

VENTRILOQUENCHED, OR SESSIONS FROM THE SUMMIT

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Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability:

- In the last forty days, have you: Willingly believed statistics provided by scientists whose qualifications you did not know? Been haunted by nightmares involving the Rockies?
- Matthew McConaughey is afraid of revolving doors. Cameron Diaz has a doorknob phobia. Have you had any trouble being inside of anyone recently?

I noticed from your intake form that you're having some trouble with thirst. Of course, you can lead a horse to water, or you can sit on your couch and drink Bud Light. Steven Petrosino drank 33 ounces of beer in 1.3 seconds. Peter Dowdeswell, while upside down, drank one pint of champagne in 3.3 seconds. The largest cup of sweet tea ever made was 912 gallons in a glass that measured nine feet high. Drinking a gallon of milk in an hour might kill you, but then, what won't? For one thousand days, a man named Mahesh Ahirwar drank his wife's blood drawn by his own hand. American scientists say that drinking semen will lower your blood pressure. British scientists say it will give you throat cancer. But tell me, do you drink alcohol, and if yes, how often, and let's talk about your family. If my hand was a collection of finger puppets, which finger would symbolize your mother?

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At five, you drank hot prophecy in a snowstorm and lost your first language in a traffic accident. How does talking about this make you feel? One: My brother grew up to be a puppeteer. Two: My cousin grew up to design a website dedicated to drinking cold sodas in hot showers. You, too, were born. But. Three: I can't decide which is scarier, becoming someone's marionette or having my hand rot inside someone else.

The fear of dolls is known as pediophobia. The lifeless eyes of a doll may bring to mind the unseeing eyes of a corpse. Using puppets

in therapy, though, enables individuals to express thoughts they might otherwise think of as unacceptable. The most popular kind of puppet in clinical settings is the kind held on the hand because it is easy to manipulate. Now, secretaries will always ask what you're coming in for. If you answer honestly, they'll blink and crinkle up their noses. To be safe, just say, well, you know, I've just been feeling a little anxious lately. Those nice ladies don't need to hear how those glass eyes stare and stare.

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Actually, milk probably isn't the worst way to go. It's better than a ham sandwich, am I right? Like poor Mama Cass. She isn't remembered for "Dream a Little Dream" or even that scandal involving the other mama and the two respective papas; she's become the poster girl for the lamest death of all time, which, it turns out, isn't even legit. That ham sandwich was just a witness — an innocent bystander, if you will, in the wrong place at the wrong time — of some run-of-the-mill heart attack. A heart attack's not the best way to go over the Big Ridge, either, of course, but in the grand scheme of things, it sure beats cold cuts and Wonder Bread, wouldn't you say?

George W. Bush choked on a pretzel his first month in office. It was only a secret service Heimlich maneuver that kept him in the White House. But we do not speak for our politicians like we do for our puppets. Instead, we look at them and think of corpses, mountains of them, forming new ranges inside the boundaries of Chile, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Vietnam, El Salvador, Guatemala, Rwanda, Argentina, Brazil, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and the Congo and bleeding outward, forming a tremendous tide.

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What I'm hearing you say, and tell me if this is wrong, because I don't want to put words in your mouth, but what I'm hearing you say is that you spend a lot of time thinking about mountain passes, but you're afraid of actually reaching their full elevations. Would you say this is accurate? Dogs are afraid of brooms and mops. Billy Bob Thornton is afraid of antiques. I drove to the top of Present Mountain and looked down at Would Be laid out below, and it was so beautiful that I thought I might never come back down.

But I couldn't stay. I hadn't brought any water with me, and that's a hell of a way to go — staring into the bright lights of the future while croaking from simple dehydration. And I'd hate to have my body discovered by somebody else coming up to enjoy the view and instead finding some idiot who died from a Should Have. Anyway, I also wasn't sure I wanted to watch that glorious vista colonized by well-meaning robots.

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If shadow puppets held an election among themselves, I wonder if I might win. Would you call yourself stable? You're sure lookin' good, doll. Sometimes I lift my lips to an empty glass, and I'm surprised there's nothing there. Care to get a drink sometime? Hot beverages aren't as popular in the summertime, even though it's been proven that they cool a person down just as well as a drink on ice. Sometimes I want to say, ugh, don't be such a dummy, but that would be offensive to puppets, who can be quite sensitive. But an action figure is different than a doll, because.

