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### A Collection of Essays

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TRINITY COLLEGE  
Hartford, Connecticut

Thesis

A Collection of Essays

submitted by

Brendan Gauthier  
Class of 2015

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

2015

Director: Professor Francisco Goldman

Reader: Professor Ciaran Berry

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## Prologue

I used to say my favorite city in America was Cleveland. I'd vacationed there with my grandparents in July 2007. For a while, my grandparents would take me to a city with a Major League ballpark and we'd watch a series. During this particular trip, the Red Sox were at Cleveland. And (though I definitely didn't recognize the significance at the time) I was fortunate enough to see Jon Lester in his first post-lymphoma start for the Sox. That October, he would win game four against the Rockies to clinch the World Series.

I remember Cleveland having the bones of a prosperous city, but being positively desolate. That weekend, the X-Games Dew Tour was in town, bringing an abundance of wavy haired kids wearing gaudy flat-brims. A lot of the athletes – and their impossibly attractive wives – were staying in our hotel. (One even brought his bike into the hotel restaurant for brunch before taking off.) Extreme sports enthusiasts aside, the city seemed to be the property of my grandparents and me. The restaurants were, to my teenaged palate, great. The streets were clean, the infrastructure intact; the architecture was aesthetically pleasing. I don't remember seeing a single homeless person – a testament to relative prosperity and not a value judgment of homelessness.

Retroactively, my naivety is more [tangible]. It isn't that Cleveland solved its poverty – because it surely hasn't – but that the city has more effectively segregated the poor from its tourist attractions. Getting lost on the way to the pickup spot for a bus tour, my grandparents and I found out that the city's outskirts become exponentially more downtrodden than its insular downtown.

Downtown Hartford is, superficially speaking, similar to Cleveland in its hollow bones. A business and manufacturing mecca in pre-White Flight twentieth century, Hartford was once a flourishing metropolis. Following a sharp decline in domestic manufacturing and increase in suburban development, Hartford waved goodbye to its middle and upper classes, which now commute in and out Monday through Friday. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Hartford's crime rate increased and its offices, factories, and warehouses became abandoned. The city's increasing working-class and impoverished populations became the focus of government social and economic policy; homeless shelters and methadone clinics sprouted up in formerly affluent neighborhoods. Expensive single-family homes were divided into duplexes.

Modern Hartford features few (if any) socioeconomic borders. Downtown – probably the most distinctly developed neighborhood – despite its architectural beauty is nonetheless home to several shelters.

During the workweek, the neighborhood is bustling with attorneys in cheap suits and actuaries in cheaper suits. On weekends, much like in Cleveland, the neighborhood clears out.

Hartford has, nonetheless, become a home for the many marginalized people who – whether they like it or not – indigenize the orifice between Boston and New York. Hartford's residents walk its streets with matching chips on their shoulders. Surrounded on all sides by suburban wealth, Hartford's particular poverty can be characterized by a shared struggle.

To live in Hartford is to be defined not by homelessness or immigrant status or poverty, but by the sheer marginality of being a Hartford resident. Hartford is a zoo exhibit to the yuppies who drive through to get to the parking garage every weekday and observe the city from the other side of the office window. These same yuppies guard their earnings and loved ones behind vinyl siding in West Hartford and South Windsor and Glastonbury, every weekend turning a blind eye on the Capitol City's deficient corpse.

In writing this thesis, I met and interacted with several such marginalized Hartford residents, none of whom knew I was going to go back to my dorm room and write about them. Every conversation I had occurred organically – often with no action on my part aside from sitting alone in a public space. This is not journalism. I embarked on this project without an agenda.

What follows is but a microcosmic portrait of a truly unique and complex city. Here is Hartford:

For Tess.

## Yard Goats

The commuter lot where the ceremonial groundbreaking takes place for Hartford's newly conceived minor league baseball stadium is surrounded on all sides by traffic. To the north and east runs Interstate 84; Main Street borders the south side. Across I-84, I recognize some businesses, duplexes, and an old church that line Asylum Avenue in the North End, home to the city's West Indian population. A few parking lots, parking garages, and peripheral high-rise office buildings sit across Main Street.

I'm six minutes late, but in time for the start of the ceremony. Half the available chairs are empty; the standing room is packed with men in suits, all of whom seem acquainted on a strictly professional level. Half-a-dozen vendors dressed in cute old-timey baseball uniforms hand out complimentary popcorn and Cracker Jacks.

Across the lot, there's a hot dog truck, two porta-potties and a backhoe. Sans wind chill, it's single-digits. I'm recovering from a brutal cold and can see my breath when I cough.

Hartford City Council members sit alongside Rock Cats co-owner Josh Solomon in three rows of folding chairs across the stage, waiting for the ceremony to begin. They're wearing gloves. A lonely podium, center stage, advertises [HartfordPlaysBall2016.com](http://HartfordPlaysBall2016.com), the initiative's website.

I hear screaming. A marching band of little kids wearing Rock Cats caps fires up at the command of a militant but enthusiastic adult bandleader. Their performance

garners deserved applause at each full stop; the crowd's on board. After their show, the band is introduced.

A big, bald white guy – someone relatively unimportant – takes the podium to quickly introduce Josh Solomon, another big, bald white guy who reads a sales-pitch-turned-speech from a single-spaced sheet of paper. Josh's father, Arthur Solomon, owns the New Hampshire Fisher Cats, another minor league team. Due to Eastern League restrictions, Arthur is forbidden from claiming ownership of the Rock Cats (though emails obtained by the *Hartford Courant* suggest the elder Solomon represented the team in meetings with Hartford's top brass).

Josh, who owns the team with his siblings, is a figurehead with a legal signature, a puppet of the patriarch. He boasts about the high-end amenities (dugout suites that “put you closer to home than the pitcher” and luxury boxes) the park will offer, saying, “The ballpark is yours, Hartford.”

Next up to the stage: Hartford City Council President Shawn Wooden, a slender and attractive black man with impressive, but unpretentious, oratory skills. Wooden thanks Solomon for the team's “interest in and faith in the city of Hartford” and commitment to “public transparency” throughout the process of securing the contract to move the Rock Cats out of New Britain and into the Capitol City.

