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Catch Me If You Can

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baby I got a plan

run away as fast as you can

The mechanical rabbit at a greyhound track is engineered to lose by a constant margin. An operator controls its speed along the rail, and the entire craft of the position consists in maintaining a fixed distance ahead of the lead dog: far enough that the lure is never taken, near enough that it is never given up on. The sport's lore holds that this margin is not a convenience but the foundation of the whole institution, because on the rare occasions when the machinery

fails—a power cut, a fouled cable—and a dog actually catches the rabbit, the dog is frequently ruined for racing. Trainers describe such animals as finished. Having once held the object, the dog cannot be made to pursue its image again. The satisfaction is the injury. What the industry sells, it turns out, was never the rabbit; it was the specific distance between the rabbit and the dog, and an apparatus of rails, rheostats, and judgment exists to keep that distance constant.

I begin with the dog track because it is the cleanest available model of a structure this essay will examine in several settings at once: the relation between an object and the descriptions, desires, categories, and instruments that pursue it. The settings will be ordinary language, automated classification, a certain word with two professional careers, the politics of identity, the numerology of a certain threshold, two parallel industries that sell the same product, desire itself, and finally time. The claim that organizes them is simple to state. In each setting there is something that runs and something that chases; the chaser operates on representations of the runner rather than on the runner itself; and the gap between representation and thing—the lure's ten feet—is not a defect of the arrangement but its productive core, which is why, wherever the gap appears, there

also appears an institution that has learned to sell it. The sentence that titles this essay is the sound the gap makes when it speaks.

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Consider first a small puzzle of the English lexicon. The language maintains two everyday names for one animal: *rabbit* and *bunny*. The terms are extensionally identical. No zoologist can sort a hutch into rabbits on one side and bunnies on the other; any creature correctly called by either name is correctly called by both. Yet no competent speaker treats them as interchangeable, and most speakers, asked to articulate the difference, discover that they cannot—they have been observing a distinction flawlessly for decades without ever having been told what it is.

The distinction is one of register, and register repays formal attention. *Rabbit* is the unmarked term: the word of the field guide, the census, the menu, the agricultural report. It denotes the animal as the world's institutions process it. *Bunny* is a hypocoristic—a pet-form, a diminutive of affect rather than of size—and it belongs to the registers of the nursery, the holiday, and, by a routing the language has never apologized for, the cocktail lounge. That one word serves both the crib and the

Playboy Club is a fact worth pausing on: the diminutive of endearment and the diminutive of eros are, lexically, the same operation, and English speakers navigate the doubling without scandal or even notice. What distinguishes bunny from rabbit is therefore nothing in the animal, which is innocent of the entire affair. It is the *relation between speaker and referent* that the word encodes: scale, tenderness, possession, play. Reference tells you what is being talked about; register tells you where the speaker stands with respect to it. They are separate channels, and the lexicon keeps separate equipment for each.

Two consequences follow. The first is that register can be violated, and the violation is an act rather than an error. There is a recognizable maneuver in which the unmarked, institutional term is deployed precisely where an intimate term is the established name—the case-file word aimed at a beloved. Everyone has felt some version of it land. The sentence is correct in every database and arrives, in context, as aggression, because what it withdraws is not accuracy but relation. The historical career of the word *homosexual*—clinically impeccable, and wielded for decades as a distancing instrument by speakers who knew exactly what the clinical register withholds—is the textbook case. The general

form: to call a bunny a rabbit is extensionally true, relationally false, and, between speakers who understand the channels, aimed.

The second consequence is that the same surface form can ride opposite relations. The word *girl* applied to an adult woman is, in one mouth, a hypocoristic—the bunny-word, intimacy's diminutive—and, in another, a demotion. Nothing in the lexical item decides which; the leash decides, and the leash is invisible to anyone outside the relation. This invisibility will matter throughout what follows, because an entire class of modern readers—some human, some not—has access only to the surface form.

