

THE FACE OF SEUNG-HUI CHO

The first school shooter of the 1990s was an Asian boy who played the violin. I laughed when I heard an account of the rampage from my friend Ethan Gooding, who had survived it. Ethan forgave me my reaction. I think he knew by then that most people, facing up to a real atrocity, as opposed to the hundreds they'd seen on TV, didn't know how to act.

Ethan had left New Providence High School in central New Jersey for the progressive utopia of Simon's Rock College of Bard in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Simon's Rock was a school for high school juniors and seniors ready for college-level work, a refuge for brilliant misfits, wounded prodigies, and budding homosexuals. Ethan was a pretty bright kid, brighter than me, but mostly he was a budding homosexual. One day in gym class at New Providence, Ethan made a two-handed set shot from half-court using a kickball while dressed in buttercup-yellow short-shorts and earned the nickname "Maurice." This was not a reference to E. M. Forster's frank novel of gay love, but to Maurice Cheeks, the great Philadelphia 76ers point guard. The unintended resonance was savored by those few of us who could discern it. Ethan had a striking pre-Raphaelite pallor set off against flaming red cheeks and lips with the puckered epicene aspect that speaking the French language too young will impart to a decent American mouth. None of this in itself meant, necessarily, that he was going to become gay, but then—well, he was.

Gay-bashing was less of a hate crime back then and more of a patriotic duty, particularly in a race-segregated, heavily Catholic suburb like New Providence. At Youth & Government, the YMCA-sponsored mock legislature attended by suck-ups with Napoleon complexes, the "governor" from our school introduced a bill to "build an island of garbage off of the Jersey Shore" where we could "put all the homosexuals." We all chortled along, none more loudly than the closet cases in our midst. New Providence was the kind of place you wanted to flee so badly that you trained yourself to forget the impulse.

But then there was a place called New York, only a half hour's drive away. We made our first anxious forays into New York City nightlife, Ethan and I and Jasper Chung, the other Korean kid from my high school (himself a governor of the mock legislature, and also a closet homosexual). We tried to get into the back room of the Limelight, where the real party was happening. "Try to look cute," Ethan told me, brushing my hair with a concerned, appraising look. Then he sucked in his cheeks, which I guess was his way of looking cute, or at least making his face less round. It would be more than a decade and a half before I learned what a smile could do for you (it is one way to hold at bay the world's cruelty), so I made a fish-eyed grimace in emulation of David Gahan of Depeche Mode. They never let us into the back room.

Those were the wild Peter Gattien days, when the place was still bristling with drugs and prostitution, most of which managed to pass us by. But we were assailed by a phalanx of sweaty, shirtless Long Island beefcake. Ethan would, to my frightened astonishment, meet other guys, and go off into a dark corner with them, and leave me to fend for myself, which I was not equipped to do. I'd get dehydrated and wear an anxious scowl. I would attempt some rudimentary sociological and semiotic reading of the scene that swirled all around me. I couldn't relax.

Not that I was myself homosexual. True, my heterosexuality was notional. I wasn't much to look at (skinny, acne-prone, brace-faced, bespectacled, and Asian), and inasmuch as I was ugly, I also had a bad personality. While Ethan was easing himself into same-sex experimentation, I was learning about the torments and transports of misanthropy. "That kid," I remember overhearing one of the baseball players say, "is a misfit." No one ever shoved my head in a locker, the way they did the one amber-tinted Afghani kid, or P. J., the big dumb sweet slow kid, and nobody ever pelted me with rocks, as they did Doug Urbano, who was fat and working class

(his father was a truck driver, and sometimes, when he lectured us about the vital role that truck drivers play in the American economy—they really do, you know—he was jeered). But these judgments stayed with me.

Jasper once told me that I was “essentially unlovable.” I’ve always held that observation close to my heart, turning to it often. It’s true of some people—that there’s no reason anyone should love or care about them, because they aren’t appealing on the outside, and that once you dig into the real person beneath the shell (if, for some obscure if not actively perverse reason, you bother), you find the real inner unlovability. I knew lots of people like that—unloved because unlovable. Toward them I was always cold. Maybe I held them at arm’s length to disguise from myself our shared predicament. And so, by trying to disguise something from yourself, you declare it to everyone else—because part of what makes a person unlovable is his inability to love.

