

Nemuel Island

TOMMY ORANGE

“I want to feel the approach of sleep as if it were a promise of life, not rest.”
—Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

His name is Nemuel Island, and he is convinced that this, the fact of his full name being what it is, permanently damaged his life—as a burn victim might feel about their post-burn seen face. To hear his own name has always meant he is alone. On an island. Ruined. Half of him is Native American—Cheyenne if you’re asking—but he looks white. The simple chance of having less melanin distributed to him—both his sisters are brown—and there you have it, a boy and then a man struggling to understand what him being Native American and not looking like it could possibly mean, and why fight for it?

Meanwhile his name is Nemuel Island. Most people don’t have to navigate or the negotiate the fact of having an uncommon name. In fact most people, statistically speaking, are Johns, Juans, Muhammads, etc. Nemuel is a name from the bible which means: *the sleeping of God*.

Nemuel sits up in bed thinking all the time because he can’t sleep. Thinking does not bring sleep but sleeping isn’t not thinking either. Sometimes he dreams of not being able to sleep—sitting up in bed worried and thinking. Everything feels impossible.

He believes everyone is happier and sadder, both hate and love themselves more than we’re comfortable admitting. Admission itself feels impossible. Because we don’t know what we aren’t willing to admit to ourselves just like we don’t know what we don’t know. All of which makes him both happier and sadder than he’d like to admit.

He got a phone call from his sister recently. When was that? They used to talk more and now they don’t. Time slips more often than it ticks or tocks or stops. She tried to point back. At what happened to them. Meaning their childhood. Let’s say experience.

“Uh huh. Yeah. No I get it,” Nemuel had said, with the TV on some judge show. He stepped outside for a smoke.

“Look up historical trauma,” she’d said. “All we been through doesn’t come from nothing,” she said.

“That was a long time ago. People think we’re complaining,” Nemuel said, as he walked away from the open windows of the house.

He normally doesn’t smoke unless the sun’s down. Now it was in his eyes so he looked down at the broken ground there. Rootbusted, cracked bark, hungry crimson streams of redbrown anttrails. Memory is quicksand when it catches you, or you catch it. Him and his older sisters used to be afraid of the silver reflection in their dad’s glasses while he drove and didn’t speak. Their mom bent the silver light away from them when she turned around smiling, telling them there wasn’t far to go, but not saying how little left there was to go after Nemuel had asked too many times. She looked away from that old Indian sorrowrage—like he wasn’t there anymore. Their dad could just say a few words, even just one to make them all go quiet the whole way—wherever they were going.

“No you’re right,” Nemuel said to what his sister had said about how much it matters, what happened to the people you come from. “But what can we do?” he asked. He really didn’t know what. He still doesn’t.

He didn’t say bye on accident before hanging up. He drove to the store more to get out of the heat than to shop. He wandered the aisles. Stopped here and there not looking for anything. To stand still in a grocery store—or perhaps anywhere—isn’t allowed. Or would maybe be frowned upon. Regarded with suspicion. Risks possible scorn. Loitering comes from a German word he can’t say that means: to make smaller. His eyes slid over the blur of random colors—at his many boxed choices. At the deli window he kept thinking: *It’s okay*—about what he didn’t know. He thought: *There there*.

There were an unreasonable number of flies around the deli area as if some fresh dead meat lay nearby. He swatted at the flies repeatedly but never made contact. He wondered if there is some thing too big to see, comprehend, like what humans are to flies, swatting at us all—annoyed at our buzzings and wanderings in a room bigger than the world. In a deliverse we don’t know about. Changing our fates with their swatting influence—ending our lives over nothing. He thought about how we ourselves are invisible. Too big to see. To comprehend. And how we wander aisles and rooms we think are worlds, hoping hands too big to see won’t crush us.



Nemuel sits at his computer watching a video of himself several years back when he was thinner, when there was more brightness in his eyes. He hates something about his mouth, the way it moves when he talks, when he sees it in videos. His mom just now emailed the video without any note about why she'd sent this particular video. This makes him watch it again and again like the secret to why she sent it is in there somewhere. But he hates to see himself talk over and over. Still, he keeps watching. He's talking to someone outside of the shot. He smiles like he knows more than who he's talking to. Nemuel doesn't remember this moment, or who he was talking to. Like was he talking to his mom or was she recording it? He was thinner then, but his cheeks were so big. His eyes too small. And his crooked bottom teeth jut out. He never should have stopped wearing his retainer. It was that he couldn't keep it on at night, the version of himself he could barely claim was him, that version of him who closes his eyes to the world nearly every night, lies down—leaves. The etymology of the word when he looked it up says Old English has it meaning: "Repose of Death." That dead or zombie version of himself, sleeping Nemuel, he would pull his retainer out of his mouth and throw it. Nemuel would find it the next morning in the corner of his room—dry and with that sick spit smell all things get when spit dries on them.

Nemuel switches from watching the video of himself his mom sent him to watching the news. Why he keeps watching the news is similar to why he kept watching the video of himself his mom sent mysteriously. To find something there. Instead of nothing, plus fear. Fear from an unknown place is maybe dread, and dread at nothing is maybe the way it feels to live now in this year in particular—or maybe every year for all of time? What Nemuel knows is that he can't stop watching. He wants be wrong about them being wrong. He wants to be told it's not fake, with fake news headlines, with a news report about a news report from a disreputable station. He wants to read fake news about fake news to get at what fake news is, how to avoid our need for the truth behind its fakeness so bad we can't stop participating in it. He wants to be told he hasn't known anything. All this time. He wants who tells him to say it with blood in their eyes because they can't sleep either. He wants it to be—if not right or true—than just okay, the actual way it is

now. From the left, right—from a mountain on the moon. Because what it looks like. What it looks like it has to be, is the end.

Nemuel grew up afraid of the end. Because of religion. Church people were all hoping the end would come. To leave this old world behind. Get to a better one. Can anyone blame them for that? When he grew up and stopped caring what church people thought, what his parents thought, he noticed there were still religious devotees everywhere. He was one himself. Rare moments he could feel it in his pulse. Things getting bigger and smaller and keeping still for moments at just the perfect size. The thing he was and is and has to be.

Nemuel noticed there is another kind of sleep. That we all practice a private religion, privately. Bow our heads to it. Bend like the air from sound—sight unseen. Pray with our teeth. In how we chew. In how we stay hungry. In the why of why we keep breathing without even meaning to.

He believes in words. Language. He says this to himself out loud because he believes in the power of saying things out loud: “Past-participle accelerator, help us go from going to gone without the crushing kinds of pain.”

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Sometimes he walks at sunset to watch the gradient color and light drop behind the mountains. After the sun sets he gets that kind of sad related to feeling like you’re not ever actually *here* enough to feel what it means to actually be here. That feeling like you’re gone already, or like you don’t belong, or like you’ve done something wrong.

He’s grateful for gratitude when he feels it, and the presence of mind that comes when he’s trying to stay present. But he can’t get around this removed feeling. Like he once belonged somewhere, but was moved, removed, and not told that he couldn’t come back, but like things happened in such a way that there was no place to go back to.

He’s still just thinking and it’s not doing anything. Or is he? When we only think we’re thinking, what else could we be doing, in such a world as this, than dreaming.