioed shell, it takes the driver well more than a second. In fact, it takes three or four seconds at least. The director is watching this process with growing alarm. The last thing the driver needs, Juan Reyes thinks, is another distraction, especially one that requires close scrutiny of pistachio shells for a third of every minute. The director is about to offer help; he might, for example, offer to go through the bag for the driver and hand him the good nuts. Even better: he might find the good nuts and then feed them to the driver. That way the driver could keep both hands unfalteringly on the wheel. The director volunteers for neither of these tasks, however. Instead, he watches the driver as one might watch a drunken tightrope walker, and after a few minutes of this the director decides it is better to look at anything that isn't involved in the pistachio drama: the back of the seat in front of him or his shoes or his sleeping neighbor or the gray-green-black void out the window. Juan Reyes eventually settles on the gray-green-black void. It is the perfect escape from the driver. As it appears to him now, there is nothing out there—no mountain, no fog, no vans, no dead dogs. There are no pistachios, either. It is just an abstraction, as unthreatening as a modern painting.

12.

Juan Reyes' newfound comfort is interrupted by a squawk from the CB radio. In an upper-register voice, the driver

answers. What he and the woman at Hotel Mitla's office discuss over the CB, omitting the details, involves a burning car that left for the coast three hours before the van. The car missed a turn and launched itself into the Oaxacan mountainside, and when the car impacted into the forest, the gas tank ignited the car, and the car ignited the forest. Somehow, the flames left the wreck in a straight line, climbing the mountain and descending toward the neighboring valley. The forest fire is spreading up and down mountains in a straight path until it either burns itself out or surrounds the entire state with a flaming wall. The van will be approaching *the obstacle*, as the woman on the other end of the CB conversation puts it, within the next hour, and what the driver is supposed to do about *the obstacle* is not made clear. Juan Reyes is assuming the van will go back to the hotel, but the driver, unlike the director, does not see the forest fire as a reason to turn around. The driver places the CB microphone in its slot on the dashboard and returns his hand to his bag of nuts. The woman in the passenger's seat, who, when the CB squawked, was midway through a story about how her former brother-in-law had abandoned her sister, continues describing how the former brother-in-law sent money every month from Puebla, but never came back, and how the separation led her sister to a nervous breakdown. She does not comment on the CB discussion and does not comment on the wall of flame visible in the distance to their left, gaining in size with each turn, the wall of flame Juan Reyes mistook for Christmas lights hours before, and she does not suggest, as the director would, that they should abandon the trip and retreat to the city. She continues to explain how her sister did not leave the house for days after the separation, and how the sister prayed to the Virgin, neglecting herself and her family, until eventually she, the woman in the passenger's seat, had to take her sister to a local therapist who prescribed Prozac. It's then, with the mention of Prozac,

that Juan Reyes remembers that he has an antianxiety medication in his bag, Klonopin or Xanax, something his assistant gave him before he got on the train from Los Angeles to the border, but his bag is in the back of the van and Juan Reyes is in the front, so Juan Reyes resigns himself to approaching the wall of flame without the guiding hand of medication. He knows that he—probably the greatest movie director Mexico has seen since Luis Buñuel—a man who has garnered two Academy Awards in two separate years (Best Picture and Best Foreign Film), whose films have been nominated for roughly two dozen Oscars and Ariels, is going to die on a mountaintop along the Pacific coast of Oaxaca. He accepts this fact and feels that it may even look good in his forthcoming biography, whenever it is published. The van is again going fast, too fast for Juan Reyes and too fast for the other passengers, some of who are now, like Juan Reyes, sweating and gripping their seats. The driver navigates another corner, tilting everyone sideways, and without any visible bodily movement, he snaps the brake to the floor, the van stopping, throwing all the unseatbelted passengers forward. When the passengers slide back to their seats, they notice that the windshield and every object in the van, reflective or not, are tinted orange. The van is hotter, probably about thirty degrees Celsius, and the passengers, all ten, see what they have been expecting, perhaps fearing: a wall of flame stretching from one side of the road to the other, engulfing trees in a straight path. Silhouettes of crumbling trees flash across the ten men and women in the van, and one woman, the accountant, crosses herself. The road in front of the van is, inexplicably, clear of fire—the flames having spread up the trees on the left side of the road, then reaching overhead from desiccated treetop to desiccated treetop, and burning back down through the trees on the right. A flaming branch or two dots the road, and every few seconds a burst of embers impacts the asphalt. Everyone, for