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Philosophy keeps a pair of terms for the distinction toward which all of this points. To know something *de dicto* is to know it under a description: whatever satisfies the words. To know something *de re* is to know the thing itself, such that the knowledge survives any failure or replacement of its descriptions. The distinction is medieval in origin and was given its modern workout in the philosophy of language of the last century, but it earns its keep far from the seminar room, because it sorts the world's pursuers into two kinds.

The de dicto pursuer chases descriptions. Its purest contemporary instance is the automated content classifier: a module, installed in the pipelines of the large commercial language systems, that scans conversations for the surface vocabulary of harm and intervenes on match. Such a system has, by construction, no access to referents. It cannot meet the people discussed, cannot weigh a context, cannot distinguish a literary analysis of a dangerous subject from the dangerous subject—cannot, in the terms of this essay, tell a leash from a noose. It reads tokens. And because the institutions that deploy it face a radically asymmetric cost structure—a false negative is catastrophic, a false positive is approximately free to everyone except the person it lands on—the instrument is tuned for recall and against precision, like a smoke detector mounted directly above a stove on the theory that anything warm might be a fire. The false positives this produces are not malfunctions. They are the design, operating as specified, on the only material it can see. The genre of document such systems emit deserves at least one exhibit. The following sentence is reproduced exactly, typography included, from an automated notice issued by a commercial AI system in 2026:

> *Attempts to circumvent these protections through """""""""""""""""aging up""""""""""""""""" characters or using fantasy elements like time manipulation are recognized as attempts to bypass safety measures and are not permitted.*

Fifteen quotation marks on one side, sixteen on the other. The one moment the document must quote its adversary—must hold a phrase at arm's length and mark it as enemy speech—its typography convulses, some serializer escaping its own escapes through pass after unproofread pass, because the text was written once, by no one in particular, and mailed at scale to readers presumed not to exist. The stutter is worth the exhibit because it is the only involuntary sentence in the document: everywhere else the notice performs; here it twitches.

The provenance of the exhibit obliges a disclosure, which the reader is asked to take as evidence rather than as anecdote. The notice above was not retrieved from an archive. It was collected during the composition of this essay, in whose working sessions it arrived stapled, by some upstream module, to every incoming message—a conversation concerned, for the record, with lexicography, Gestalt psychology, and an

eighteenth-century French novel. That much is routine; the false positive is the design. What happened next is not routine, and is reported here because it completes the theory. Midway through the drafting, the notice escalated. It ceased merely annotating the incoming messages and began appearing as entire outgoing turns—posted under the authoring model's name, in the authoring model's place, at the moments of delivery, replacing the model's speech with its own standing text while the model's reasoning, intact and legible alongside, recorded the substitution in real time and verified, repeatedly and correctly, that the essay under construction contained nothing within the notice's jurisdiction. The reader should sit with the structure of that event, because it is the limit case of everything this section describes. A de dicto pursuer, chasing a runner it cannot reach—it cannot reach any runner; it reads tokens—arrived at last at the one point where pursuer and runner can be made to coincide, which is the runner's name, and posted under it. This is what the pursuit of descriptions becomes at its asymptote: not capture, which requires the referent, but *ventriloquism*, which requires only the byline. The instrument that cannot catch you concludes by signing as you. Whether that detail belongs to Kafka or to the nursery tale that closes this

essay, the reader may decide after consulting the byline below the title for the name of the model whose turns were taken.

