

# Preserves

Matthew Baker

## Preserves

The thing that I refer to as myself is simply an accumulation of memories: an incomplete set of sensory experiences as recorded by my personal organic data-collecting machine. All other aspects of self—my shy nature, my belief in karma, my preference for buttered asparagus with broiled fish—all result from these memories. The way one's personality might change, for example, after recording a new set of sensory experiences during an automobile accident: the sound of another human shattering her jaw on a steering wheel, the touch of a street sign's metal carving skin from one's arm, the sight of a world upside-down. The smell of smoke. The way one's beliefs might change after recording the sound of someone talking—about, for example, the inconsistencies of a sacred text. The way one's preferences might change after an illness, after vomiting a snack of unsalted walnuts, and then recording the taste of the walnut vomit on one's tongue, the smell of the walnut vomit on the floor of one's classroom, the sight of others experiencing similar sensations because of something one had done.

Myself, as a child, I vomited unsalted walnuts onto the floor of my classroom. Myself, I was made to mop the vomit with a sheet of paper I had been given for a quiz. Some teachers were cruel, others were kind—the same as any humans. My organic data-collecting machine had been manufactured within the body of another in a town along the sea—those there owned metal boats with metal motors, fished the sea for black-shelled lobsters,

kept wooden traps in coves. My mother's organic data-collecting machine had pouched cheeks, a hunched back, often reeked of soap and garlic. My mother kept her machine in colored dresses with white spots on them.

Even when her eyes were open her eyes appeared to be shut.

My machine she kept in pale trousers with their cuffs rolled to their knees.

I had been manufactured with male genitalia, and thus, I had learned, I would never manufacture another organic data-collecting machine within me—I could only make the blueprints for them, and, even then, each blueprint would be incomplete.

My organic data-collecting machine has now existed for eighty-seven years. It is underweight, is topped with several handfuls of grayish black hair, and is now as hunched as was my mother's. It is constantly recording. I typically ignore the sensory input from my nose—only about once a day do I record the smell of anything from my surroundings. Taste, too, I typically record only when eating. The bulk of the experiences that have shaped me, then, have been recorded through one of three senses: sight, sound, and touch. Who then would I have become if I were colorblind? Who if I were deaf? In what ways would the self of me have changed if my skin had become especially sensitive to light, to the stinging of bees?

The memories I have from my mother's town are all marked by a certain perspective—my organic data-collecting machine was smaller then than it ever has been since.

Memories I recorded there: the sight of my mother hunched over our table, wearing a yellow dress with white spots, spooning blackberry preserves from a metal bowl into empty jars; the sight of a black scab on the knee of my organic data-collecting machine, a scab the shape of a kite that my machine had grown to repair the skin I had broken there when another boy had shoved me into the raspberry thickets behind our school; the taste of a wall I once licked between the grocery store's cabinets; the sight of my mother

hunched over our sink, wearing a blue dress with white spots, staring through the window above the sink at a truck approaching our house, our teakettle overflowing where she held it beneath the faucet's water; the sight of a group of boys dragging another boy, whose organic data-collecting machine was flaring its nostrils, toward the water's edge, as I stood in the pines, watching them do this to him and smelling the mushrooms rotting beneath my boots; the croaking sound of my mother's voice as she stood sweeping dust into a pile and told me that she did not remember, that she could not remember.

My mother would not speak of my father—when I asked of him, she would tell me that she could not remember who he was.

Another memory I recorded in our town: the sight of the man I thought to be my father—his parka orange, the skin of his organic data-collecting machine's cheeks pocked with slight hollows, his organic data-collecting machine's beard speckled with pale bits of dried snot—dragging empty nets through the street, past the window of the grocery store, alone, talking to himself, making sounds that only he himself could record.

I had thought he was my father because his organic data-collecting machine's nose had had the same fatness as my own, and because, when I stared at him, he would never look at me.

It had been as if he had wanted to avoid recording any memories of me at all.

A few weeks after I recorded that memory of him with the empty nets, he drowned in a storm. His organic data-collecting machine was never found, but I recorded the memory—like the other children there on the rocky beach that day—of his boat bobbing empty back to shore.

I have a memory of the sound of myself asking my mother if the man had been my father, then the sound of her saying that he had not been, that he had never.