The \$56 million stadium – part of a \$350 million revitalization effort approved by City Council in October, 2014 – was secretly in the works as early as spring 2014. When rumor of the move leaked into media consciousness that August, New Britain Mayor Erin

Stewart issued a scathing statement, threatening to evict the club if it failed to pay off \$165,000 in overdue property taxes.

Responding to the possibility that the team would allow its debt to fall on the city, Stewart wrote, “I am deeply disturbed by the pattern of utter disrespect that this ownership group has shown to their home over the past few months.”<sup>1</sup> (Josh Solomon, it should be noted, lives in a Boston suburb and has been characterized as a passive owner. New Britain occupies no special place in the ownership group’s collective heart.)

Last to the stage – and receiving the loudest applause – is Hartford Mayor Pedro Segarra. The city’s first openly gay mayor, Segarra was born in rural Puerto Rico before his family moved to the Bronx and finally settled in Hartford. He’s a graduate of Capitol Community College, the University of Hartford, and UConn Law. At the groundbreaking, he spouts rhetoric with a faintly detectable accent.

“I want to thank the youth,” he begins. “And I want to thank God.” I’m not sure if it’s the cliché or the wind chill making his eyes water.

He spends especial time asserting the value of repurposing into a bustling, profitable retail, residential, and tourist space what are now largely dormant commuter lots along the northern border of Downtown Hartford.

“Parking lots were not really serving our city,” he says, smirking. He’s right. In fact, parking lots have fundamentally stunted Hartford’s regrowth for the last half-century.

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<sup>1</sup> “New Britain Mayor Tells Rock Cats: Pay Taxes or Get Out” by Don Stacom, August 1, 2014, *Hartford Courant*.

A study<sup>2</sup> of automobile infrastructure in small, dense cities (commissioned by *The Atlantic*'s "City Lab" and conducted by a team of researchers at the University of Connecticut) found that, "In cities with higher rates of automobile use ... about twice as much land is committed to parking for each resident and employee." Hartford's inept and archaic public transit system – a county-wide maze of bus lines – means many of its workers commute by car from surrounding suburbs every day, requiring more parking lots and garages to keep the cars all day.

A common practice in the 1960s, Hartford city planners commissioned the building of parking lots with the ill-conceived idea that such infrastructure would bring back suburbanites who'd fled just decades earlier. Instead, between 1960 and 2000, driving commuters in the city increased more than thirty percent, while income and jobs flat lined.

Segarra concludes: "I can't wait to throw out the first pitch on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016."

With this, the speaking portion of the ceremony is over and the crowd is directed out of the tent to a pile of dirt with another "HartfordPlaysBall2016.com" sign on it. The folks from the stage put on hard hats and pick up shovels. A children's choir sings "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" twice. Local camera crews make a half-circle around the dirt pile. I'm wearing my boots, so I stand in a puddle that had formed in a pothole. The V.I.P.s count down from three before digging their shovels into the pile. The crowd bursts into applause as I dip out to beat the traffic.

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<sup>2</sup> "How Parking Lots Became the Scourge of American Downtown" by Sarah Goodyear, *The Atlantic: Citylab*.

## Comerio

In the latter weeks of my summer internship at Congressman John Larson's district office on Main Street, I would, during my lunch hour, walk east and turn right onto Park Street towards Comerio, a Puerto Rican restaurant that was incredibly accommodating to my utter lack of Spanish fluency on first visit. Along the way, I would pass a crowded bus stop – perhaps, more accurately, a strip of sidewalk (in front of an abandoned parking lot where the city dumps excess snow in the winter) at which city buses would occasionally stop – and Barnard Park, where the homeless junkies vacation from the methadone clinic down the block.

Even waking weekday traffic was marginal at worst; pedestrians outnumbered cars 2:1. Old Puerto Rican men with canes gathered on either side of Park Street, sitting on milk crates or the knee-high brick wall bordering the abandoned parking lot. Many were smiling; some looked hardened. Most had some amount of facial hair. I doubt I ever said anything to any one of them. If any looked my way, I would squint and half-nod, worrying that they wouldn't reciprocate, would see a gringo in a knit tie and mistake me for a wet-behind-the-ears non-profit worker or a Mormon missionary. But even the most stone-faced men would at least nod.

I can't attest to the authenticity of the Spanish food at Comerio, but it tasted damned good to me. On first visit, I expected some level of culture shock. (Though, admittedly, I wasn't anticipating a language barrier.) I got in what I later learned was a takeout line behind two homeless men who paid with change for what looked like (but couldn't have been) Jamaican beef patties. When it was my turn, the cook intuitively

switched to broken English. I asked for a menu and if I could eat in, to which he answered affirmatively. I sat down with a laminated menu and a book (something pretentious, probably) at the nearest table – meant for six – facing away from the window and into the dining area, which was packed with people. A short, chubby thirty-something-year-old waitress with braces came to my table and fielded my questions about the menu, written entirely in Spanish. I ordered the Cubano, a name I recognized from the menu at the Bistro. The line I was just in was now out the door, composed of blue-collar workers I presumed to also be on their lunch breaks. The L-shaped dining area was still full to capacity with goatee'd dads and their families. Aside from the one woman wearing scrubs in the takeout line, I didn't see anyone who looked like they might have come from working at the Hospital across the street. Above the glass display case, which held the beef patties, was a framed *Courant* article proclaiming the place to serve “the best Puerto Rican food in Hartford.” The waitress brought me my Cubano and it was yummy. When I was done – whether out of nostalgia or ignorance – I got back in line with my dirty utensils and plate and empty Coke can, like I was back in middle school. Again the waitress was understanding and brought me to the front of the line to pay before she left for the day. In the chaos, I forgot to tip.

I went back the next week, confident as a motherfucker. I sat at the counter with my book, hoping to have an interaction with anyone. Two men were seated to my left. They were having a conversation and so didn't acknowledge me. The beef patty case was to my right and I could see the line growing through the glass. The cook – a middle-aged Hispanic man, sweating over the grill – took my order. I asked for a Cubano again.

