

Christian Moraru  
Univ. of North Carolina, Greensboro

Babes-Bolyai Univ. of Cluj  
Centre for the Study of the Anglophone Novel  
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### **Post-Pandemic, Post-Postmodern:**

#### **Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* and the World on Display**

Societies move forward, historian Reinhart Koselleck observed, when they shake off the burden of the “exemplary” past. It goes without saying, previous ages are not inherently something to emulate. They become so, more often than not, as a community’s cultural and narrative apparatuses rework earlier events, figures, and material environments into a system of values, or a “patrimony.” Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre have called this operation “patrimonialization.” I would stress, more than they have, that patrimonialization is complete when those values have been set up as exempla, as models to imitate. In this sense, “patrimonialization” and the birth of modern nations and of modernity generally have gone hand in hand, hence our deep-running investment in patrimonial instruments, institutions, and sites such as archives and museums. To a significant extent, collectives come together in their collections, where, in charting the genealogies of our nationality, ethnicity, racial identity, and the like, objects arrange us into defining structures as much as we arrange them in showcases. When built patrimonially, and when patrimony is thought of along these lines, collections produce stories of “us” to be reproduced and carried on beyond the moment or period in which the collection is assembled or shown. These stories are, in other words, blueprints for futures whose élans are largely channeled by beaten paths. In this respect, the resistance to patrimonial preservation and curating is warranted, as is the critical scrutiny of the decontextualized, oversimplified, conveniently whitewashed, and romanticized pasts manufactured routinely in the world’s museums, galleries, exhibition halls, and private collections.

Thus understood, the patrimonial is not the only possible *logic of museality*, however. The last decades have witnessed a pronounced shift away from the reproductive and the nostalgic to the productive and the futural—from politically conservative collecting and displaying to museal praxis and discourses informed by “future-directed frameworks” such as those art critic Terry Smith identifies in Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist’s endeavors. Where, according to Boris Groys, the traditional kind of exhibition “illustrates” and, I would add, shores up and extends “already established narratives,” a newer, bolder category sets out to institute a presence without precedent, exteriority, or external rationale. The former primarily “documents,” recreating, in essence, what has been—it is “form redux,” says Smith; whether it surveys a cultural movement, moment, or theme or brings back an artist’s entire output or segment thereof, it tends to be recreative, to play back what has been and has been retained and narrated in a certain fashion. By comparison, the latter is creative, and it is so twice. It both allows the curator to “express” himself or herself more and steers his or her creativity toward the future. Hewing closer to the spirit of installation, this is a heterogenous, Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* of sorts that makes something new, which has not been composed in this arrangement before and which, in a way, has never been at all. But exactly because that something, that novel form, neither re-presents past forms nor carries a “meaning outside of the project” itself, it opens up to the future. “The present” may well be, as a despondent Groys opines, “the only thing that we have, all of us,” and yet the unprecedented collection on view, replies Smith, has the potential to map still uncharted temporalities, to “curat[e] the future.” Even if this present is no more than an “extended ‘Now’ full of noises, a baffling cacophony in which we attempt to find our balance,” as Douglas Rushkoff, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Lionel Ruffel, and others have described it, its scattered body can be assembled—can be collected and displayed—into configurations susceptible to help visualize not just the “world picture of contemporary art” and of

contemporaneity broadly but also that which is amorously present in the picture or is not there at all and yet presents its possibility.

This ghostlike future—“our resource of silence,” writes Rabaté—resonates in the echo chambers of twenty-first-century curating activities of the installation or “constellation” kind. Juxtaposed in such impromptu, seemingly arbitrary but revealingly defamiliarizing “adjacencies,” objects may connect, and their connections may tell stories that break the exemplary mold of available surveys, teleologies, and rationales. “When you put two objects together,” Latin American curator Mari Carmen Ramírez contends, “you’re generating a dialogue between them, which creates another type of knowledge, an innovative understanding of the works and the physical and conceptual relationship between them that does not necessarily relate to established art historical narratives.” Not so much retrospective as prospective, the “other” knowledge Ramírez alludes to is a constellation effect; it is conveyed indirectly, formally, not in about mode, as objects, risen into presence in museal space, start whispering to each other.

