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## THE PLACE BECAME A PLACEHOLDER

Can you remember what has happened? Not just in your life, but in your parents' lives? Or further back? Your grandparents and great-grandparents? Can you sense the latent optimism of the 1980s? That there is a collective, genetic memory? That periods of scarcity and abundance throughout the lives of your ancestors left a mark on your DNA, the way that the rings of a tree grow wider or more narrow? Is it something like Joseph Campbell said in 1988? That you are a body with organs and it is here that the ancient mythologies have been coded? That everything that has ever happened has been leading you forward . . . to this moment? That all the major technological problems have been solved and now, finally, we can focus on ourselves? With hard work, you will get everything you wanted. . . .

Or is it something else? Have the traumas of your childhood left an imprint on your chromosomes? Will your daughter be predisposed to ADD or alcoholism or asthma or depression because of it? Is that feeling of always moving forward starting to seem less like progress and more just like a steady acceleration—subtle but constant, in the same way gravity is a static acceleration; that things aren't getting better, but possibly much worse? Are you shorter because your mother or your grandmother lived through the Great Depression and suffered malnutrition? And to top it off, it is now known that the markets rise and fall in seven-year cycles, and continue to cycle in spite of it being known; and that we're in yet another bear market; and, finally, that in these repetitions the future is modeled, "The first time as tragedy the second as farce."

Or if the record isn't in your genes, it's been stored in some other way: in the endless circulation of a network, or as magnetic polarities on a metal disc, or an electrical charge in a silicon chip. . . . Or before all that—before everything changed in 1890 when the U.S. census began keeping its records as holes in a punch card.

There is a fundamental change that occurs in a culture that moves from organizing information in space to encoding information as data.

In the ordering of things, each object is given a place with a particular location next to other things with their own particular locations. When an object is removed, the empty space remains so you can remember what was there, and over time the place comes to stand in for the object. The place itself becomes a placeholder. One day the object will be lost and you won't remember exactly how it related to its neighbors.

The spaces for collected things have also been translated into memory—in the classical art of the orator's "memory palace" each thing is placed in a particular spot in an imagined architecture holding the contents of whatever is to be recalled. In this place you will find X and in the next you will find Y, each on a metaphorical plinth in a determined position. The story told by a series of objects is recalled walking on a given

path. Before the invention of the printing press and movable type, very long texts would be remembered with this method. The architecture makes a place for the object as much as the object makes a place in the architecture, but deeply familiar structures are the key to good recall.

Do you remember the cupboard where you hid as a child? Your parents' Art Nouveau side table? The Colonial dining chair? The Empire-revival couch with the lingering septic smell of your grandmother—the hint of a much worse malignancy waiting in the corners, a genetic susceptibility passed on to you. Did you later find that the couch, now inherited, was not modeled after a French design but in fact an older English Protestant style commonly confused? A result of the backlash against the lavish, baroque excesses that would lead to the French Revolution, followed by a conservative bent that looked back, once again, to Greco-Roman motifs and then found inspiration in their imperial tendencies as well, not unlike the Protestant backlash against the Catholic church. The rise and fall of regimes that trace the arc of drama . . . that leaves us where? Following an always already-repeated cycle that performs history as politics? Finance?

Futures trading has its origins in ancient Greece as well. Could they have imagined that the trajectory of an empire would be so closely pegged to speculations on the future market value of real estate? Fuel? Art? If nothing else, the last decade has seen the final reconfiguration of the future that understands it not as the endgame of progress but as an endless game with odds, stakes, and positions. And it is in this that the present falls away from its status as the arrowhead in a geometric notion of time to a potential in a probability cloud derived from a statistical future. As another Grecian said, "The best prophet is the good guesser." But what was heard was, "The best profit..."

It's not surprising, then, that the fifth-wealthiest man in the world is the CEO of a company named Oracle Corporation, a company that makes relational database software. Which is to say, software to organize information that is not located anywhere in particular, but data that is dispersed in a cloud of relations—a perfect example of the distribution of knowledge that will ultimately result in the reconfiguration of history. And it is very likely that your personal details have already been stored in thousands of these databases: every time you shop or pay your taxes or make a phone call. . . . In the future, history is a series of graphs that chart out a lifetime of user stats.

Are you ready? Your phone is buzzing.

It's probably best to answer it.