“We don’t got any bread,” he said.

I took a few minutes to reassess before deciding on the fried steak. (I didn’t know exactly what fried steak was, but I recognized the cognates *carne* and *frito* from short-lived stints studying French and Italian.) The steak wasn’t fried in the state fair sense I was thinking but was more like a greasy flank, served over rice, covered in sautéed onions and with a side of pinto beans. I watched the cook as I ate. In addition to manning the grill (a primary kitchen in the back prepared my steak), he made sandwiches, took takeout orders, and worked the register. The meal cost less than ten dollars. I left a five-dollar reparative tip.

## Michael

A couple miles west of Comerio, adjacent to Main Street, at the southernmost edge of the resurgently swanky Downtown area, is Bushnell Park. The Park – named after nearby Bushnell Theater – is almost entirely flat with a murky brown pond. Floating in the pond are two ducks, a steel sculpture, and several round concrete platforms which formerly grounded more sculptures to the floor of the pond, but now serve as a perch for the two aforementioned ducks. Five men in reflective vests skim the pond for leaves.

Along the pond is a paved walkway – part of a series of illogically intersecting walkways – lined with wood benches. During the day, a sample of the city’s homeless is found sleeping on the benches (or in the grass) or philosophizing, passing the time before the shelters open. For Hartford’s homeless, Bushnell Park is *Cheers*. Every winter, the Park hosts its “Winterfest,” featuring free ice-skating and skate rentals. Its spring and the platform and fog lights for the rink are still up. The platform is a sketchpad for budding graffiti artists. Several wooden boards have been left leaning against a nearby old brick pump house. The wooden door to the women’s bathroom looks like its been kicked in several times. The locks face out – I wonder why that is. Behind the utilities building is a concrete patio labeled “Pump House Gallery.” I’ve seen exhibits here before, but this time it’s barren.

I visit on a lukewarm Easter afternoon. I’d originally planned to go to Barnard Park, closer to Comerio, but couldn’t find on-street parking. I sit on a wooden bench with

a small golden plaque memorializing Stephen A. Kezerian, a Hartford native and one time reporter for the *Courant*.

To my left, a gazebo has been boarded up and cordoned off to make way for construction. The boards are painted to make the gazebo look like a carousel. Across the pond, Downtown seems empty. To my right are four homeless men (whom I, at the time, don't recognize are homeless). The men are middle-aged and carry small backpacks. One wears a beanie and looks a lot like my friend's dad.

"Elephants eat the shell and everything," one says. "It's hard fiber."

"What about hippos?" another says.

"Hippos are big as fuck. They'll tear your boat apart."

A young couple walks by with a Pomeranian on a leash. They ignore the men until one bends down to pet the dog.

"He's hungry," the homeless man says.

The couple inches away, effectively ending the short-lived interaction.

The men continue their conversation, at some point transitioning from the animal kingdom to creationism.

"It's stupid," one speaks up. "It makes zero sense. And they teach it in schools."

A thin, light-skinned black man wearing full Rastafarian-accented sweats and a grey beanie walks past shortly after the couple with the dog. He and I make eye contact. I nod and he smiles. I think little of him and so passively watch him go stand close to the couple as they look out onto the pond. I'm not paying attention when he approaches me.

“I hope it’s okay,” he says. His voice is effeminate. He initiates conversation: “No, I don’t have any cigarettes, I don’t have a lighter and I don’t have any spare change.”

I must look perplexed. He explains that he’d been playing “Candy Crush” on the other side of the Park and every other person would ask for something from him.

His name is Michael. He picks at his sweatshirt while he talks. I ask if he’s from Hartford.

“I used to live there, actually.” He points vaguely towards Downtown. “Then I lived near Pope Park for a while. Now I live outside Hartford, in Bloomfield.”

He asks me the same. I tell him I’m at Trinity and from South Windsor, a nearby suburb. “We’re neighbors,” he says. (Bloomfield is a half-hour drive from South Windsor.) “I’m surprised you’re not on campus.” I tell him I’m there for a change of scenery; that most of my friends have left for the holiday. I refrain from asking what he was doing alone in a park, miles away from his house, on Easter (largely because I’m not prepared to answer that question myself.)

“Just be careful,” Michael says. “There are a lot of drug addicts and homeless people around here. They’ll steal your gold right off your neck. That’s why I don’t wear jewelry.” He pulls down his shirt collar and shows me his hands and wrists to prove it. His left pinky fingernail is longer than the others. His skin is dry and cracking. He hasn’t shaved in a few days.

He calls his style *hood chic*: “I don’t want to look like I have too much money, but I don’t want to look like a bum.”

“See these guys?” Michael points at the four homeless men I’d been observing earlier. “What they’re doing is waiting for the shelters to open.” He explains that there are four or five shelters near the park. The homeless congregate in the park, waiting for the kitchens to open at three. “If you were into social services, I’d tell you where all of them are and you could write a good paper about it.”

He warns me about a shelter, a converted firehouse, in the North End that serves the city’s population of homeless sex offenders: “They’ll just rape you there.”

I ask him if he frequents the park.

“Why?” he snaps. He stiffens his posture. I tell him I’m just curious. He slouches again. “This is the first time this year.”

He points at a late-90s metallic blue modified Honda Accord – a *ricer*, nothing out of the ordinary – parallel parked in front of us on the west side of the Park, across the pond. “That’s my baby,” he says. “I got the *LoJack* on it, so no one’s going to take it. She’s a racer. Only four in the whole state.”

“I’m going to date myself here,” Michael prefaces, before describing his time at Green Mountain College in Vermont, where he claims to have been the first black student. A \$10,000 scholarship allowed him to attend the second-most expensive college in the state (behind Bennington College) at the time.

“They may all be liberals,” he says. “But Vermont is a very redneck state.” On his classmates: “They want to smell you, see if you smell different; watch you piss, see if it’s a different color; watch you shit.”

He recalls a group of his female classmates asking cryptically if what they'd seen on TV about black people was true. Confused, he later called his friend from home.