My presentation brings us within earshot of their causerie by turning to what I call the curating scene in post-2000 American fiction. Such episodes abound in twenty-first-century novels. For the next half hour or so, I want to deal in some detail with Emily St. John Mandel’s 2014 novel *Station Eleven*. I do so because the book is, to my mind, one of the most poignant curatorial narratives to come out in recent memory and, more importantly still, because the catastrophic contemporaneity it exhibits, sometimes literally, affords, beyond the patrimonial mourning of lost worlds, a more encouragingly futural, post-survivalist and post-conservative politics of preservation.

*Station Eleven* became a Covid-19 classic overnight. Unenviable as it may be, the distinction does not take anything away from Mandel’s masterful accomplishment, whose recognition did not have to wait for the real equivalent of the Mandel’s fictional Georgia Flu.

On the other hand, the 2019 pandemic, especially the suddenness with which it magnified world scarcity culture and by the same token impacted our relationships with the objects around us, has understandably refocused our reading of *Station Eleven* and even of Mandel's whole work. As a result, I would argue, a couple of things are clearer now than a few years ago: first, this work is a narrative system of integrated, intersecting, and recurring themes, situations, references, and characters, and this system is centered on yesterday, in my talk at the Translation conference, I called object-thinking, thinking about objects or, as Mandel's fictional curator says, "considering objects"; second, this is a reflective modality that in *Station Eleven* reaches beyond the conceptual and its rationalizations, beyond "claiming" this or that, *beyond "aboutness,"* bodying forth into objectual practices such as amassing, organizing, laying out, and showing in designated and undesignated, actual or makeshift storing and exhibiting sites from museums to backpacks; third, these practices are also practices—installations or performances—of contemporaneity in a poietic sense, in that in which the contemporary is *made* by object arrangements; and fourth, the object-thinking animating them also encourages their visitors from inside and outside the novel to do some future-thinking themselves as well. The oblique inscription of futurity, of a narrative of hope, into the horribly catastrophic present—the sublimation of the pandemic into a vaguely *post-pandemic* world susceptible to avoid the mistakes of the Anthropocene past—aligns *Station Eleven* with other American fictions that think through our current predicament in ways that are less cynical, less ironic than run-of-the-mill postmodern prose. These works may be, and are, metafictional and heavily intertextual, but their goal is not to uncover the void in the heart of any futural project after the bankruptcy of modernity's Grand Narratives. Quite the contrary, they are in search of a presence, of something that is or will be—and will be newish if not entirely new—in a present to come.

This futural strand is less visible in Mandel’s 2010 debut novel *The Singer’s Gun* (2010), where salvaging, collecting, and trafficking in counterfeit and damaged artworks feed principally into the thematics of fraud, debt, debt crisis, and crisis overall. At once personal and public, North American and global, the crisis got incrementally more catastrophic and world-systemic in Mandel’s writing. The 2012 novel *The Lola Quartet* echoes the 2007 subprime mortgage crisis and the recession that followed, and so does *Station Eleven*, Mandel’s masterpiece. Very quickly, the book is about life on the planet, particularly in North America’s upper Midwest, after a cataclysmic pandemic, the Georgia Flu—“Georgia” from the country by the same name. The story is, simply speaking, a narrative triple decker: there is a main plot line in the diegetic present, about 15 years after the pandemic, with the members of the Traveling Symphony at its core—they are people who go around visiting the scattered, small communities of survivors and performing Shakespeare and Beethoven for them; then there is retrospective narrative line that recounts the shocking days and weeks of civilizational collapse when the Flu struck; and third, there is subplot that pursues the making and itineraries of a comic book authored by a character, Miranda, right before the Flu, and which eventually finds its way to an improvised Museum of Civilization, where a character, Clark, collects all kinds of things that used to be part of people’s lives in the years and decades prior to the catastrophe.

Now, the pandemic that in the novel wiped out over 99% of the world population struck the same “year when 12 percent of the world shipping fleet lay at anchor off the coast of Malaysia, container ships laid dormant by an economic collapse.” Entwined with cross-hemispheric networks of crime in *The Singer’s Gun*, “international water systems,” traveling over water, the planetary ocean’s shipping lanes, and the financial debacle’s bearings on them all come back in *Station Eleven*, where Miranda, a “shipping executive,” is dispatched to inspect the “dormant” boats, and they return again in the 2020 *The Glass Hotel*, along with

Leon Prevant, Miranda's boss. The freighters, their circumplanetary routes, and, first and foremost, their solemn, quasi-funereal immobility are more than a short-lived boost to the geopolitical scope of the 2010 thriller. An enduring hallmark of Mandel's material imaginary, the vessels also link up with other key elements of *Station Eleven*'s objectual repertoire. These include the itinerant paperweight—the snow globe that, albeit indirectly, Kirsten, a collector herself and member of the Traveling Symphony, got from Miranda strings together and gives meaning to characters and occurrences scattered across discrete times and places; the new world's "dormant airplanes," chiefly those rusting outside Concourse C of the fictional Severn City Airport, where Clark sets up his Museum; and, most significantly, Miranda's exquisitely crafted two-volume comic-book series, *Dr. Eleven*, particularly the spaceship from which the graphic novel's first installment gets its title.