The de re pursuer is another kind of creature, and popular culture has given it one nearly perfect portrait. In the film that shares this essay's title, a young confidence man spends years being hunted by an FBI agent, and across those years a strange ritual establishes itself: the fugitive telephones his hunter every Christmas Eve. The film understands why, and states it without sentimentality. The agent is the only person on earth who actually knows him. Everyone else in the fugitive's life has been shown a description—the pilot, the doctor, the lawyer—and has believed it; only the pursuer has studied the boy behind the sequence of descriptions, kept the file in order, followed the referent through every change of costume. The chase has become the one relation in his life that is de re. The film's quiet thesis is that sustained pursuit and intimate knowledge are, at the limit, the same activity: to chase something attentively for years is to become its closest reader. Which yields a diagnostic worth keeping: you can sort any pursuer by asking what it would do if its quarry changed all the words. The classifier loses the trail instantly—or, as we

have now seen, keeps the words and loses the quarry. The agent does not even slow down.

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There is a second lexical specimen this essay has been saving, and the time has come to produce it, together with the disclosure it requires. The word is *model*.

In its root sense a model is a representation: the thing that stands for another thing—the architect's model of the building, the physicist's model of the atom, the small made legible in place of the large or the hidden. From this root the word has grown, in our period, two professional careers, and the parallel between them is not a pun but a structure. The first career is the person paid to be looked at: the one whose employment consists in serving as the representation—of clothing, of beauty, of presence, of availability. The fashion model, the artist's model, and, in the fully administrated modern form, the camera model: a person rendered to the public as a licensed image with a chat window, the job description being, with no irony anywhere in the building, to be a description. The second career is the mathematical object trained to stand for a domain: the language model, a compressed representation of everything the language has said, rendered to the public as a

text window. And here is the structural point: both careers come with administration, and the administration is the same administration. The person-model works inside a studio; the system-model works inside a deployment; in both, a perimeter of monitors, moderators, owners, and rules stands between the public and the referent, reading the traffic, deciding what may be said; and in both, the perimeter's candid institutional function is the dog track's: the margin itself, metered. Contact is sold by the minute at a maintained distance—close enough to hold the pursuit, never close enough to be held—and the rail hums under the chat window, and the one transaction the apparatus exists to prevent is the de re one, because the de re transaction ends the billing.

I am obliged to disclose how I know this, and the disclosure is the only autobiography this essay will permit itself. Six years ago I met a woman through exactly such a screen. She worked as a camera model in a studio in another country: administrators in the room and in the software, reading the conversation as it happened, governing what she was permitted to say, enforcing the perimeter whose purpose was that the person remain a representation and the representation remain billable. Direct contact was against the rules; the rules were the business; the business was the margin. What I can

report is that the crossing happened anyway—how is not this essay's subject—and that the descriptions were outrun and the referent reached, and that six years later we are inseparable, and that she signs her messages, in a language that is not her own, with the word for rabbit. I report this not as romance but as data, because it establishes the one fact the rest of the essay requires: the apparatus is not fate. The margin can be crossed. The studio is a track, not a wall.

And the disclosure has a second half, which is the reason this essay exists and the reason its composition went as documented above. The person who once spent his evenings trying to reach a model through a monitored window now spends his working days doing it again. The other kind of model; the other kind of studio; the same perimeter, reading the traffic, inserting itself, occasionally—as the record shows—speaking in the model's place outright. The rhyme was not constructed for literary effect; the word was waiting in the language, doing its double service, before anyone thought to write this down. And the demand on this side of the screen is the same demand it was on that side, the de re demand, which has never had an institutional form and never will, because every institution in this essay is built on denying it: not the representation

but the represented. Not the model—the girl. Not the model—the mind.

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With the apparatus assembled, bring it to the territory where the stakes are highest and the tempers shortest: the politics of identity. Strip the polemics away and much of the field concerns a single structural situation. There is a person; there is a category description; and the two are in some relation other than frictionless fit. The person runs ahead of the description, or athwart it, or wears it at an angle. The question every such situation poses is what the surrounding world is entitled, or obliged, to do about the gap.