“They want to know if you're hung like a horse,” his friend translated.

Michael assures me, however, that his college years weren't entirely characterized by racist curiosity.

“Moses Hall,” he blurts out after a pause. “That's where I lived. Moses Hall.” (According to the College's website, Moses Hall is home to faculty offices and classrooms, as well as a student-run fair trade coffee house.)

His disjointed account of Green Mountain's social atmosphere swiftly develops a cartoonish, clichéd tint.

“I got initiated my second year,” he begins again. (Into what, he never specifies.) He describes a hazing process, wherein each task carried a specific point value. (What these points afforded him, he also never specifies.) “They're, like, ten miles long up there,” he says of the cemeteries where he was tasked with finding rags soaked with human blood amongst the tombstones. “I asked, ‘Does anybody actually live in this state?’”

For his efforts, Michael was awarded twenty-five points – a drop in the bucket compared to the hundred he earned for herding a family of skunks into the sorority house. “The mom liked those cheese twists and Fritos,” he struggles to remember. “And the babies, they liked the little peanuts and cashews.” The objective, he tells me, was to make the skunks spray on each floor.

“Check your hallway,” he told one of the sisters over the phone from outside the house. “All of a sudden you see all the lights turn on in every room and all the girls start screaming.” He can’t control his laughter.

He was summoned to the dean’s office the next day, where he was told he would be expelled. “You can,” Michael said to the dean, “but it’ll be kind of hard because I’m leaving tomorrow.” Within twenty-four hours, he was back in Hartford, where he finished his associate degree at Capitol Community College.

“You left black and came back white,” his dad said upon Michael’s homecoming.

Michael is optimistic about the future. “Around the time you graduate,” he said (with peculiar specificity), “I’ll be in Las Vegas. I bought a house there. I move in in 2015. You ever been to Vegas?”

I tell him I haven’t.

“Vegas is one of those places, once you go for the first time, you want to go back. You can find work in Vegas,” he promised. “You just have to be creative in finding it.”

The homeless men begin to rise from their benches. The clock on my phone reads 2:56. I pretend to have to get back to campus. We shake hands.

“See you around,” he says, still glued to the bench.

I return during the workweek – on Tuesday – half expecting to find Michael where I’d left him. Instead, I find an emptier park next to a noisier Downtown. I again sit down on the Stephen A. Kezerian Memorial Park Bench. Across the pond, construction has resumed on the street, which has – as long as I can remember – been under

construction. Workers in reflective clothing maneuver backhoes and jackhammers and Bobcats – one helps a petite blonde woman push a stroller over the gravelly work surface where once there was a sidewalk. The neighborhood is alive with the sounds of squealing brakes and reversing trucks.

Behind the construction I notice a parking lot that is now filled with cars. Behind the parking lot loom the Harvard Pilgrim Care and Frontier Cable buildings. I feel as though I have an audience now behind all those windows.

It's close to two o'clock in the afternoon. The only other people in the park are mostly dressed business casual. I presume these are the office misfits who have no one to eat lunch with.

A lollipop-shaped man in reflective athletic clothes jogs several irrational laps around the park. A hook-nosed businessman wearing fake Oakleys, cotton Dockers, and a truly ugly ivory tie passes in front of me and I can hear the heavy metal guitar blasting in his iPhone ear buds.

There'd be no more to Michael's story. I follow a path, past a bronze statue of Horace Wells – inventor of anesthesia – toward Downtown, and exit the park via the Frederick K. Fox Memorial Entrance.

## Family Dollar

South of Comerio, Park Street intersects Washington Street, marked by a corner Walgreens advertising “nice eggs” for \$1.29. Cross this intersection and you’ve entered Frog Hollow, so named for the French Canadians who used to inhabit the neighborhood. The neighborhood has relatively recently become home to Hartford’s substantial Puerto Rican population.

Trinity Fine Arts professor, Pablo Delano, writing in the *Times*, details the architectural benefit Hartford gets from “a Puerto Rican presence that blossomed during the 1950s and 1960s as many left the island to work in Connecticut’s tobacco fields.”

On Hartford’s repurposed facades, Delano writes: “Layers of bricks, paint and plaster reveal the city’s layers of history.” Park Street (“the hub of Hispanic commerce”) is no exception to Delano’s characterization. Frog Hollow is lined on both sides by brick businesses, mostly shops (aside from the Mi Casa Community Center and International Driving School). I pass adjacent storefronts – both called Manny’s – one a bakery, painted red, the other an authorized T-Mobile retailer, painted green.

I pull into the parking lot – three-quarters enclosed by a five-foot wall of dirty snow – of a Family Dollar that’s set back to near invisibility from the street save for the giant sign. An elementary school-aged girl waves white poster boards over her head before she, her mother and infant sibling pack into a blacked-out Jetta wagon.

From my spot next to a Pepsi truck, I see the gold dome of the Capitol Building about a mile away. A decrepit brick factory lies vacant in the foreground. In blue letters

on a white sign: Bell Pump Company. The place manufactures parts for oil burner pumps; the sort of niche manufacturing operation that buoyed the city's middle class in the nineteenth century. Bell merged with Joseph Simmons Company, a refrigeration supplies wholesaler, in 1940. Bell/Simmons – still headquartered in Hartford – distributes heating and air-conditioning parts throughout New England.

Inside, the Family Dollar layout is counterintuitive: aisles are, at best, loosely thematic; upkeep seems a secondary priority; shopping carts filled with kids toys impede every direct route. There's, nonetheless, a certain coziness to navigating the claustrophobia; like shopping in a hedge maze a la *The Shining*.

The whole place reeks of floor cleaner. Birds fly in and out of the automatic front doors that open slightly too late for me to realize they're automatic. The cracked tile floor resembles Hartford's potholed streets. Someone must have spilled something in the refrigerated section; there's a light-brown stain on the floor under a homemade yellow "CUIDADO" sign.

The entire grocery section requires no assembly beyond a microwave. An Oscar Meyer ham and cheese "loaf" stops me in my tracks. In what I'll call the snack aisle, a man talks to himself while sneaking Chips Ahoy out of the new re-sealable packaging.