Remarkably, the comics end up, like the glass globe and other "distant" relatives of the slumbering liners among the Museum's holdings. After the roving artists arrive at the Museum, their symbolic destination all along, Kirsten makes a point to always leave a volume in Clark's curatorial custody. That way, she tells Clark, "at least one book will always be safe" while she is touring with the Symphony. But if "survival is insufficient," as Kristen's tattoo, the inscription on the Symphony's lead wagon, and *Star Trek: Voyager* episode 122 before them assure us, so are too *Dr. Eleven*'s safekeeping and, as we will see momentarily, safekeeping and preservation in the comic itself and, on another level, in the novel as well. Conservancy is not the only concern here; after all, as Clark tips the reader, the southern Midwest, where the Symphony is headed, has become, more than a decade after the Flu's outbreak, "perfectly safe." Through Kirsten, Mandel ensures *Dr. Eleven* reaches the Museum and takes its place alongside the other objects, and that is important because the entire collection and of the novel itself revolve around the comic's presence in the Skymiles

Lounge display, the objectual “dialogue” this presence enables, and the connections, narratives, and worldviews this silent conversation articulates.

Most critics who have dwelt on *Station Eleven*’s “postapocalyptic curating” and “salvagepunk” have read them, and the whole book with them, as a largely conservative and politically-economically decontextualized exercise in nostalgia. In their assessment, the verdict is corroborated by the Symphony’s patrimonial commitment to the high-brow, “Western-centric” canon instantiated by Beethoven’s and Shakespeare’s works, to which the artists’ portfolio is heavily tilted. The comment made by one of the performers (“the clarinet”) to the effect that Shakespeare—his own “survival” through the plays Symphony puts up—may be an “insufficient” if not an “inadequate” response to such a civilizational disaster has been dismissed as tokenism, as has been Mandel’s incorporation of *Star Trek* and comic books into the novel. The charges are not completely baseless, and the author herself did little to obviate them when she declared that she “found [her]self wanting to write a love letter to the modern world. And one way to do that, one way to write about something,” she added, “is to write about its absence.”

But Mandel does not solely seek to re-present the now absent world, to simply bring it back, let alone “redeem” it, nor does she reduce it to its canonical art paragons. If she “mak[es],” as her critics themselves acknowledge, popular TV and comics “central to the plot,” she does it for a reason. This cultural material and especially *Dr. Eleven* do more than just “pay lip service to the multiplicity of texts that could be considered artistic.” As I have proposed, Miranda’s book defines metonymically the other items around it in Clark’s collection, but the definitional energy of this illuminating adjacency of *Dr. Eleven* in the Museum and even beyond stems from the comic’s colloquy with the planes right outside the terminal, with display objects such as the paperweight, and through them, with the disused boats in the novel, an exchange that is modulated by the ships’ connections with their real-

world counterparts—the “Ghost Fleet of the Recession Anchored Just East of Singapore,” as reads the title of a 2009 *Daily Mail* article Mandel also credits in *Station Eleven*’s “Acknowledgments.” Moored in “old-world” history, the freighters in turn anchor the post-collapse “new world” in that history’s economically global troubles, and so does, specify commentators otherwise critical of the book’s “nostalgic” politics, even “*Station Eleven*’s use of Shakespeare,” which “helps us understand precisely what is ending with the Flu, namely the capitalist ‘world-system,’ . . . begin[ing] to show readers how the novel’s apocalyptic scenario is entangled with this system.”