One day we were hanging out with Ethan in Jasper’s room over winter break. Ethan was telling us all about Simon’s Rock, and—this might be an invented memory; it feels real, yet I can’t rely on it; the very feeling of reality makes me distrust it—Ethan told me that I reminded him of this weird Asian guy at his school, whom he then proceeded to describe. Ethan, cherubic complexion notwithstanding, could actually be pretty mean. He was proud of his ability to wound with a well-chosen phrase coined in an instant, which is not to say that I didn’t aspire toward the same facility. It’s just that he really had it. In any case, Wayne, my double, was an Asian boy ill at ease in the world and he had a chip on his shoulder. His father had been an officer in the Taiwanese air force, and his mother had been a Suzuki-method violin teacher. For a time, Wayne had been among the best violinists in the world in his age group. He was headed along the familiar track of Asian American assimilation. By the time he arrived at Simon’s Rock, he had other things to prove.

The gay guys liked to tease Wayne and intimate that he might secretly be one of them. It was good-natured ribbing, gentle to the extent that it was not tinged with gay malice; and who could begrudge them their share of malice—a little or a lot—given the world they were entering? On top of everything else, an incurable illness spread by the kind of sex you were already having or else aching to have was killing off a whole generation of your predecessors. You could get a rise out of Wayne, and he deserved it: here he was at this place where people were finally free to be who they really were, and who he really was turned out to be someone who didn’t want other people to be free to be who they were. He had fled Montana only to discover his continuing allegiance to its mores. And who knows, conceivably he was even a bit bi-curious. “How tough are you?” Wayne’s friends used to ask him, egging him on. “I’m tough!” he would shout.

By now the story of Wayne Lo has been well told, though he has not become a figure of American legend. (His certified authentic “murderabilia” drawings were fetching just \$7.50 on his website at the time his jailers shut it down.) On Monday, December 14, 1992, a package arrived for him in the mail from a North Carolina company called Classic Arms. It contained 200 rounds of ammunition that Wayne had ordered using his mother’s credit card. The school’s dean held the package, and, after questioning Wayne about what was inside it (Wayne assured him that it was a Christmas gift), gave it back to him. Liberals! They’ll hand over the ammunition that their enemies will use to kill them.

Ethan told his version of the story to Jasper and me over hamburgers at the A&W Restaurant at the Short Hills Mall. Wayne had started hanging out with some other students who wanted to rebel against the orthodoxy of difference at Simon’s Rock. They listened to Rush Limbaugh and joked about killing people. They were suspicious of Jews and blacks and homosexuals and . . . did they make an official exception for Asians? Wayne wrote a paper proposing a solution to the AIDS crisis: Kill them all. He lacked the imagination to come up with the island of garbage disposal. Then, according to psychiatrists hired by his defense, Wayne was

overtaken by a “somatic hallucination”—not heard, but directly experienced in his body—of God urging him to punish the sinners of Simon’s Rock.

It was a more innocent time, in a way. The Berlin Wall had come down. Crime rates were beginning the historic fall they were to make during the 1990s. American soldiers were ensconced in the Persian Gulf, having recently kept the armies of Saddam Hussein from entering the land of the two holy places. People didn’t know about school shooters back then. They still thought that Asian men were happy to be (as Ethan liked to call us) the Other White People. Or even, as many people were suggesting, the New Jews. And for the most part, Asian people were happy—and are. I mean, maybe they were nerds, maybe they were faceless drones, but did anybody know they were angry? What could they be angry about? They were getting rich with the rest of America—and reassuring everyone of our openness and our tolerance for everyone prepared to embrace the American dream.

Lo went around the campus with the Chinese-made SKS Carbine rifle that he bought in a neighboring town. He shot and killed two people and wounded four others. Had his rampage not ended prematurely when his rifle repeatedly jammed (cheap Chinese junk), he might have set a record that no one was going to best. Instead, he called the police and negotiated his surrender.