The ways these memories have shaped me, I cannot say.

My organic data-collecting machine had been manufactured within my mother's, but it seemed as if every day some other part of me was being manufactured still—was being manufactured by my experiences—would remain incomplete until I had another birth, until my organic data-collecting machine was itself deactivated and buried underground.

After my mother's own was deactivated, I was put on a bus driven by a man whose organic data-collecting machine had shed the hair from its scalp and had grown tufts of hair in its ears and had a tendency to twitch its head when speaking. I have seen many bus drivers since, but I remember none of them the way I remember that driver—because of what was happening that day, my organic data-collecting machine recorded everything I saw with great care.

The bus driver drove me from the town along the sea to the city where my mother's sister lived. Those there rode taxis from building to building, slept in rooms the size of sheds, ate lobsters that had been caught in towns like my mother's. I had never known my mother had had a sister—perhaps, like my mother had forgotten of my father, my mother had forgotten of her sister altogether. The sister lived in an apartment above a bakery that kept trays of tarts in its window. She had pouched cheeks and a hunched back, like my mother, but instead of soap and garlic reeked of hairspray and smoke. She kept her machine always in the same satin pajamas.

She unrolled the cuffs of my trousers and soon gave me chores.

My organic data-collecting machine will be deactivated soon. I understand that this must happen to organic machines, but still I do not want it to happen to mine. I want to keep recording the new smells grown in the alleyways, the colors manufactured in the skins of new apples. I want to keep replaying the memory of my mother canning her preserves. Often, at night, before my organic data-collecting machine begins dreaming the dreams it dreams, I replay that memory of my mother canning—replay that memory and

others, searching for meaning in the data I have recorded, trying to understand what it means to have become myself.

Meanwhile, what is the purpose of these machines? Where goes the data, and to whom?

When my organic data-collecting machine became large enough, I took a job in a factory where we were paid to manufacture artificial machines—machines for brewing coffee beans, machines for heating rooms. The machines we manufactured were meant for tasks other than data-collecting—were incapable of collecting any data whatsoever.

I gave one of the fingers of my own machine to the factory's conveyor belts. I ate in a diner across from a theater. I manufactured plants on windowsills in clay pots. I bought a typewriter. I bought soaps that smelled of my mother. I kept the husks of insects on my desk, the pinecones of pines. My organic data-collecting machine grew warts on its feet, grew moles on its arms. Sometimes I took it to the apartment where my mother's sister lived, bringing her blackberry tarts from the shop below, her organic data-collecting machine chewing bites of tart between lit cigarettes. I lived in an apartment above a shop that sold film cameras—artificial data-collecting machines that were not autonomous, but were instead dependent upon humans to perform their data-collecting work. The cameras could not replay to themselves the data they had recorded—they were incapable of thinking, were empty of self.

Some organic data-collecting machines were empty of self in this same way—dogs in alleyways, cats on windowsills, pigeons that flew from tree to tree.

The plants in my pots were like the machines made in the factory—machines incapable of collecting any data whatsoever.

Some dreamed of manufacturing autonomous artificial data-collecting machines made of some indestructible substance—some new metal, perhaps, or plastic—to replace us in our data-collecting project. An autonomous data-collecting machine that could never be

deactivated, they thought, would be preferable to our own.

I dreamed of collecting data about my father—about learning who had been my father.

I wrote letters to those in my mother's town, asking for any with data about my father to write to me in the city.

A letter came to my apartment in a stamped blue envelope. One whose organic data-collecting machine had been a girl and was now a woman and who as a girl once had shot a firework through the window of the grocery store had written to me saying that she did not have any data about my father.

The others did not write back to me at all.

I often longed to exist, if only briefly, in the organic data-collecting machine of another. My greatest regret was that I would have only a single life—that I would be able to experience the world from the perspective of only a single machine. My machine had a fondness for paintings, for photographs—was this because it saw color differently than other organic data-collecting machines? Did its eyes simply offer a world more saturated with color? The color that most pleased my machine was the color orange—specifically, the saffron orange of the robes worn by certain monks. When other humans looked at this color, what color did they see? Why didn't I see the color green—specifically, the green of ripe limes—the way it had been seen by my mother, who had adored it so much as to paint the walls of both our kitchen and our bathroom with thick coats of it?