Both the 2007 “collapse,” which Miranda witnesses firsthand and reflects on during her last business trip, and Shakespeare ground, overtly and allusively, the novel in documentable history, recent and older, but that does not mean that Mandel offers up either as a model. The dormant vessels and the dormant, no longer performed plays, as well as other, broken and unusable things are curated, staged, and repurposed by Miranda, Clark, the Symphony, and more comprehensively Mandel herself on behalf of an inquisitiveness whose object may be “the world we live in today” but that ultimately mobilizes not so much a patrimonial archiving and celebratory remembering of this world as it does a more farsighted imagination of “renewal.” It is quite telling, in this regard, that if the pre-pandemic world ends with the bang of a *King Lear* performance, the Symphony’s favorite is *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. This another hint that, on balance, this imagination is not passéist, about legacies, inheritances, patrimonies, and a world, ours, on museal life support in *Station Eleven*, but futural. This imagination is scanning that world’s material domains for another world, for the more promising “otherworldly.” Lerner’s Janus-faced ontology, as I called it, is all here, in a multiverse Borgesian reiteration where the alternative, future world “could theoretically be simultaneously present and not present, perhaps living out a shadow life in a parallel universe or two.” A blurry dimension of the world in which we live and whose last

gasp Mandel's characters experience, that other world, or at least an inkling of it, is discernable *en filigrane* ("in filigree") in the cultural signature of the "current era," that is, in the contemporary collected—etymologically, "gathered together"—in the Museum.

The collection goes beyond the vestigial and the commemorative. It has been read mostly as a pitiful index of the postmodern "absence" Mandel refers to and whose fragments Clark and Mandel allegedly shore against their fictional and not-so-fictional ruins, but that reading misses the other absence, the futural otherworld that the Museum's objects arrange into presence. A leitmotif of *Dr. Eleven* and *Station Eleven*, the otherworldly is the display behind the display, "another world just out of sight . . . toward [which] ships mov[e] over the water," and to which the novel opens out in its last line. Similar to the "non-absence" Lerner talks about apropos Ashbery, that world is not of a past all but forgotten by the new generations growing up without the internet, but of a future *in potentia*, part of the present albeit not substantially present in it. An other to and beyond our world, the otherworld is not wholly divorced from it either. This is what the cargo ships suggest, and *Station Eleven*, which is their comic-book equivalent, as Miranda's final "vision" implies, does as well, whether through its association with the inactive fleet or metaleptically, in the *Dr. Eleven* scene that reenacts the dinner party famous actor Arthur Leander and his wife, Miranda, give in California and Clark reminisces about at the end of the novel. The majestic freighters bring to the Museum and the novel as a whole dismal history *and* futurity, the apocalypse of *Station Eleven*'s readers as well as a "post" to it. Wrecks of an all-too-real early twenty-first-century world economy itself in shambles, the ships connect not just with Dr. Eleven's spaceship, which, badly damaged in the war against the alien invaders who took over Earth and enslaved its population, is a barely functioning "wreckage" itself, but, through *Station Eleven*, also with the "metal Starship Enterprise," August, a Symphony member, finds in one

of his scavenging expeditions, and thus with *Star Trek*'s post-survivalist, post-postapocalyptic, futural message.

This is by and large the message of *Station Eleven* too—of the spacecraft and of the book. Only, like Lerner, and surely unlike Tyler, Arthur's son and the novel's end-of-days Prophet, Mandel is leery of "messages." She declines to make explicit claims about the world beyond the horizon and more generally to operate in about mode. She neither paints that world in realistic detail nor theorizes it. Instead, she *poses it com-positionally*, through object arrangements. Kirsten's showdown with Tyler later in the novel, where the two trade quotes from Miranda's book and the Prophet is shot dead by one of his own followers, is instructive in this respect. Replaying the comic's first-volume "face-off between Dr. Eleven and an adversary from Undersea," the planet-like spaceship's "underwater fallout shelters" inhabited by people "clinging to the hope that the world they remembered could be restored," the encounter is also a clash between two approaches to civilizational catastrophe. Both have to do with collecting, as well as with collectives, with community, that is. One, the Prophet's, is radically restorative. For Tyler, the flu is the new flood, "perfect" in its "culling" capacity to weed out the impure and gather the "spared" few into a hyperbolically selective group—a "collection" of the elect. Deceptively forward-looking, his prophecy is nostalgic to a fault, which is what Kirsten implies when she throws back at him one of the comic's sentences ("We long only to go home"). The mandatory nostos is reinforced by an extreme and violent patrimonialism, which "saves" humanity's exemplars for a future that will already have revealed itself outside history altogether, in an imaginary *illo tempore*. The rationale for Tyler's "new world" and, in all final analysis, this world itself are foreordained, and so salvation, in and of itself a "collecting" practice, as noted, leads inevitably to the musealization of human beings, which the Prophet's vision disconnects from each other and from historical reality as well.