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The perpetrator of the largest mass murder in American history was an Asian boy who wrote poems, short stories, a novel, and plays. I gazed at the sad blank mug of Seung-Hui Cho staring out at the world on CNN.com—the face-forward shot that was all the press had before they received Cho’s multimedia manifesto, mailed on the day of the shootings, with its ghastly autoerotic glamour shots (Cho pointing gun at camera; Cho with a hammer; Cho pointing gun at his head). I felt, looking at the photo, a very personal revulsion. Millions of others reviled this person, but my own loathing was more intimate. Those lugubrious eyes, that elongated face behind wire-frame glasses: *He looks like me*, I thought.

This was another inappropriate reaction. But the photo leapt out at me at a funny time in my life. I had come to New York five years earlier, to create a life for myself there. I had not created a life for myself there. I had wanted to find the emerging writers and thinkers of my generation. I had found the sycophants, careerists, and media parasites who were redefining mediocrity for the 21st century. I had wanted to remain true to myself as a writer, and also to succeed; I wanted to be courageous and merciless in defense of the downtrodden, and I wanted to be celebrated for it. This was a naïve and puerile desire and one that could not be realized—at least not by me, not in this world. It could not be done without a facility (and a taste) for ingratiation that I lacked. It could not be done without first occupying a position of strength and privilege that I did not command—because, as Jesus said, to him who hath, more will be given; nor without being enterprising and calculating in a way that I wasn’t—because, as Jesus went on to say, to him who hath not, even that which he hath will be taken from him. It seemed to me that every kind of life, and even the extinction of life, was preferable to the one that I was living, which is not to say I had the strength either to change my life, or to end it.

And then to be confronted by that face. Because physiognomy is a powerful thing. It establishes identification and aversion, and all the more so in an age that is officially color-blind. Such impulses operate beneath the gaze of the supervisory intelligence, at a visceral level that may be the most honest part of us. You see a face that looks like yours. You know that there’s an existential knowledge you have in common with that face. Both of you know what it’s like to have a cultural code superimposed atop your face, and if it’s a code that abashes, nullifies, and

unmans you, then you confront every visible reflection of that code with a feeling of mingled curiosity and wariness. When I'm out by myself in the city—at the movies or at a restaurant—I'll often see other Asian men out by themselves in the city. We can't even look at each other for the strange vertigo we induce in one another.

Let's talk about legible faces. You know those short, brown-toned South American immigrants that pick your fruit, slaughter your meat, and bus your tables? Would you—a respectable person with a middle-class upbringing—ever consider going on a date with one of them? It's a rude question, because it affects to inquire into what everyone gets to know at the cost of forever leaving it unspoken. But if you were to put your unspoken thoughts into words, they might sound something like this: Not only are these people busing the tables, slaughtering the meat, and picking the fruit, they are the descendants of the people who bused the tables, slaughtered the meat, and picked the fruit of the Aztecs and Incas. The Spanish colonizers slaughtered or mixed their blood with the princes, priests, scholars, artisans, warriors, and beautiful women of the indigenous Americas, leaving untouched a class of Morlocks bred for good-natured servility and thus now tailor-made to the demands of an increasingly feudal postindustrial America. That's, by the way, part of the emotional undertow of the immigration debate, the thing that makes an honest appraisal of the issue impossible, because you can never put anything right without first admitting you're in the wrong.

So: Seung-Hui Cho's face. A perfectly unremarkable Korean face—beady-eyed, brown-toned, a small plump-lipped mouth, eyebrows high off his eyelids, with crooked glasses perched on his nose. It's not an ugly face, exactly; it's not a badly made face. It's just a face that has nothing to do with the desires of women in this country. It's a face belonging to a person who, if he were emailing you, or sending you instant messages, and you were a normal, happy, healthy American girl at an upper second-tier American university—and that's what Cho was doing in the fall of 2005, emailing and writing instant messages to girls—you would consider reporting to campus security. Which is what they did, the girls that were contacted by Cho.

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First, you imagine, they tried to dissuade him in the usual way. You try to be polite, but also to suggest that you'd actually prefer that your correspondent, if he could, you know, maybe—oh, I don't know—*Disappear from your life forever? How about that?*—and you had to do this subtly enough not to implicate yourself in anything damaging to your own self-image as a nice person, but then not so subtly that your correspondent would miss the point. When Cho missed the point, the girls had to call the campus police. They did not want him arrested, and they did not press charges. They just had to make clear that while Cho thought he was having one kind of encounter (a potentially romantic one), he was in fact having another kind of encounter (a potentially criminal one), and to show him that the state would intervene on their behalf if he couldn't come to terms with this reality. And so, the police didn't press any charges, but they did have a man-to-man talk with Cho, and conveyed to him the message that it would be better if he cut it out.