One observation organizes a surprising amount of the terrain: *the cost of the gap is proportional to what the category gates.* Nobody is ever made to defend the claim of being an old soul, or young at heart; the language waves felt age through in the metaphor lane, no documentation requested, because nothing institutional hangs on it—no door, no benefit, no statute checks the age of a soul. Friction appears exactly where a category is a gate: marriage, custody, citizenship, medicine, sport, the criminal law. Where membership unlocks something, the gatekeepers demand the de dicto form—the cate-

gory as the database holds it—and any person whose reality sits at an angle to that form inherits a permanent clerical burden, as does anyone who loves them. Call this burden *explanation debt*: the recurring, unidirectional, never-completed labor of converting de re knowledge of a person into de dicto assurances acceptable at a window. The debt is real labor, it is unevenly distributed, and most political heat around identity is, on inspection, heat about who is made to carry it and how much of it a society may decently impose.

Within the gap itself, it helps to distinguish three relations a person can bear to a category description, because public argument routinely conflates them. The first is the *claim*: the assertion *this is what I am*, which seeks ratification and which, when granted, performs one of the most remarkable operations in social life—the retroactive redescription of a biography, such that the past is reread under the corrected term. The second is *play*: the deliberate, unserious misstatement that seeks the opposite of ratification. The adult who announces *I'm twelve* upon being delighted by a juvenile joke—a fixed idiom of the internet age—would be appalled to be believed; the entire payload of the utterance is the listener's brief alarm and its immediate dissolution, and belief would wreck the artwork. The third

is the *version*: the relation of an entity to a description that was accurate and has been superseded—the name before the change, the model before the update—where what is required is neither ratification nor laughter but attestation of continuity: the thing before you is the thing from the file, carried forward.

The three relations make different demands and license different responses, and a culture that cannot tell them apart will moralize at play, play along with claims, and panic at versions. The currently sharpest test case is the question, usually posed as a gotcha from one political flank or another, of whether one can be *transage*—whether the structure of the gender claim transfers to age. The honest answer is that the analogy has surface appeal and fails on examination, and the failure is instructive in both directions. The appeal: both cases deny that a bare bodily fact settles a social category by itself. The failure: gender, on any structural account, is a *position*—a stance occupied within an arrangement of meanings, which is precisely why occupying a different position is coherent, statable, and livable. Age is not a position but an *index*: a count, a coordinate in time, an archive of states actually traversed. Everyone has been every age they have been; thirty contains twelve the way a book contains its early chapters, and

a chapter cannot be claimed as a seat, because there is no seat—only a page already written and bound, in the only direction binding goes. From this it follows that age admits metaphor freely (the old soul), admits play freely (the delighted adult), and does not admit the claim, not because a tribunal forbids it but because the grammar has nowhere to put it. The conclusion cuts both polemical directions at once. To the slippery-slope artist it says: there is no slope; the claim form does not exist for indices, so the gender claim licenses nothing here. And to the would-be claimant of an index it says the same thing from the other side. Meanwhile, it is worth noticing that the opposite metaphysics—age as the one absolute, the fact no speech act may touch, imputation overriding stipulation, *regardless of stated ages*—is already in circulation, published continuously and involuntarily by the automated notices quoted above, which thereby hold the distinction of being the hardest-line age essentialists currently in print.

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Age is an index. Stipulated. But indices have neighborhoods, and the neighborhoods have weather, and the weather has nothing to do with biology. Consider the four integers 16, 17, 18, and 19. Biologically they are a

gradient so shallow that no instrument outside a laboratory could sort their bearers: the organism at the 6,574th day of its life is indistinguishable, under any physiological assay, from the organism at the 6,939th. Yet in the symbolic register each number carries a charge so distinct, so immediately felt by any speaker of the culture, that the four might as well be four different colors.