the first time in several hours, is quiet. They are all looking out the windshield, the flames reflecting in the glass. The woman in the passenger's seat, for reasons Juan Reyes can still not understand, rolls down her window. She puts her head out of the window to look up at the arc of flame above them. For the only time during the trip, one of the nine passengers says something not directed at the driver: *Please, dear, put up your window*. Turning off the radio, the driver pops another pistachio, his irises ringed with fire.

13.

In Shasta County, northeast of San Francisco, there is an array of telescopes, not the cylindrical and lensed telescopes, but radio telescopes, sightless listeners. Near the Lassen Peak volcano, these telescope blossoms with metal stems poke up from the mountainside, one every twenty feet, forty blossoms in all, their concave faces heavenward. In the past, radio astronomers would have built one big telescope, *a big dish* like the one in Arecibo, Puerto Rico. At Lassen Peak, these forty small dishes do the work in tandem, congregating to harvest radio transmissions from outer space. Juan Reyes visited the forty robotic listeners, the Allen Telescope Array, last summer. With a skeleton crew of UCLA graduate students and Deborah Garcia, his assistant, he interviewed the project's director, Dr. Alan Thomas Blake. He and his staff listen for messages from outer space, messages from extraterrestrial intelligent life. With the exception of last year's *anomaly*, they haven't heard anything yet from this hypothetical intelligent life, though they never will hear anything, because their project is numerical, maybe numerological, a sorting procedure, separating random bits of information from meaningful bits. The *anomaly* was all over the news when Juan Reyes arrived, and it was all over the

ATA office, too. *See that?* Dr. Blake said to the director while pointing to a printout. *That's it.* The transmission, the anomaly, is a cragged ink peak in a flat field of randomness. A line drawing made by a plotter, Juan Reyes asked as gently as he could whether this could be an instrument gone haywire, rather than an alien intelligence. Dr. Blake said that his team was investigating exactly that question using a convoluted mathematical formula that could parse signal from noise. Dr. Blake believed, eyes watering, that this was probably the thing itself, a letter from beyond. Juan Reyes wondered how a man so caught up in the probable could devote his life to something so improbable, and he wondered whether Dr. Blake, who worked on the original Voyager records, thought the two spacecraft, now somewhere outside the solar system, would ever be found. For Juan Reyes, these dead letters, *Voyagers 1* and *2*, were acts of faith, not reason, and as he interviewed Dr. Blake, at first calmly, openly, and later more adamantly, he thought that the man he was speaking to with his clean khakis and trimmed mustache, with his millions of Silicon Valley dollars, had no grip on reality. By the end of the interview, Juan Reyes was speechifying, Dr. Blake nodding and grunting occasionally, starting a sentence only to be cut short by the director. *What are the odds of anyone finding them?* the director asked. *First you have to have a planet hospitable to life, right? What are the odds? Okay, and let's say we have that, then you have to have a planet that evolves intelligent life. And those odds? Then that life has to be able to leave the planet or at least be able to canvass the universe for relatively invisible objects. On top of that, they would have to be curious about other life-forms—they would have to care. Who says they have any curiosity about us at all, let alone compassion? Then, out of all that space, out of all that infinity, they—our little green people—they have to find one of these objects. A Voyager is a hunk of metal the size of a Mexico City taxicab*, he said. If you watch the video of the interview, there is a long silence at

this point, Dr. Blake shrugging his shoulders and smiling at Juan Reyes, signaling, perhaps, that the interview is over.