Seung-Hui Cho's is the kind of face for which the appropriate response to an expression of longing or need involves armed guards. I am not questioning the choices that these girls made; I am affirming those choices. But I'm talking about the Cho that existed before anyone was killed by him—the one who showed proficiency in beer pong at the one fraternity party his roommates took him to, and who told his roommates he had a girlfriend named Jelly who was a supermodel from outer space; who called one of his roommates to tell him that he had been on vacation with

Vladimir Putin; and who emailed Lucinda Roy, director of the Creative Writing program, seeking guidance about how to submit his novel to publishers. “My novel is relatively short,” he wrote. “It’s sort of like Tom Sawyer, except that it’s really silly or pathetic, depending on how you look at it.”

Of course, there are a lot of things that Cho might have done to change his social fortunes that he declined to do. Either out of incompetence, stubbornness, or plain old bat-shit craziness, Cho missed many boats that might have ferried him away from his dark fate. For one, he could have dressed a little bit better. He might have tried to do something with his hair. Being a little less bat-shit crazy couldn’t have hurt. Above all, he could have cultivated his taste in music. He was “obsessed with downloading music from the Internet,” the press reported, putting a sinister cast on something that everyone of a certain age does. But the song he continually played on his laptop, driving his roommates to distraction, wasn’t some nihilistic rhapsody of wasted youth. It wasn’t Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails saying he wanted to fuck you like an animal, and it wasn’t the thick lugubrious whine of James Hetfield of Metallica declaring that what he’d felt, and what he’d known, never shone through in what he’d shown.

No, it was the cruddiest, most generic grunge-rock anthem of the ’90s, Collective Soul’s “Shine.” “Shine” came out in 1994, and you only had to hear the first minute to know that whatever was truly unyielding about the music Nirvana spawned by breaking punk into the mainstream was already finished. The song cynically mouths “life-affirming” clichés noxious to the spirit of punk rock, but then these are not, given the situation, without their own pathos. You could picture the Cho who stalked around campus not saying a word to anyone, even when a classmate offered him money to speak, coming home in silence to listen to these lyrics repeat in an infinite loop on his laptop, and even, one day, to write them on his wall:

Teach me how to speak

Teach me how to share

Teach me where to go
Tell me will love be there (love be there)

Whoa-oh-oh-oh, heaven let your light shine down.

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“You were the single biggest dork school shooter of all time,” opined one internet chat board participant, and it was hard to disagree. Cho was so disaffected that he couldn’t even get the symbols of disaffection right. In the fall of 2005, when he made the mistake of instant-messaging girls, Cho was also attending Nikki Giovanni’s large creative writing class. He wore reflector glasses with a baseball cap obscuring his face. Giovanni, who believed that openness was vital to the goals of the class, stood by his desk at the beginning of each session to make him take off the disguise. He later began showing up with a scarf wrapped around his head, “Bedouin style,” as Giovanni put it. When the attendance sheet was passed around, he signed his name as a question mark.

The class set Cho off, somehow—maybe because he had enrolled in the hope that his genius would be recognized, and it was not recognized. He began snapping pictures of female classmates with his cellphone camera from underneath his desk. Eventually, many of the seventy students enrolled in the class stopped coming. That’s when Giovanni went to Lucinda Roy and insisted that Cho be barred from her workshop.

“He was writing, just weird things,” Giovanni told the *New York Times*. “I don’t know if I’m allowed to say what he was writing about. . . . He was writing poetry, it was terrible, it was not like poetry, it was intimidating.”

Giovanni’s personal website has a list of all her honors and awards and another page for all the honorary degrees she has earned—nineteen since 1972—and a brief biography that identifies her as “a world-renowned poet, writer, commentator, activist, and educator,” whose “outspokenness, in her writing and in lectures, has brought the eyes of the world upon her.” Oprah Winfrey has named her one of her twenty-five living legends. “We are sad today, and we will be sad for quite a while,” the 63-year-old eminence told the convocation to mourn Seung-Hui Cho’s victims. “We are not moving on, we are embracing our mourning.”