To vastly exclusive, top-down, and passéist salvation, Mandel opposes salvaging, collecting, and displaying. More democratic and futural, these are activities in which Kirsten participates along with the rest of the traveling ensemble, which is an object assemblage in its own right—pointedly, the narrator refers to its members, and they actually call each other, by their instruments’ names (“the tuba,” “the clarinet,” “the flute”), and when they do not play or rehearse, they rummage through abandoned buildings. Some of their findings wind up, alongside items donated by others, in Clark’s steadily expanding Museum, where, August explains to his fellow artists, “artifacts from the old world are preserved.” Granted, “The entire world is a place where artifacts from the old world are preserved,” as another character quips, but there is nothing curatorial—no object-thinking—to the planetary *objet trouvé* display. The world outside the Museum, the “world-as-museum” is more of an ossuary, a desolate landscape that stands out for what is not there anymore, for the “unredeemable” absence around which a society genuinely different from what has been is unlikely to gather. This makes the post-Georgia Flu world an inferno—“hell is the absence of the people you long for” reads Mandel’s recurrent paraphrase of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Huis clos* (No Exit) “hell is others.” The axiom is apt, for this world has witnessed the swift degradation of the human into its murderous and asocial other, what with North America’s dystopian wastelands overrun, by “feral” humans and marauders with and among whom community, a modicum of human “harmony,” of the Symphony sort or not, and potentially a new world are hardly imaginable. In the vestigial vastness of the pandemic’s aftermath, people wait for the jumpstart of modern history’s Grand Narratives or for Tyler’s prophecy to pan out. Their only concern is survival—“there is just survival out there,” observes a heroine.

A mark of apocalyptic contemporaneity, self-preservation is both the dominant “cultural mode” of the post-Flu years and a temporal ontology where what is cannot exceed what has been (“there is just survival . . .”), trapping survivalists in an indigent and past-

beholden present the way *Dr. Eleven*'s nostalgic renegades are in their Undersea "limbo." No actual future can take in this abeyant temporality where what survivors want at most is to re-present what is now missing, so they can keep on treading the waters of the precarious yet unending now. In that, their ideal and Tyler's are not that different. The "future" they are hungry for, one from earlier history rather than from outside it, had arrived too and came to a standstill in the pandemic. It is the future anterior of "antibiotics" and "engines," staples of an industrial past that, as a character comments, sound like stuff from the future ("science fiction") to those born after the Flu. "An incomplete list" of such futuristic items features "chlorinated water" for "pools," "ball games played out under floodlights," "trains running under the surface of cities," working internet and cell phones, manned state borders, and aircraft crossing the sky.

The language of this elegiac catalogue suggests that the desire to make the Anthropocene great again is basically one for the material world's lost instrumentality. Notably, the objects themselves are not gone; their uses are. Like the planes "dormant on runways and in hangars," these entities are no longer the "standing-reserve" they have been. The fantasy of more "proactive" nostalgics such as the Traverse City "inventor" looking for the by now legendary internet, "WiFi[,] and the impossible-to-imagine Cloud" is to wake them up from their inoperative dormancy, bring them back to functional life, and use them as utensils, prostheses, conveniences, commodities, and resources once more, without much thought for what this use has done to the planet. This fantasy is culturally and politically regressive, and patrimonially so, one might say—not only does it fall back on the past and the foundational rationales embodied in hi-tech wonders and other epitomes of "human creativity," but it also posits use as ultimate value and serviceable, exploitable, and tradeable things as exemplary objects.