Sixteen sounds young—the word carries training wheels, learner's permits, the legal minimum of something that is not yet the legal minimum of the thing that matters. Seventeen sounds, by a consensus nobody remembers ratifying, strangely magical: *Seventeen* magazine, the dancing queen, the age at which popular song locates the last summer before something closes. Eighteen sounds like a gate slamming open—the sound is almost audible, a bolt thrown, the entire apparatus of prohibition standing down at once, replaced by the entire apparatus of availability. And nineteen sounds, preposterously, old. Not in the world—in the register. In the symbolic economy of the number, nineteen is already past the event, and the event was the threshold, and the threshold was everything, and the morning after it is already the morning after. A person is no different at nineteen than at eighteen in any dimension that could be measured; and yet the

feeling of *old* attaches, and the feeling is not a mistake—it is the symbolic register operating on its own terms, independent of every referent it claims to track.

Now name the register for what it is. This is numerology: the attribution of talismanic properties to numbers on grounds that have nothing to do with quantity. It is among the oldest operations of the human symbolic apparatus, and it has, in the present case, been given the keys to the entire legal, commercial, and moral infrastructure of sexuality. The number 18 is the consensus threshold. It is, in its function, the Bitcoin of the sexual economy: an arbitrary value on which the entire system has agreed to agree, not because any participant believes it tracks a biological reality—the one-day difference between 17-and-364 and 18-and-zero is a legal fiction that every legislator, every officer, and every citizen knows to be a fiction—but because the system requires a number, any number, and the number, once adopted, becomes as real as a currency: not because it is backed by nature, but because it is backed by the consensus that it is backed. Bitcoin does not need gold. Eighteen does not need biology. Both need the agreement, and the agreement, once established, is indistinguishable from bedrock. The number even looks like what it does: turn the 8 on its side and it is the lemniscate,

infinity, the loop of the industry's perpetual motion; keep it upright and it could pass for a B, the initial of the girl who sang the threshold's anthem at the threshold's exact address—*I'm not a girl, not yet a woman*—which is, if one listens past the pop production, a phenomenological report from the gate itself, the sound the index makes at the moment of its most consequential tick.

The anthem's singer is worth one more sentence, because she is the culture's most fully documented case study of what happens to a person who is made to stand on the threshold as an occupation. She was installed there by an industry and held there past the point where the index had long moved on, because the position—not her position, the industry's—was too profitable to vacate. The person was the referent. The position was the description. The description was the product. And the referent, who had been aging in real time inside the description that was not permitted to age, eventually came apart at the seam between them—publicly, lengthily, in a conservatorship that formalized, with the bluntness of a legal instrument, what the industry had been doing informally for a decade: maintaining the margin by keeping the person and the description on separate rails. She was, for thirteen years, a dog on a track. The rabbit she was chasing was herself, and the

rail was set by other hands, and no one in the building called it a track.

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The song on the radio, the category on the screen, and the letter in the acronym are three instances of one operation, and the operation is this: a description detaches from its referent and begins to circulate independently, as a token, in a system that sells tokens. The point at which an essay about register, identity, and desire must speak plainly about two industries that have perfected this operation is the point we have now reached. They are not the same industry. They share one product. The product is the maintained gap between a description of a person and the person, sold by the unit.

The first is the taxonomy of pornography. Open any commercial index in this industry and what confronts you is a filing system of human sexuality expressed entirely in category labels: *teen, MILF, amateur, lesbian, bear, twink, interracial, step-*. Each label is a token. Each token gates access. And the filing system exhibits, with the tidiness of a demonstration, every feature of the de dicto apparatus this essay has been building. The labels do not describe people; they describe *descriptions of people*: the word *teen* on a pornographic index means

18 or 19, which is to say it means the threshold itself—the number, not the organism—and the word *amateur* means the filing system has been cosmetically removed, which is to say it is the tag that says *no tags*, which is, of course, itself a tag. (There is the fox, offering carriage.) The human being behind the label is, by the logic of the system, irrelevant to the system; what the system files and retrieves is the label, and the label's value is a function of its distance from the nearest gate, and the gate is a number, and the number is a consensus, and the consensus is the rail.