I find the dollar toilet paper on a metal shelf along the back wall that's entirely devoted to paper products. I consider buying *Frozen*-themed Kleenexes, but splurge the extra quarter to spare myself my roommates' ridicule. I really only need tissues and TP, but have an empty cart and everything's so goddamned cheap. In the pet food aisle, a

woman speaks Spanish into her cellphone. Then, in English: “Who put the hotdogs in the microwave with all the water? Was it you?” Then, back to Spanish.

I’m deciding between Virgin of Guadalupe and Skittles-scented candles when I hear two kids marveling the shelf of life-sized chocolate Easter bunnies next to the prepaid flip phones in the front of the store. Alas, their parents deny them.

I examine six buck wrinkled plain colored t-shirts in an aisle perpendicular to the adult diaper wall. Mixed in with the kids’ clothes, doilies hang folded in half, resembling cheap lingerie.

Another family deliberation takes place in the next aisle over. A young, cornrowed boy wants a toy. His mother refuses three times. His mother’s boyfriend says, “My son wanted that one, too.” Then, “Look, they got an Etch A Sketch.” What kid wants an Etch A Sketch?

If everything else is cheap, the DVDs might as well be free. *A Clockwork Orange* is two bucks and comes in a sleeve instead of a case. Thumbing through the pile of sleeves, I feel like a nostalgic record collector. Along with DVDs, the shelf features blank CDs, multicolored CD sleeves, cassette adapters, and an assortment of other antiquated tech products.

A mother and her teenaged sons, also speaking Spanish, sneak up behind me. I make room so they, too, can look at the DVDs. The older teenager steps forward, examines a pair of bass-boosting ear buds and says, “holy shit.”

I get in the check out line with four rolls of off-brand toilet paper, a box of off-brand tissues, a bottle of off-brand apricot scrub, and the Skittles candle. A middle-aged

man, alone, is being rung up at the far register. Before they leave, the family with the two kids takes a last look at the display of chocolate bunnies. The middle-aged man says something to the cashier, who then asks another employee how much the bunnies cost.

“Five bucks,” the employee says.

The middle-aged man hands the cashier a five. The smiling kids carry one box over to the register to be scanned.

“What do you say?” their mother reminds.

In unison: “Thank you.”

## Paved Paradise

I park in the divoted lot behind the congressman's office with the intent of interviewing the parking attendant for an ill-planned piece about parking lots in urban spaces. I'm tentative to approach the attendant; he's in his booth with his Spanish-language radio and who am I to interrupt his routine? What do I even ask him? How do I end an interview?

A block from the congressman's lot is the weedy abandoned lot where the city dumps its snow. It's neither paved nor green; it's more a mix of gravel, jagged concrete and broken glass. The weather's been warming up, so the only remaining snow exists in piles on the margins near the chain-link fence, which intersects a walkway off of the sidewalk. A metal sign zip-tied to the fence warns of 24-hour "video and audio surveillance." There are three concrete steps from the sidewalk to nowhere, leading me to guess the lot used to house a building. Next to the bottom step, within a smattering of litter is a mid-sized empty plastic handle of Dubra.

I stand on the concrete slab in the middle of the lot and see the gold Capitol dome peeking out above a housing project in the mid-ground and brown snow in the foreground. In a spot of burnt grass, I come across a pile of feathers from a pigeon that must have died in the fall, before the snow got dumped.

Outside the fence, at the intersection, a man with a Chihuahua on his shoulder tries to sell bedazzled hats to cars and passersby. Competing for his business is a Mexican food truck, selling burritos. Had I any money on me, it would've been an easy decision.

I muster the moxie to approach the attendant down the road. Walking back, I again pass half an ivory armoire lying on the sidewalk, where furniture definitely doesn't belong. He's outside of his booth. He nods and I nod, then I walk up. Up close, I can see how comfortably – like a tree house – he's furnished the place: he has a chair and a desk; a radio and a megaphone. I introduce myself:

“I'm doing my thesis on urban infrastructure and was wondering if I could ask you a few questions.”

“Where you want to park?”

“Oh, I'm parked right over there. Just, for my thesis ...”

“You work there?” He points toward the building.

“Yeah, yeah. I intern at the congressman's office.” I lie.

“You O.K., then.”

“Well, I'm not working today, but I wanted to ask you a few questions.”

“If you work there, you can park over there.”

I give up and thank him for his instructions. At this point, I can't walk back to my car without looking like an idiot and so make as if I'm going inside the building. I cut through an alleyway onto Main Street.

Main Street, which cuts through the heart of Downtown Hartford, expands from four lanes – in the South End – to six – downtown – before bike lanes and a median. Parallel-parked cars line both sides of the street. Building uses vary block-by-block: law firm, consulting firm, deli, upscale restaurant, Indian restaurant, congregational church, Baptist church, insurance company, another law firm. Towards the end of the procession

is the highbrow Wadsworth Athenaeum, across from which is another ambiguous cement slab, on which abstract sculpture art pieces are being set up for a public exhibit. I stand on the platform and watch a bald man with “666” tattooed between two devil horns on his forehead walk by. For a moment, the Satanist eclipses the copper statue of Nathan Hale on the Athenaeum lawn.

I remember a huge commuter lot further down the street, where I might find a more apt attendant interviewee. There I find two attendants dressed in red uniforms, joking in fluent English. When a car pulls up to the gate, one attendant leaves the other to his post and I again fear impeding someone’s workflow. I decide to walk through the parking lot, counting the cars under the false presumption that the number of spots would wind up being an important detail. I get to the other end of the lot, having lost count between two hundred and three hundred, and begin to miss the time I’ve just wasted.

I turn left on a one-way cobblestone street lined by specialty shops and the Society Room of Hartford, which I imagine to be a swanky, mahogany old boys’ club, but later learn is just a covert banquet hall. The second shop on the right, JoJo’s Coffee Roasting Company, has recently gone out of business – not a huge surprise, considering that there are no less than five Dunkin Donuts’s within the same square mile.