Patrimoniality is here essentially a metaphor, not an “intentional” curatorial practice. The object-thinking in play in it comes down to object-use, to getting hold of objects that can be once more employed, consumed, exchanged, and so forth. By contrast, a collection entails, as Boltanski and Esquerre insist, an investment in “the useless,” which is exactly what Clark makes in Concourse C, with deliberation and dedication (“he took his role as curator seriously,” Mandel writes). The world-as-museum is not about conserving the things in it, but quite the opposite, about preserving, *at their expense*, the human and, more broadly, the anthropocentric setup of modernity. They are not collectibles but consumables, their presence drained away by the exploitatively transitive relationships humans have with them. This does not mean that one cannot collect objects that still work or can be repaired, and an anterior future is precisely the kind in which “the objects [Clark]’d collected over the years, from the airport and beyond—the laptops, the iPhones, the radio from an administrative desk, the electric toaster from an airport-staff lounge, the turntable and vinyl records that some optimistic scavenger had carried back from Sever City—” would be presumably fixed, retrofitted, repurposed, and reintroduced into the world circuitries of instrumentality. Clark’s Museum is predicated, however, on the suspension (“dormancy”) of this instrumentality. The computers and cell phones are not in there for their use or exchange value. Clark does not treasure them for what he can do with or get for them—for their capabilities, for the goal or place he could reach through or past them. They are there as “forms” rather than “contents” and are appreciated for the intrinsic, aesthetic worth acquired under catastrophic circumstances, much like the Ur-object of the collection, *Dr. Eleven*, and in it, the hulk of Dr. Eleven’s spaceship.

Mandel has been accused of “aestheticizing” things, of removing them from their economic, political, and historical context, but the abundant references to the 2007 economic downturn effectively *historicize* even a futurist object such as Station Eleven. The comic

book and its spacecraft—the seminal presences of the Museum—are not ahistorical. To the contrary, they are entanglements of history and aesthetics, cultural sites where, appearances notwithstanding, aesthetics is historicized rather than the other way around and beauty arises, accordingly, out of a documentable historical and financial catastrophe, from which Mandel extrapolates the death of a whole object-thinking paradigm and of the world-system of material production and consumption rooted in it. Indeed, in *Station Eleven* too death is the mother of beauty, as the author echoes an entire modernist tradition and, almost verbatim at times, Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning.” As the novelist tells us again and again, the post-pandemic world is awash in beauty, replete with beautiful objects, from the “remnant fleet” to the paperweight Kirsten carries in her bag, and more than anything else, if on another plane of the story, “the beautiful wreckage of Station Eleven.” This world is beautiful not because it is dead itself, but because the world before it has died. As it did so, that world let go of objects heretofore hostage to its economic systems, and, as a result, ships, paperweights, and toasters acceded to the unprecedented beauty of “uselessness.” It is not that these objects were “ugly” before either; their “treatment” by humans was, insofar as objects’ transcendence in the acts of use, exchange, and the like was a fundamentally unaesthetic response to their presence. Nor are they dead now that they no longer work; they are “dormant.” In other words, the beauty Miranda, Kirsten, and Clark admire around them is an effect of objects’ stillness, of their having become valuable in and of themselves once they stopped serving as tools or raw materials. Mandel does not beautify an unjust and wasteful world, nor does she offer up capitalism as an aesthetics. The aesthetic aura around things, their “flatness,” she suggests, reveal themselves once the instrumental logic of capital has failed and are, remain enduring, aesthetic markers of this failure. If survivalists’ wish is to correct it and go back to “uglier” relationships with objects, the Museum celebrates and intensifies their de-instrumentalization while acknowledging in detail the global networks of

their manufacturing and circulation. “Clark,” we learn—and I leave you with his illuminating thoughts—

has always been fond of beautiful objects, and in his present state of mind, all objects were beautiful. He stood by the case and found himself moved by every object he saw there, by the human enterprise each object had required. Consider the snow globe. Consider the mind that invented all those miniature storms, the factory worker who turned sheets of plastic into white flakes of snow, the hand that drew the plan for the miniature Severn City with its church steeple and city hall, the assembly-line worker who watched the globe glide past on a conveyor belt somewhere in China. Consider the white gloves on the hands of the woman who inserted the snow globes into boxes, to be packed into larger boxes, crates, shipping containers. Consider the card games played belowdecks in the evenings on the ship carrying the container across the ocean, a hand stubbing out a cigarette in an overflowing ashtray, a haze of blue smoke in dim light, the cadences of a half dozen languages united by common profanities, the sailors’ dreams of land of women, these men for whom the ocean was a gray-line horizon to be traversed in ships the size of overturned skyscrapers. Consider the signature on the shipping manifest when the ship reached port, a signature unlike any other on earth, the coffee cup in the hand of the driver delivering boxes to the distribution center, the secret hopes of the UPS man carrying boxes of snow globes to the Severn City airport. Clark shook the globe and held it up to the light. When he looked through it, the planes were warped and caught in whirling snow.

Thank you.