It’s a perfectly consistent picture: Giovanni the winner of awards, and Giovanni the wise and grandmotherly presence on *Oprah*. But if you knew more about the writing of Nikki Giovanni, you couldn’t help but wonder two things. What would the Nikki Giovanni of 2007 have made of a poem published by the Nikki Giovanni of 1968, and what would the Nikki Giovanni of 1968 have made of the Nikki Giovanni of the present? The Nikki Giovanni of 1968 wrote this:

Nigger

Can you kill

Can you kill

Can a nigger kill
Can a nigger kill a honkie
Can a nigger kill the Man

Can you kill nigger
Huh? nigger can you

kill

Do you know how to draw blood

Can you poison
Can you stab-a-Jew
Can you kill huh? nigger

Can you kill

Back then Giovanni was writing about a race war that seemed like it really might break out at home, even as the country was fighting what she saw as an imperialist war in Vietnam. Black militancy was something that many people admired, and many more felt sympathy toward, given the brutal history of enslavement, rape, terrorism, disenfranchisement, lynching, and segregation that blacks had endured in this country. And so you wonder what would have happened if, for instance, Cho's poems (and thoughts) had found a way to connect his pain to his ethnic identity. Would Giovanni have been less intimidated if she could have understood Cho as an aggrieved Asian man, instead of an aggrieved man who happened to be Asian? Or if he were black and wrote the way he did? Or if he were Palestinian and managed to tie his violent grievances to a real political conflict existing in the world? (Can you bomb-a-Jew?) Giovanni knows black rage, and she knows the source of women's bitterness. We all do. We know gay pride. We know, in short, identity politics, which, when it isn't acting as a violent outlet for the narcissism of the age, can serve as its antidote, binding people into imagined collectivities capable of taking action to secure their interests and assert their personhood.

Cho was a pimply friendless suburban teenager whom no woman would want to have sex with. In his own imagination, he was a warrior on behalf of every lonely invisible human being in America. This was his ghastly, insane mistake. This is what we learned from the speech that Cho gave in the video he mailed to NBC news. For Cho, the cause to fight for is "the dorky kid that [you] publicly humiliated and spat on," whom you treated like "a filthy street dog" and an "ugly, little, retarded, low-life kid"—not just Cho, not just his solitary narcissistic frenzy, but also that of his "children," his "brothers and sisters"—an imagined community of losers who would leave behind their status as outcasts from the American consensus and attain the dignity of warriors—by killing innocent civilians. "I say we take up the cross, Children of Ishmael, take up our guns and knives . . . and take no prisoners and spare no lives."

He enclosed his speech, too, in the NBC packet, as "writings."

You had everything you wanted.
Your Mercedes wasn't enough,
you brats,
your golden necklaces weren't enough,
you snobs,
your trust fund wasn't enough . . .

You have vandalized my heart,

raped my soul
and torched my conscience.
You thought it was one pathetic, bored life you were extinguishing.

I die like Jesus Christ,
to inspire generations of the weak and defenseless people.

Cho imagines the one thing that can never exist—the coming to consciousness and the joining in solidarity of the modern class of losers. Though his soft Asian face could only have been a hindrance to him, Cho did not perceive his pain as stemming from being Asian: he did not perceive himself in a world of identity politics, of groups and fragments of groups, of groups oppressing and fighting other groups. Cho's world is a world of individually determined fortunes, of winners and losers in the marketplace of status, cash, and expression. Cho sees a system of social competition that renders some people absolutely immiserated. Just because he thought so, and he was a maniac who should have been locked up, and just because none of us inhabits the trap as fully as Cho did, doesn't mean we're not all living in that world.