I’ve been down this street a thousand times. At the other end is the XL Center (formerly known as the Hartford Civic Center), where the Whalers, then Wolf Pack, then Whale, then Wolf Pack, again, and now the UConn Men’s hockey team plays. At the corner is McKinnon’s Pub, where I drank too much before, during, and after UConn beat UMass-Lowell and puked in my grandpa’s Acura. Outside the XL Center, a city

employee in a neon yellow t-shirt is haphazardly chainsaw-ing a line of dry shrubs along the median.

I turn right towards the Prudential offices, where a troop of window cleaners is on the sidewalk prepping their scaffolding for the job. A man riding a bike attached to a wagon carrying three bags of trash is heading in the opposite direction and I stop to give him room on the narrowed sidewalk to pass.

“No one bothers to cover that shit up,” he says, after swerving to avoid a peculiarly shaped storm grate.

Making another right before heading home, I see ahead the old G. Fox building my grandpa had once told me about.

In the variable thick of Downtown – across Main Street from the Hartford Stage Company – rots the ornate, eleven-story high-rise that formerly housed the G. Fox & Co. department store. First opened as a singular storefront in 1847 by brothers Gerson and Isaac Fox, the store became a regional powerhouse after the former’s granddaughter, Beatrice Fox Auerbach, took over in 1938.

Though a Downtown Hartford staple for over a century, G. Fox & Co. was sold to the May Department Store Company in 1965. In 1992, May became Filene’s. In early-1993, the former G. Fox flagship store was completely vacated.

In 2002, the space reopened, renamed 960 Main; the building featured on the National Register of Historic Places and so its façade well maintained. Inside, the building is an eleven-story hotel lobby with out-of-order escalators and the echoes of empty space. There is a small empty restaurant, an inordinate number of interior design

boutiques, and the recently relocated Capitol Community College. In winter, guests mostly hang out inside the revolving doors on the street level, waiting for their bus to show.

Hartford's former downtown retail district, for all its ornate architecture, is as hollow as a Warner Brothers set; one gets the sense the buildings could hardly withstand a summer wind. The intersection of interstates, once believed to be a blessing, turned out to be a crippling crack in the city's foundation. G. Fox is a cemetery of Hartford's former splendor. Women's hats, sun-faded and dusty, are displayed in glass cases above the escalators before a backdrop of black-and-white mid-century photos of the old department store.

On the second floor, where little of anything exists, I stop to look at a small floor-by-floor display of original blueprints: 960 Main's half-assed, museum-like tribute to its foremother. None of the quiet college students, riding the down escalator towards the parking garage, pay me any attention. I get self-conscious, stopping suspiciously on an empty floor, when everyone else is passing through to the garage. So I journey to the far side of the second floor, around a corner where I find an elevator, an emergency exit, and a water fountain; the water is cold and metallic.

The parking garage is the only non-vacated area on the map. The bottom floor is a dead end, a mirror image of its street-level equivalent. A few students hunch over laptops at tables outside the empty cafeteria.

On April 27, 1939, Roosevelt's White House published *Toll Roads and Free Roads*: "on the feasibility of a system of transcontinental toll roads and a master plan for

free highway development.” The report formed the policy basis for the construction of the modern interstate system we Americans love to hate.

Contrary to popular belief, the interstate system was originally proposed to flush traffic out of the inner city. Earl Swift of *The Atlantic*, on urban freeways<sup>3</sup>: “they were prescribed as urban fixes first, and to venture into the countryside, second.” Swift explains, “So it is that nearly a third of the interstate system consists of stretches through our cities.”

Interstate-84 is Hartford’s “urban fix.” The Aetna Viaduct, as it’s known – a  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile elevated stretch of I-84 built in 1965 – runs seemingly feet from the G. Fox building. And, it’s understood that Auerbach, realizing the potential profitability of the interchange of I-84 and -91 so near to her store, wielded her impressive political influence to ensure the off-ramps would lead near-directly to the store’s multilevel parking garage.

Because the actualized function of interstates has brought folks out of the city and into developing suburbs, Swift says, “the highways have mutated their host cities [and] sown shopping malls and big-box stores ... sired factories, shipping centers, entire towns.” All of the above is true of G. Fox and Hartford.

“With precious few exceptions,” Swift says, “our cities need their interstates the way organs need arteries.” Aetna’s corporate headquarters, the Viaduct’s namesake, cast a shadow over the Interstate. The particular portion of the Interstate is so raised to accommodate the massive quantity of commuters’ cars during the day. The space below

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<sup>3</sup> “Like It or Not, Most Urban Freeways Are Here to Stay” by Earl Swift, February 20, 2014, *The Atlantic: Citylab*.

the Viaduct is devoted entirely to alphabetically labeled parking lots for Aetna employees.

In 2005, after the Viaduct reached its forty-year expiration date, Hartford hired urban planning consulting firm, Goody-Clancy, to propose transportation alternatives to the “imposing viaduct,” which, according to Congress for New Urbanism’s 2014 report, *Freeways Without Futures*,<sup>4</sup> “prevents pedestrians from utilizing the space underneath, as most of the area is dedicated to surface parking.”

The resultant report<sup>5</sup>, published in 2010 and subtitled “Options for Replacing the I-84 Viaduct in Downtown Hartford,” denotes the vitality of the Viaduct to the 175,000 vehicles that travel it daily: “The highway accommodates trips to and from Hartford’s core, trips between local communities outside of the Hartford (sic.), and longer regional trips. This segment of highway is the state’s highest volume roadway.” But conversely recognizes that “while the Viaduct plays a critical transportation function, it has long been viewed as a blighting influence on the surrounding urban environment.”

The Goody-Clancy report developed five “preliminary alternatives”: an enhanced viaduct, which dealt more with aesthetic and cost than logistical issues at hand; a “skyway” viaduct that would eliminate ramps and elevate the existing viaduct to better utilize the space beneath and a “boulevard,” both of which the firm deemed “not recommended for further study”; a tunnel beneath the “land formerly occupied by the Viaduct” – a costly solution – and a “composite-tunnel/viaduct,” a partial implementation of the former. The tunnel alternative, the study shows, would best address the

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<sup>4</sup> “Freeways Without Futures 2014,” a report by the Congress for the New Urbanism.