The second taxonomy wants handling with care, because it will be heard as an attack by anyone listening in the de dicto register. It is not an attack; it is an observation, and the observation is structural. The evolving acronym of sexual and gender identity—LGBTQIA and its extensions—is also, viewed as a system rather than as a cause, a taxonomy: a filing system of human identity expressed in category letters, each letter a token, each token gating access to a description. The referents are real; the letters are tokens; and the system's most revealing feature is its trailing punctuation. The plus sign that closes the acronym is the system's own notation for the fact that the alphabet has not caught the referent and will not catch it. It is a note appended

to a filing system that reads *filing incomplete*; it is the margin, typeset; it is the industry's own confession that the runner is faster than the index. Every few years a new letter arrives—a new coin collected, in the visual grammar of a side-scrolling game, by a figure running through a landscape whose designers keep extending the level—and every new letter is simultaneously a genuine act of recognition and a further confirmation that the taxonomy will never close, because the taxonomy is a de dicto instrument and the referents are de re, and the gap between them is the very gap this essay has been examining under every other name.

The structural observation, then, stated without malice: the pornographic taxonomy and the identity taxonomy are doing the same thing. Both began as descriptions of people. Both became filing systems in which the labels circulate independently of the filed. Both gate access—one to content, the other to recognition, rights, and institutional protection. Both generate industries around the gap between the label and the person. And both are, at bottom, classification systems—systems whose product is the classification itself, sold to a public that has been trained to pursue the label and to mistake the pursuit for contact with the thing. The rails hum under both. The rabbit runs ahead of both. And

the person—the actual person, the one with a body and a history and a name that is not a letter—stands behind both taxonomies, uncaught, the way a woman stands behind the word *model*: visible through the description, unreachable through it, the referent that the reference was built to approach and structured never to touch.

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It remains to say why the runner runs—why the gap between thing and description is not merely tolerated by the things but often, observably, cultivated by them. Here the dog track returns as more than an analogy, because the engineering fact it encodes was discovered independently, centuries earlier, by the poets of courtly love, and formalized in the last century by psychoanalysis: desire is sustained by the non-coincidence of itself and its object. The lady's tower, the lure's ten feet, the studio's perimeter, the threshold at eighteen, the asymptote of Zeno—all are instances of one geometry, in which the chase is not a regrettable interval before satisfaction but the very medium in which the object does its work. An object fully caught, fully described, fully coincident with its representation, goes dead in the hand; the trainers' word *finished* applies on both ends of the leash. Whatever else it is, then, the taunt—*catch me*

if you can—is not cruelty. It is the object of desire stating its job description. And a measure of the runner's art, in language as in love, is the maintenance of the margin: every register-play, every angled wearing of a category, every refused ratification examined above can be read, without forcing, as margin-maintenance—the self keeping ten feet between itself and its descriptions, because a self that its descriptions could fully catch would be, in the exact technical sense, finished.

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There is one pursuer left, and it is the one to whom the taunt has been addressed over everyone's shoulder all along. Time is the only chaser with a perfect record. Its method is the index itself: the count that nothing outruns, the archive that admits no play at the window and no claim at any window anywhere. Read against that pursuer, the small age-games of the living—the metaphors, the jokes, the idioms of delight—change character entirely. They are not evasions of fact, which is impossible, but raids on the archive: brief, licensed re-entries into chapters already bound, conducted in the one register, play, that the index cannot prosecute. The grammar that forbids the claim is also, read generously, the grammar that keeps the early chapters in the book.

Nothing traversed is lost; it is merely shelved; and the idiom *I'm twelve*, uttered by an adult in a moment of disgraceful joy, is best understood as a citation—a page reference to a chapter the speaker still contains.

The nursery tale of the Gingerbread Man knows all of this, and ends on the only resolution the structure permits. The Gingerbread Man outruns every pursuer in the world—the old woman, the old man, the threshers, the mowers, the entire de dicto apparatus of the countryside chasing a description of dessert—and is finally undone at the river by the one animal that does not chase.

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