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When I was at Rutgers I knew a guy named Samuel Goldfarb. Samuel was prematurely middle-aged, not just in his dimensions, which were bloated, and not just in his complexion, which was pale but flushed with the exertion of holding himself upright—sweat would dapple the groove between his upper lip and nose—but above all in something he exuded, which was a pheromone of loneliness and hostility. Samuel had gone off to Reed College, and, after a couple of years of feeling alienated in that liberal utopia, he had returned east. Samuel was one of the students at Rutgers who was clearly more intellectually sophisticated than I. He knew more, he had read more, and it showed. He was the kind of nominal left-winger who admired the works of Carl Schmitt before many others had gotten onto that trend, and he knew all about the Frankfurt School, and he was already jaded about the postmodernists when others were still enraptured by the discovery of them. In addition to being the kind of leftist who read a Nazi legal theorist to be contrarian, Samuel was also the kind of aspiring academic so contemptuous of the postmodern academy that he was likely to go into investment banking and make pots of money while jeering at the rest of humanity, because that was so much more punk rock than any other alternative to it. He identified his “lifestyle”—and of course he put that word into derisive quote marks when he used it—as “indie rock,” but Samuel's irony had extra bite to it, real cruelty and rancor, that was tonally off-kilter for the indie rock scene, which, as it manifested itself at Rutgers, was taciturn to the point of autism, passive-aggressive, and anti-intellectual, but far too cool and subdued for the exertions of overt cruelty.

You saw a look of sadness and yearning in Samuel's face when he had subsided from one of his misanthropic tirades—there was no limit to the scorn he heaped on the intellectual pretensions of others—and it put you on guard against him. What you sensed about him was that his abiding rage was closely linked to the fact that he was fat and ugly in a uniquely unappealing way, and that this compounded with his unappealing rage made him the sort of person that no woman would ever want to touch. He seemed arrayed in that wild rancor that sexual frustration can bestow on a man, and everything about his persona—his coruscating irony, his unbelievable intellectual snobbery—seemed a way to channel and thus defend himself against this consuming

bitterness. He was ugly on the outside and once you got past that you found the true ugliness on the inside.

And then below that ugliness you found a vulnerable person who desperately needed to be seen and touched and known as a human phenomenon. And above all, you wanted nothing to do with that, because once you touched the source of his loneliness, there would be no end to it, and even if you took it upon yourself to appease this unappeasable need, he would eventually decide to revenge himself against a world that had held him at bay, and there would be no better target for this revenge than you, precisely because you were the person who'd dared to draw the nearest. This is what you felt, instantly, without having to put it into words (it's what I felt anyway, though it might have been pure projection) the moment you met Samuel. For all that he could be amusing to talk to, and for all that he was visibly a nice guy despite all I've just said, you were careful to keep your distance.

Samuel used to complain about declining academic standards. He said that without much work he was acing all of his classes. This was a way of exalting himself slightly while mostly denigrating others, which made it an exemplary statement of his, but it was also a suspect statement, since no one had asked. One day, while I was in the history department's front office, I noticed a plastic crate full of hanging folders. In one of those folders, I found my own academic transcript in its entirety. Then I looked for Samuel's, and found it. His transcript, like mine, was riddled with Ds and Fs. And while what Samuel had said about academic standards and his own aptitude was surely true, it was also true that he had lied—and I suppose I understand why. If your only claim to self-respect was your intellectual superiority, and you had more or less flunked out of Reed College because of the crushing loneliness and depression you encountered once you realized that liberal utopia wasn't going to embrace you as it did the willowy, stylish high school outcasts who surrounded you—and if your grades weren't much better at Rutgers (a pathetic public university, even though you hated Reed more), you might be forced to lie about those grades, because they were the public face of all you had left—your intellectual superiority—and even after all you'd endured, or maybe because of it, your public face still mattered. Unaware that the contrary evidence was there for anyone to check (it should not have been) or that a person inclined to check it existed (I should not have looked), you would assume that you could tell this lie without being caught until graduation.

I mentioned this incident to a mutual acquaintance, who proceeded to tell Samuel, who accused me of making up lies about him, and turned me into the great enemy of his life—he was clearly looking for one—which was too bad and a little disconcerting, because, as I explained to him, he and his grades had never meant anything to me. And yet I had only read two transcripts, his and mine, mostly because I suspected, correctly, that he was telling lies. Samuel had been wronged by me, and it would have been right for me to apologize, but I had some hostility of my own, so instead I told him that he was ugly on the outside, but even uglier on the inside, and that he meant nothing to me, and his enmity counted for nothing to me. And this was true. I had recognized him as a person with whom I had some mutual understanding—overlapping interests and, most of all, overlapping pretensions—but I never wanted him as a friend. The image this whole affair calls up is the scene in *Born on the Fourth of July* in which two paraplegics in wheelchairs start wrestling around in anger, and then tip each other into a ditch by the side of the road, and fall out of their wheelchairs, and roll around on the ground in the dirt, from which they are unable to lift themselves.