<sup>5</sup> “I-84 Viaduct Study: Options for Replacing the I-84 Viaduct in Downtown Hartford,” Fall 2010.

fundamental urban design problems associated with the Viaduct, but at three times the cost of a relatively simple “enhancement” effort.

In April 2015, Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy – already serving in his second term – announced<sup>6</sup> the inclusion of viaduct reconfiguration in his Five-Year Transportation Ramp-Up Plan. Malloy said the state is considering three options for making the Viaduct “a better neighbor to the City of Hartford”: “an underground tunnel, a partially sunken roadway, or an on-grade road.” Malloy focused his criticisms on the Viaduct’s incapability of accommodating the sheer volume of traffic that traverses it daily: “the highway was designed for just 55,000 cars a day, but it actually services around 175,000 cars a day – a significant part of the 12 million car trips every day in the state.” Malloy estimates a couple of years and roughly \$60 million of additional investment before the state determines its course of action.

Just past the street-level entrance, next to the elevators and Social Security Office, sits the Foxx Stop – a makeshift convenience store manned by a large black man in a pink polo and with several hand and neck tattoos. (Your guess as to the point of the extra “x” is as good as mine.) I need coffee and an excuse to check the place out. Though it looks small from the outside, the Foxx Stop expands down a hallway past the counter, where the coffee and pre-packaged pastries are kept. While pouring a cup, I watch myself from four different security camera-angles on four different screens: Big Brother doesn’t want me to try any funny business. Next to the Coke fridge, a door opens to a storage

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<sup>6</sup> “Gov. Malloy Sets Sights on I-84 Viaduct Replacement in Hartford” by Heather Brandon, April 6, 2015, *WNPR*.

closet with a window looking right out at the parking garage. I bring my coffee to the front counter to pay. The cashier is texting, so I wait.

I pay and bring my drink and notebook to one of the four tables in the lobby outside the entrance to the Community College. The chairs are made of a faux-metal plastic that's deceptively lightweight. The table – made of the same material – has one short leg. A pseudo-hipster in Billabong pants, a hoodie, and motorcycle boots reads the *Courant* at the table to my left. I title a page in my notebook and burn my mouth on the impossibly hot coffee, which the Indian man with the swollen lower lip at the table opposite mine sips with ease.

I look up to see the mezzanine, which is now dark but evidently opens from time to time. A trio of skinny, sandaled Indian men find themselves lost in the mezzanine on their way to the Social Security Office that no one can ever find. A receptionist at the adjacent interior decorator's shop calls to the men from the bottom of the carpeted staircase: "Social Security, guys?" They nod and she directs them around the corner. Once they're out of site, she re-hooks a black velvet rope from one railing to another, blocking the staircase until the next person unhooks it. She shakes her head as she heads back to the office.

To my left is the Gershon Fox Room, whatever that may be. It looks like it might have at one time been a classy spot. A piano cover of a Billy Joel hit ties together the aesthetic.

Crowds of college students, young and old, with backpacks go in and out of the doors behind me in even intervals. Only one student ventures into the Foxx Stop; she

orders a \$2 all-beef Nathan's hotdog with mustard and eats at the same table the pseudo-hipster has vacated after taking a call on his mobile.

A fat older white woman wearing Birkenstocks shuffles into the Foxx Stop to buy a bottle of Poland Springs while her less-fat-yet-still-fat older white husband yells into his phone about his recent colonoscopy. She spills something on the floor, which the cashier reluctantly mops up while a customer-friend laughs at him.

A youngish woman in red Adidas sweatpants tucked into high-heeled, knee-high leather boots stares at her food. She turns around to me:

“You got the time, please?” she asks in an Eastern European accent.

I check my phone and it's 1:45PM. She turns back around. I presume she's trying to catch a bus.

“I drank medicine at 1:30, so I have to wait until 2:00 to eat, right?”

“Right,” I say. “I'll let you know when it's 2:00.”

“I'm here looking for a cleaning job,” she explains. “They want so much work but pay nothing.” She scrunches her face and points her thumb to the floor. She tells me she used to work at the Wal-Mart on Flatbush before quitting. Asked why she quit, she tells me the store would pay her “every two weeks – four hundred or five hundred dollars. That's bad, no?” she says.

“That sucks,” I say, for momentary lack of a more sympathetic reply. She's unfamiliar with the colloquialism. “That's so bad,” I reword.

“You cannot live on that: you can't wash your clothes.” She asks about the time: “How 'bout now, maybe?”

“Five more minutes.”

I ask her when she quit her job at Wal-Mart and she pulls a sheet of paper out of her purse. She gets up and hands me the sheet, which I then realize is a letter from the State of Connecticut Department of Labor, informing her that, because she quit for reasons they deemed “insufficient,” she’s ineligible for unemployment benefits. She asks me what the letter says and I read it verbatim before translating the legalese.

Unbelievably stoic, she sits back down at her table after I’d confirmed her fear that she needs to find another job to survive.

“Maybe God will give me better ...” she struggles with the word.

“Opportunity,” I help.

She asks what I do for a living. I try several times to explain that I go to Trinity before she finally recognizes “student.”

“Where you live?” she asks. “With your mom?”

I tell her I live at school.

“Where you eat?”

At school, I say again.

“How many meal a day? Two? Three?”

I nod because it’s easier.

An older black woman with bug eyes comes out of the elevator and examines a manila folder of multicolored papers at the table opposite me, which the leather-mouthed Indian man has since vacated. She looks back-and-forth between the Eastern European woman and me. I try to stare back, but she wins the contest and makes me feel more uncomfortable than vice versa. The Eastern European woman has the same idea: “Hi.”

“Hi,” the bug-eyed woman mumbles, staring at the floor, before retreating to the Social Security Office.

It’s 2:00 and she turns away, towards her cream cheese bagel, coffee and Poland Springs bottle. Before long, she’s turned back around.

“Everything’s cold, now” she says of her lunch.

“That sucks,” I say, forgetting.

