

Run

It is one year since I began my lease-less, couch-bouncing lifestyle and I am once again a rent-paying appendage of a household. I need a job. After two months of searching fruitlessly and getting by on food stamps, free boxes, and plasma money I get a call back to become a canvasser -- to gather memberships for a progressive non-profit in support of their current project, a revision of the soon-to-be-passed farm bill restricting Federal subsidies to large Agricorp businesses.

I get to the office about an hour early and decide to walk around and read. About half an hour in I have fully admitted that I want to walk home and skip the whole fucking thing -- thus commences the argument of positive and negative mantras, where you try to get yourself to do something that you know you are absolutely going to hate. I walk back and make it to the office right on time but just hover at the door, all glass and totally transparent, for about five minutes in petty, agonizing indecision until this guy opens the door and asks if I'm okay; which, effectively, clenches my cognitive pubic hair and tugs. I am part of reality, time exists and is at least subjectively linear, and this man thinks I'm creeping. So, I tell him I'm here for my observation day and make a pathetic excuse that I "just got distracted by, umm, something" to cover up my five minutes of creepy, statuesque, and mantra-induced flip-flopping. "Something." He doesn't buy it. No one would buy it. I mean, Jesus fucking unimaginative Christ, "something." He lets me in biting back a smile that is less wary than expected.

I enter then, as it seems to me at the time, a lesser known cul-de-sac of Hell for the shy and average cowards, for all those people that choose public speaking as their #1 fear instead of death. Or, as a disturbing microcosm of the world, as it is expressed in some translation of the *I Ching*, "holding in its devotion all things, good and evil, without exception."

I head into the back room. The building is an old, grey brick building next to the Burgerville on Hawthorne with a hallway that leads straight in from the door all the way to an open back room. I get there just as everyone is being paired off to practice "The Rap," a prewritten and bureaucratically-approved mock conversation. I get paired with a guy in his mid thirties or early forties, just starting to bald a little and grey out. Before we start he asks the question that I'm too scared to hear the answer to ask myself: "Do we have to do this thing verbatim or can we just paraphrase?" The young woman running this circle of potentials responds in a perfected, pasteurized kind of friendliness: "That's a good question, David. We do ask that everyone recite the rap word for word. It's important that we not deviate from it even if you think it doesn't sound conversational enough -- which I know is what you're thinking. I was in your shoes once too. Trust me though, it only sounds memorized because you know it is. You'll get used to it soon enough. Just keep practicing." She looks at him all perky smiles but I can see her weighing him. It's in her eyes and the taught edges of her smile -- she is looking for weakness.

I get a little nauseous.

The guy I'm practicing with must be a fantastic human being. At the very least, I've strung his failure to memorize "The Rap" up beside my own and have begun to use it as proxy evidence for our subconscious refusal to continue along the path of mnemonic dehumanization and meld with the monster in front of us. Every time we start, we can hardly make it past the "Hi, how are you?" (This, too, cannot be deviated from. There will be no "Hello, how are you doing today?" here, mister). After the first 10 minutes of mutual failure we begin to give each other knowing glances as practice time ends and we shuffle to the front. She looks at us. I begin.

"Hi, how are you?"