I saw Samuel Goldfarb at the News Café on University Avenue about a year ago. He was chatting up the Eastern European counter girls. You could tell that he was a regular. He had put on a lot of weight and lost more of his hair, and his skin had lost none of its sebaceous excess. He had really become, at 32 or 33, the ruined middle-aged man that he already seemed on the cusp of becoming in youth. He seemed like a nice, harmless guy, but then you could still discern

loneliness and sexual desperation clinging to him, though it had lost some of its virulence. I was glad to see his resignation. And I knew that he was probably very rich, and I felt weirdly good on his behalf to know that if he had to be lonely, if he had to be one of the millions of sexually null men in America—and for all I knew, he could have studied the Game and become a world-class seducer in the intervening years, though it seemed unlikely (“Hey guys—quick question for you—do you believe in magic spells?”—I couldn’t see it)—at least he could be rich.

Lack of money had taught me the value of money. I had learned that when I didn’t have it—and by this I mean, really having none of it, as in, like, nothing, which was most of the time—I would become extremely unhappy. And that when I did have it, even a little bit of it, which was rare, my despondency was assuaged, and I became like a dry and dwindling houseplant that would rally and surge up from out of its dolor when watered. I deduced from this pattern that what I needed to do was find an occupation that would pay me a salary—it was amazing to think how long I had gone without one—and then I would have money all the time, and then I would be, if not happy, at least OK. And to come to this realization seemed a little bit like the moment in *1984* when Winston Smith decides that he loves Big Brother, but then even more than that it just felt like growing up and it felt like life. And so I figured that Samuel was fine; and while I was very far from fine, I thought someday I’d catch on to something and I’d eventually be fine too.

And maybe I still will, at that.

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A friend of mine wrote a book about online dating. She talked to hundreds of people about their experiences. Online, you become the person you’ve always known yourself to be, deep down. Online, you’re explicit about the fact that you are paying for a service, and you’re explicit about the fact that what you’re paying for is to get what you really want, and what you’re paying for is the ability to remove that annoying bit of residual romantic nonsense that gets us into annoying situations in life where we have to face up to the fact that we are rational profit maximizers in nothing so much as those intimate areas where we pretend to be otherwise. And so, people on the dating sites disclose what they really want, and also what they really don’t want.

This friend talked to one man from Maryland who put up his profile on Match.com one night a few years back. This man had good reason to think he would do well on the site. He made more than \$150,000 a year; he was white; he was over six feet tall. The next morning, he woke up and checked his account. Over the course of the previous night, he had gotten many responses. How many responses had he gotten? How well could he expect to do, being a man able to check off, without lying, boxes that certified that he made more than \$150,000 a year, that he was six feet four inches tall, and that he was white? How well do you think he was going to do on that site where people disclosed what they really wanted out of life and also what they really didn’t want?

He had gotten six thousand responses in one night. The fact was that if there was something intriguing or beautiful about that man—and there’s something beautiful about us all, if you look deeply enough—someone was going to take the trouble to find it out, and they’d love him for that thing, not because he was 6 foot 4 inches tall, and not because he made more than \$150,000 a year. You’d find out about his love of truth and poetry, to the extent that it existed, or at least his ability to make you laugh, or his own ability to laugh at things that made you laugh too—things on TV. You could watch TV together. Because the thing you wanted to do was to find true love and have that true love coincide with everything else that you wanted from life, so that you could have all the benefits of one kind of ease, and all the moral credit that others had to win by forgoing that kind of ease (but you could have it all, so why not?), and so you were going to put yourself in a

position to do that. And you weren't going to answer the ads of anyone with beady lugubrious eyes in a forlorn, brown-tinted face, and if that person wrote you a message, you weren't going to write him back, and you'd probably even, if it seemed like it was necessary, block all further emails from that person. And you'd be right to do that. You'd be behaving in the way that any rational person in your situation would act. We all agree that the rational thing to do is to shut every trace of that person's existence out of your view. The question, though, is—what if it's not you shutting out the losers? What if you're the loser whom everyone is shutting out? Of course, every loser is shutting out an even more wretched loser. But what if, as far as you know, you're the lowest person at the low end of this hierarchy? What is your rational move then?