Sock puppets get sweaty. Shadow puppets get sneaky. Robots become more and more human all the time. In tropical and suburban locations, we continue to sip vodka tonics, gin off the rocks, coffee without cream, tea without sugar, Coke with lime, and, when we think no one is watching, to press our lips straight to the taps of our lovers with the faucets at full blast — like garden hoses in midsummer. We may feel like we're losing our sanity, but sometimes that feeling is the first step to finding it.

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Rivers grow from tributaries, and we grow anxious. Ordering just whatever's on tap means a person has surrendered their right to choose. Now, that's a topic we haven't discussed. Is choice something you value? Having to decide between fifteen million tracks on iTunes for a three-minute song just isn't worth the effort. But then, I don't know, I'll probably wear Old Spice deodorant for the next fifty years, and grocery shopping at the Dollar Tree has always relaxed me because there's only one type of ketchup — you either pick it up or you don't.

Still, if somebody were to come along and say, all right, this is America, and we're all going to slather on the same brand of butter from now on, well, I'd have a problem with that. More than deodorant or ketchup, what I like most is being able to choose not to choose, having that be *my* choice. You take that away from me, and all I'm going to want is choices, hundreds of them, thousands of them, fifteen million of them, enough to stack up into a mountain that can be seen for miles.

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You called your father from a place called Ing once, and he said, wait, where did you say you are? I don't think I heard it right; there's nothing like that on the map I've got here. He was at the factory. You could hear the lunch bell ringing, a clock ticking. One of the old guys was yelling to him from across vacuous right angles. You knew he'd heard you the first time, but you said it again anyway, leaning up against your crippled car, hobbled by a flat tire and the sudden realization that the world extends beyond even the best cartographers. The metal of the passenger door scorched through the back of your shirt. The sting was exquisite.

I'm near a ten-foot sign imprinted with the fifth commandment, you said. A few hours ago, I passed a Stop sign. But it didn't matter what you said; the syllables were deflated even before they left your mouth.

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Have you ever had inappropriate thoughts about children or animals? My doctor prescribed me medication to keep the dolls from staring at me while I'm asleep. But now, everything is covered in frost, and I'm not sure I ever have appropriate thoughts about anything.

The presidential debates were televised for the first time in 1960, and it's said that John F. Kennedy won the election because everyone fell in love with his young and hopeful face. I suppose it's possible that hope was actually a real thing once, before flag-draped coffins fresh from Vietnam started replacing those pretty faces on our TV screens.

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You know, many people hear voices — inside their heads — some time in their lives. It's much more common than we might imagine. It can be a frightening experience, certainly, but nothing we necessarily need to panic about. Do we ever *need* to panic about anything? Do we ever *need* to feel any feelings, or are they always an optional part of the package?

I don't know, dummy. The maps mostly show Was, a landscape we like to think of as a varied topography. But the elevation is actually almost all below seeing level, and what our eyes do capture is a monochrome skyline. There is only one city; no Littleton, no Walden Pond, no Harper's Ferry, no Pearl Harbor, Chicago, New York, or Wounded Knee; no Sutter's Mill, no Gettysburg, no Oklahoma City, no Washington, DC — only Before, stretched in every direction. Despite our own best efforts to tell them apart, the brick buildings all bleed together.

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Pediophobia includes robots. Robots include vacuum cleaners. Loaning a next-door neighbor a vacuum is against the law in Denver, but you live in denial. Ashton Kutcher openly admits to being afraid of his wife's doll collection. A mannequin named Clara was married to a man named Dauveed on a California street in 2009. Some say that Warren Harding died after being poisoned by his wife in 1923. Still, the statistics say that people who are married are more likely to be satisfied with their lives. Do you live alone? I live in the river, but I still wake up thirsty.

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Some people find it helpful to breathe into a paper bag. Some close their eyes and count. Still others simply open their mouths and pour. I'm a whiskey man myself, and they say that means that I know how to settle an argument and that I'm willing to pay for good service. Of course, they also say that Edison invented the lightbulb, and that the 1950s were the happiest times — remembering poodle skirts instead of Jim Crow and McCarthy. Betrayal is blue. Annoyance is orange that burns into anger. Nostalgia is not a feeling, but it covers us in violet. If nothing else, we are good at forgetting. I remember mannequins in store windows. I remember a red sign some time ago, and other magic tricks that were never explained.