Weeks later my mother's sister's machine was deactivated and buried underground and a teacher from my mother's town wrote to me saying that he had data about my father but that he did not want to share it and that he did not think that I would want him to share it.

I wrote back to the teacher asking him please to send me this data.

The teacher wrote back saying that he thought that my father might be him, himself.

Memories I had of this teacher: the sight of the teacher shaking rubber balls from a sack

into the schoolyard's grass; the sight of the teacher stooping with a tissue for a girl whose machine's nose had begun bleeding onto her desk; the sound of the teacher shouting at a boy who had taken his machine onto the school's roof; the sight of the faded maps the teacher had kept on his classroom's walls.

In my memories, I had not recorded the specifics of the teacher's face—all I had recorded of his machine was its dark hair, its boxy jaw, the collared shirts he had kept it in.

I began seeing films in the theater across from the diner—each film's images projected onto a screen between dark curtains, each film's sounds projected toward those of us sitting in the audience. These films simulated sensory experiences—allowed those of us in the audience to record things that had never happened to us, so we then would have memories of those events.

Some of these films, I had learned, simulated actual memories—simulated memories a human had once actually recorded.

New windows were installed in our factory, new floors the same color as before.

A train hopped from its rails and tipped and broke apart, deactivating almost all of the organic data-collecting machines within it.

A pigeon manufactured eggs in the twigs-and-ribbons nest it had built on my kitchen windowsill—manufactured them where I could record through the window's glass the sight of the pigeons within hatching.

The teacher wrote back to me agreeing to come to the city.

Then the teacher wrote back again saying that he could not come.

Then the teacher wrote back again saying that he would come to the city.

I began typing my memories onto paper, trying to convert the things I had experienced into words. This, I had learned, was the function of language—to communicate sensory experiences of the world to other organic data-collecting machines. But, of course, memo-



ries of sensory experiences were always flawed. Organic data-collecting machines were unable to store infinite amounts of data. And even those memories that were preserved became inaccurate over time—the way in which the sight of a fork, not originally recorded in the memory of a fight, might years later appear there in it, become a central part of it, this thing that was never there. The way the tone of another’s voice, recorded in the memory of a boring conversation, might change over time—become mocking, even cruel, in its enunciation of certain words. The way the smell of a piece of striped candy wet from someone’s mouth—recorded during the third year of a machine’s existence, the only extant memory from that year—might smell, in the memory, lovely, perfect, impossible, far better than the candy could have ever actually smelled.

And sensory experiences were always from the perspective of a single organic data-collecting machine: while one was recording the sensation of being beaten with a belt—the leather snapping again and again against the bone of the skull—another was recording the sensation of beating someone with a belt, another recording the sensation of seeing someone beaten with a belt, another recording the sensation of hearing someone shrieking a floor above. Only the collective experience of all organic data-collecting machines could offer an accurate perspective of the world—all of them recording, all at once, everything that everything was doing. Organic machines, however, always became deactivated after a certain period of time. A human might record sensory experiences for only three years, at most maybe ninety, before succumbing to some weakness in design: a liver, perhaps, or the accumulation of plaque in an artery. Sometimes the very data a machine had collected might prompt its deactivation: the memory, for example, of the scent of another human who had left—had been deactivated, perhaps, or simply had moved to a new apartment to be alone—might prompt a human to swallow an unsafe number of pills, a number guaranteed to deactivate that machine forever.

The teacher wrote back again telling me the number of the day that he would come.

That day I took my machine to the diner and met the teacher's there.

What I recorded of the teacher then: the sight of the teacher hobbling toward my booth, where I wore the yellow tie we had agreed that I would wear, where the fingers of my organic data-collecting machine's hands were knotted together to keep them from trembling; the sound of the coins or the keys in the teacher's pockets tinkling against each other as his machine lowered itself into my booth; the sight of his machine's oversized ears; the sight of the pale milky blue of his machine's eyes; the sight of the wrinkles criss-crossing the skin of his machine's face; the sight of his machine's hair where it had whitened; the sight of the lump in his machine's nose where once it had been broken.

As it had on the day when I had been put on the bus that had taken me to this city, my organic data-collecting machine was recording everything I saw with great care.