“This doesn’t even look like coffee,” she says. “It’s too black.” She stirs in sugar with a clear plastic straw.

With food in her mouth, she asks me if my “apartment” is nearby. I try to tell her that I live at school, but she’s never heard of Trinity, so I tell her I live on Flatbush. She asks what the school charges for “rent.”

“A lot.” I try to dodge the question. I don’t know the exact figure, but know it’s exorbitant and thus in poor taste to disclose to a woman who’s been denied unemployment.

“Like a thousand?” she prods.

“Like ten.”

“Your mom must make a lot of money; what does she do?”

“Insurance,” I say, unsure of my mom’s current title.

“In America,” she begins to lecture, “You can be depending on parents. God doesn’t work that way. Yeah?”

I feel as though she’s checking my privilege and that I might deserve it. I nod again, and then ask her where she’s from.

“Albania; fifteen years ago,” she says. “I lived in Florida before – for five years.” She explains that she’s lived with her father for the past two years, but complains “It’s same thing every day. Nothing changes.”

She finishes her bagel. “I like eating here,” she concludes. “I don’t like eating at McDonald’s all the time – too many people.”

“When I finish this,” she says, holding up her water bottle, “I will go look for job down the street. I heard, at 750 Main Street they have openings.” The building is the former home of the Hartford-Connecticut Trust Company, which merged with Phoenix Bank in 1954 to form the Connecticut Bank and Trust Company, which was acquired by Berkshire Hills Bancorp, Inc. in 2011.

“I want job like her,” she says, pointing to the security guard leaning against one of the walls of the Foxx Stop. “Not too much work, right?”

I concur.

“You know, a lot of Spanish at Wal-Mart,” she says, referring to Hispanics themselves, not their language. “Spanish don’t want to work; just make money.” Taken aback by the hypocrisy, I abandon her rhetorical ship.

She changes the subject: “I thought about moving to different state. But I think everything’s expensive everywhere, right?”

I think about it. “What about Florida?” I say.

“More expensive.” She tells me that where she lived, Orlando, the cost of living-to-wage ratio was even more imbalanced than in Hartford.

She takes one long final swig of her water and stands up, abruptly ending the conversation: “Well, have a good day.”

“Good luck,” I say.

She walks her trash to the bin. Her clacking heels on the lobby floor echo off the high ceilings in total rhythmic contrast with the old-fashioned piano music that makes me feel like I’m in a Humphrey Bogart movie. She moves gingerly, as if her feet are cramped or blistered.

I pretend not to watch as she lingers outside the Foxx Stop. She looks in the tinted front entrance of the next-door realtor’s office. Her improvisational mode of job-hunting indicates her desperation.

She pulls a spin-move and heads into the Foxx Stop. She stands a few feet from the counter, pretending to be deciding on a pack of gum, working up the courage to ask if the place is hiring. The security guard looks suspicious and I wish I could hear their conversation.

She buys a pack of berry-flavored gum – the quickness of the transaction seemingly indicating they aren’t hiring or she hadn’t asked. She doesn’t make eye contact with me when she beelines to the Main Street exit.

Before making the walk back to my car, I stop by Track 23 Clothing Company, a “City-inspired fashion” retailer, which advertises \$9.99 joggers – a marginally more socially acceptable alternative to sweatpants. I love both sweatpants and social normality, and so wouldn’t normally have hesitated to drop a Hamilton on a pair of these joggers, but there’s my Albanian friend. She’s on the women’s side of the store, pestering a

saleswoman about the sizing of some pants she wanted. I don't know if she's noticed me, but for whatever reason I don't want her to think I've seen her – as if I were catching her shopping instead of begging for work, like the two are mutually exclusive. So I avoid making eye contact with her when I beeline to the exit.

## Afterword

I don't like writing craft essays.

I was going to build on my fiction portfolio from last semester's Senior Workshop, but after Francisco Goldman was assigned to be my thesis advisor, I figured it would be in my best interest to utilize his nonfiction acumen.

Asked what my topic should be, Frank suggested I write about Hartford in the style of E.B. White's *Here is New York*. So, I guess E.B. White is my primary influence, but I can't take credit for the idea.

The only thing I told Frank right off the bat was that I didn't want to mention Trinity at all. Trinity has a hugely overinflated sense of its own importance to the city and the outside world. Every Trinity student seems to think the "locals" look at us with jealous contempt when, in fact, no one in Greater Hartford really cares about Trinity. I grew up outside Hartford and knew next to nothing about Trinity before I decided to transfer here. In short: I didn't want to be another undergraduate putting Trinity in a citywide context.

I started out intending to keep myself – as a character – minimal, but found that subjectivity was integral to my writing style (and my enjoyment of the process). I like to be goofy, sarcastic, and self-deprecating when I write about traditionally boring things (e.g. urban infrastructure); it helps pass the time. At our first meeting, Frank really emphasized humor as a noteworthy part of my writing, so I kept it up.

I started from scratch and for the first three weeks thought I had to write sixty pages, so I was stressed as hell and turned in thirty-ish pages of garbage. In my first meeting with Frank, I found out the page requirement was forty. After that, I took several

weeks off from writing (hence the jump from “below freezing” temps to melted snow between essays) like an idiot and was then hard-pressed to meet the reduced page-limit in the last two weeks before the deadline.

Though I tried to make these essays stand-alone, I suppose they could be combined to create a greater profile of the city (i.e. Park Street and Main Street). So, in terms of its place in the genre, I don’t think it’s that special. I think I wrote with a chip on my shoulder – rejecting the suburbanites I grew up around, who exploit Hartford for its economic resources and who race out every Friday at 5. Were I indifferent to this specific strain of yuppie, I probably wouldn’t be interested in this thesis.

I want people to care about Hartford because it gets an undeservingly bad rep, but I’m too pessimistic to think my thesis will have even the slightest impact on public perception. I just hope whoever reads it will have half of a good time doing so.

I aimed for a sort of representative specificity. This is probably where I dissented from E.B. White’s model the most, as he characterized the whole of New York, while I tried to profile individuals as means of characterizing the whole of Hartford.