14.

The door slides open. Everyone exits the van except for Juan Reyes, whose seat is covered in a film of perspiration. After running his hand over the seat, Juan Reyes climbs out, and for the first time in eight hours, he stands. He did not want to die, but he is also not happy to be alive. Juan Reyes is stunned. It is a primary stunning, basic and bodily. The eight passengers and the driver walk to the taquería, everyone's hunger stimulated by the drive through the flames. In the distance, Juan Reyes can see the lights of the tiny town on the coast, he can hear the waves, smell the ocean. The director does not want to eat. Instead, he will call his wife. He will confess all his infidelities to her and say that she was always his one and true love. He will cry, perhaps even beat his chest, actually beat his chest, and will submit to any marital privations she desires. He will then call his agent and tell the agent that he, the agent, is nothing more than a talentless gringo with a horrifying substance-abuse problem and that every piece of career advice the agent has ever given to the director has done nothing but move him, the director, closer to critical irrelevance. After he finishes with the agent, he will then call his research assistant and say that their relationship must be strictly platonic from now on, and that he will begin paying her overtime for the countless weekends and late nights she has worked—and, not only that, he will backdate this pay one year. Juan Reyes dials his wife, ready to repair decades of marital strife. The phone does not ring. Juan Reyes looks at his phone's glass face and sees that he has no reception. He thinks that somewhere on this mountain there must be reception. Across from him, waiting for

her quesadilla, the woman who called for the rest stop is talking on her prepaid Nokia. There must be reception near the grill, he thinks. Walking near her, he taps the "CALL" button on his phone, and again there is no connection. The quesadilla is delivered to the woman, and Juan Reyes walks back to the van, tapping his phone's face and putting it to his ear. He continues to do this for some time, walking and searching for reception, tapping "CALL," each successive failure making him less likely to try again.

15.

When I interview the director on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, both of us seated in a restaurant empty except for a bartender and two waiters, he wonders why I would omit particular details from my report, details that he thinks are dramatically interesting and crucial. For example, why didn't I include what was said to the director by the woman seated in the back row of van? She didn't say anything, actually—what she did was to hiss air through her teeth whenever Juan Reyes asked the driver to slow down. Juan Reyes must have asked five or six times after he found the courage to ask once, and she hissed every time, loudly. And why didn't I include, he asks, that it was she who requested stopping at the taquería only half an hour away from their destination? He clenches his fist in mock anger, banging it lightly on the table and then unclenching his fist to point at me. *And the song*, he yells. The bartender turns around and looks at him, perhaps thinking Juan Reyes was speaking about the song playing in the restaurant at that moment. Juan Reyes isn't speaking about the song in the restaurant, but the song that was playing in the van as the van approached the fire. *What is the name of that song*, he asks, snapping his fingers in the air above his head as if to conjure

the name from the space above his skull. *The Last Kiss,* he says. Not the original by Wayne Cochran or the Pearl Jam version, but the version sung by Gloria Trevi—the tragically debauched Gloria Trevi. I say to Juan Reyes that considering the lyrics the reader would have never believed the song was playing on the radio at that exact time—unlike you, I say, I have to write what is plausible, what the reader will believe—and not only would the reader not believe that the song was being played, the reader would never believe that the driver, fire in his eyes, was singing along: *There in the road, up straight ahead / A car was stalled, the engine was dead / I couldn't stop, so I swerved to the right / I'll never forget the sound that night / The screamin' tires, the bustin' glass / The painful scream that I heard last.* Juan Reyes hums the song to himself, smiling slightly, and turns his head to watch the Fifth Avenue pedestrians walk by in the April rain. The film is not going to be finished, he says. It's dead on arrival, you know, but the report—put it in the report. The film, the song, the trip, all of it. Stop worrying about what is plausible or possible, he says. Tell what happened.