

## ***Bioethics Poetry - "What writing is"***

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*Do you experience intense feelings of doom? Overwhelming emotions? Racing thoughts? If so then you may be eligible to participate in a two-week study on anti-anxiety medication overseen by*

The words are slight. Sans-serif. Nonthreatening, a dark grey font nearly indistinguishable from black printed on an off-white banner, placed carefully just above commuters' heads on the T. I glance back from the ad to the other passengers. They pack closely together, standing, or sitting, either staring out the window or oscillating between their phone or book to the outside and back. A few sway with the car's gravity. I sway with them.

The T stops. We cluster to let more on. I felt bad for the woman who stood under my arm; I had showered, but I hadn't washed my shirt in a week. The car jolts on. We all watch the trees roll up behind concrete as we descend into Kenmore. Underground the B-line sheds brownstone for a bright blackness. All you have to look at is your phone, or the darkness outside the window which reflects your own image. Or the ads.

I hadn't seen this one before. I first noticed it when I got on in Allston, where, next to me, with me, pushing into the trolley, others held up their wallets and flashed their Charlie Cards and I did the same knowing full well I didn't have the fare if the driver were to ask me to come to the front.

The ad continued. *For participation you may be eligible for a cash compensation up to \$300.*

*Up to.* What made someone eligible for the full amount? To what would you need to agree?

When I worked as a linguistic researcher at Virginia Tech, I took an IRB certification course which forbade unethical practices, such as offering financial compensation that was "undeniable." I make \$11 hour. My net pay comes to perhaps \$400 biweekly. Not including tips.

The same year I earned IRB certification a friend of mine at another university, studying in one of the country's top biomedical programs, called to ask my opinion about sperm donation. When I pressed him for a reason he responded that it's "more enjoyable than donating plasma."

The B-line ends at Park Street. It doesn't venture into the financial district. You won't see anyone wearing suits on the B-line unless they got on at Hynes (having taken from Harvard the #1 bus – one: superlative, generative, capital). The Green line intersects at Park Street with the Red Line, which veins all the way from Alewife to Braintree. For \$2.25 you could observe the creep of gentrification from north to south, east to west.

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Was this ad for me? Because it felt “undeniable.” \$300 was grocery money for three months. Or it was a fifth of one month’s rent.

I did not come to Boston impoverished. I came with savings. I came, I thought, ready for its challenges. But coming to Boston is like riding the B-line. You get on in Allston, riding through the gentrified grit of performative punk and you feel empowered by a diversity which feels comfortable to a white southern boy like you, because it’s diversity in moderation. The Orthodox Jewish neighborhood and the Orthodox Russian butcher, the Korean barbecues and three Starbucks are all a type of familiarity which affords a comfortable participation in gentrification under another umbrella term: “just getting by.” I joke at work that I’m not wealthy enough to have ethics. I can’t buy reusable bags. I moonlight in my head that I write a polemic about the microplastics found in oysters. Op-eds for the Globe. Which lead to a book deal at Knopf. A PEN/Faulkner. Eventually a National Book Award. At the same time I imagine writing this piece I also imagine eating the oyster. Relishing the brine. I like to know my oysters were bottom-feeders.

But then the B-line slips out of Allston and into Boston, past the theatres of BU, by the sanctuary of the MFA you were not accepted into. The ramen place you’ve wanted to try but can’t afford. And then you descend into that lambent darkness.

When the windows go dark, I won’t lie, I look at the reflections of others. I see others glance above my head. They linger. I linger on them. How they turn their whole bodies away from the banner. I know they’re also from Allston by how they linger, as if they’re waiting for the change of stoplight to cross.

After ending the call with my friend, who ultimately backed out of donating sperm, I looked up clinics nearby. One of them offered up to \$1000 a month for regular donations.

*Up to.* A phrase that indicates potential, but with no promise of achieving it. It’s the American Dream in a word. It’s also an idiom; what are you up to? (Oh, just getting by.) Lastly it’s an implication of collusion. Up to something. The suspicion of artifice, of subterfuge, of clever misdirection. The very same sleight-of-hand I used to design the linguistic research project. IRB protocol permitted outright equivocation to the participant so long as they were not harmed. And so long as the compensation was never undeniable.

What is the threshold at which an offer becomes undeniable? At what price are we willing to sell our neurochemistry? What risks are we willing to incur? By advertising on the T – to those who can afford Allston, but suffer it – the ad suggests those who can be bought are coming from Allston, from Roxbury, from Forest Hills. And that researchers know how to coerce them.

Is that what research is? The practice of displacing your own curiosity on the bodies of others. A type of voyeurism that is hypothetically consensual. Another brand of gentrification. Pretending to look out the window to look back at those around you.

I write down the number. At the bottom of the ad, in a crimson banner, Harvard Medical printed their seal: VE RI TAS.

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