You wake to find yourself one of the disadvantaged of the fully liberated sexual marketplace. If you are a woman, maybe you notice that men have a habit of using and discarding you, pleading their own inconstancy and premature emotional debauchery as a sop to your wounded feelings. If you are a man, maybe you notice that the women who have been used and discarded by other, more highly valued men are happy to restore (for a while) their own broken self-esteem by stepping on you while you are prone, and reminding you that even a society of outcasts has its hierarchies. Indeed, these hierarchies are policed all the more ruthlessly the closer to the bottom you go.

For these people, we have nothing but options. Therapy, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, alcoholism, drug addiction, pornography, training in mixed martial arts, mail-order brides from former Soviet republics, sex tours in Southeast Asia, prostitution, video-game consoles, protein shakes and weight lifting regimens, New Age medicine, obsession with pets or home furnishings, the recovery movement—all of which are modes of survival as opposed to forms of life. Each of these options compensates for a thing, love, that no person can flourish without, and each, in a different way, offers an endlessly deferred resolution to a conundrum that is effectively irresolvable. You could even say that our culture feeds off the plight of the poor in spirit in order to create new dependencies. You might even dare to say that an undernourished human soul—desperate and flailing, prone to seeking voluntary slavery in the midst of freedom and prosperity—is so conducive to the creation of new markets that it is itself the indispensable product of our culture and our time, at once its precondition and its goal.

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There's a familiar narrative we all know about high school losers. It's the narrative of smart sitcoms and even edgy indie films. The high school loser grows up, fills out, goes to Brown or RISD, and becomes the ideal guy for every smart, sensitive, quirky-but-cute girl with glasses (who is, in turn, the female version of the loser made good). The traits that hindered him (or her) in one phase of life turn out to be a blessing in another, more enlightened phase, or else get cast aside. For many people, this is an accurate description of their experience—it is the experience of the writers and producers of these stories.

In the indie film version of Seung-Hui Cho's life, the escort Cho hired a few weeks before his massacre wouldn't have danced for him for fifteen minutes in a motel room and then shoved him away when he tried to touch her. Not every one of the girls he tried to talk to would have recoiled in horror from him. Something would have happened in that film to remind him, and us, of his incipient humanity—that horribly menaced and misshapen thing. He would have found a good-hearted person who had perhaps been touched in some way by the same hysteria—and don't we all know something about it?—that had consumed Cho's soul. And this good-hearted girl or boy would have known how to forgive Cho for what he couldn't forgive himself—the unbearable, all-

consuming shame of being ugly, weak, sick, poor, clumsy, and ungifted.

We know that Cho had dreamt of this indie film ending. He had been dreaming of it for a long time. In the spring semester of 2006, he wrote a story about a boy estranged from his classmates: “Everyone is smiling and laughing as if they’re in heaven-on-earth, something magical and enchanting about all the people’s intrinsic nature that Bud will never experience.” But eventually the boy meets a “Gothic Girl,” to whom he breaks down and confesses, “I’m nothing. I’m a loser. I can’t do anything. I was going to kill every god damn person in this damn school, swear to god I was, but I . . . couldn’t. I just couldn’t.”

Cho’s short story about the Gothic Girl should have ended, but did not, with this declaration. Instead, he and the girl steal a car and drive to her house, where she retrieves “a .8 caliber automatic rifle and a M16 machine gun,” and the story concludes when she tells the narrator, “You and me. We can fight to claim our deserving throne.”

In real life, there was no Gothic Girl, *nome* to Cho’s *you*, no other willing actors—whether sympathetic, heroic, or equally violently deranged—to populate the self-made movie of his life.

Having failed to make it as a novelist—he really did send a book proposal to a New York publisher—Cho decided to make a film. This was a familiar trajectory, with a twist. He was going to collaborate with all the major television networks on it. In the days before his date with a self-appointed destiny, Cho was spotted working out in the college gym. He wanted his scrawny arms and chest to appear more credibly menacing than they were. How many of those men working their arms to the point of exhaustion were driven by the vain notion that they could improve their sexual prospects in the process? Cho had no such illusions. He was preparing a spectacle for the world to witness on TV, and he needed to look the part. +