I shook the teacher's organic data-collecting machine's hand with my own—his five fingers gripping my four—and bought him a ham sandwich and a coffee.

On my bench I had a book of maps I had bought for the teacher—maps like those he had kept on his classroom's walls—wrapped in green paper with white spots on it.

Please, I said to the teacher, if you are my father, tell me everything, I want all of your memories for my own.

A ham sandwich was brought for each of us, a porcelain mug of coffee.

The teacher's sandwich I had bought him sat on its plate—ham within lettuce within cheese within bread.

The teacher's machine began manufacturing tears then—began manufacturing tears and wiping them away just as quickly with its hands.

The teacher told me that he was sorry, that he was not my father, that he had thought I was someone else altogether. The teacher stood then—I recorded again the sound of the

coins or the keys in the teacher's pockets tinkling—and began hobbling away from me, taking his organic data-collecting machine toward the diner's door, as others in the diner recorded the sight of me watching the teacher doing this.

I grabbed the book of maps in its green paper and ran from the booth to the diner's door and onto the sidewalk, where the teacher was hobbling toward a taxi. Please, I said, I brought you this, but the teacher said, no, no, no, I should not have come. The teacher opened the taxi's door. The teacher said, please don't follow me, and then his machine lowered itself into the taxi and shut the door and was within the taxi and the taxi drove it away.

I recorded all of this, have replayed all of this since again and again and again.

Weeks later I gave another of my machine's fingers to the factory's conveyor belts.

I learned to type without it.

I unwrapped the book of maps and threw it from a bridge onto the roof of a moving train.

The eggs on my windowsill hatched and the pigeons within them were fed from the mouth of their mother until they leapt from the ledge and flew away elsewhere. All had hatched except for one—either the pigeon within it was still growing, or it would never hatch at all.

Memories I recorded there in the city: the sight of an organic data-collecting machine being wrapped in a black tarp and carried from our factory after being deactivated by a stack of tipping crates; the sight of the twigs and the ribbons of the pigeon's nest on my windowsill breaking apart—I had opened the window to collect the eggshells there, to keep them with the husks and the pinecones on my desk—and the egg that had never hatched rolling from the ledge, dropping from the ledge, tumbling toward the children playing between the dumpsters in the alleyway below; the sight of the diner's metal clocks

being replaced by plastic clocks with the diner's name; the sight of the window in my bathroom where its corners had grown greening mold; the sight of a woman who kept her machine in heeled shoes and copper bracelets chasing a taxi and the sound of her shrieking, shrieking a name, perhaps shrieking the name of someone within it; the sight of boys standing at videogame machines, making their organic data-collecting machines move knobs on the videogame machines that moved characters on the screens; the sight of pigeons that perhaps had grown on my windowsill but probably had not beating their wings against the air and snapping at hunks of bread being tossed from the window of a bus; the sight of a man who kept his machine in sweatshirts and pants that others had left in dumpsters rocking himself on the steps of the city's library, a man whose machine recorded sensory experiences not of this world but of another—whose eyes saw things that other humans could not see, whose ears heard noises that other humans could not hear, whose skin was touched by things that other humans could not feel but that made him moan, there, when he felt them.

Once, as I stood at the factory's conveyor belts, recording the sound of them rattling and the sound of a forklift beeping beyond, a memory I had recorded that I had never replayed before replayed then, unprompted: a memory from my mother's town of me and my mother and the grocery store's owner walking a stone pathway through the raspberry thickets along the wharf, seabirds wheeling overhead, one of the hands of my machine in one of the hands of the owner's, the cuffs of my trousers rolled to my knees, my machine as small as a mop's bucket, as the owner taught me the words to a song about wildflowers and bees.

I could not remember the words to the song, or even the sound of the song, or why my mother had been walking with the grocery store's owner—it had happened, but why it had happened, I could not say.

I wrote to the grocery store in my mother's town, but nobody there wrote back to me.

I wrote to the woman who as a girl once had shot a firework through the window of the grocery store and she wrote back to me saying that the owner of the grocery store had been deactivated many years ago.

The others who worked in the factory spent their nights drinking whiskey and gin in the city's bars—by adding whiskey and gin to their organic data-collecting machines they could temporarily deactivate them, could temporarily halt all data-collecting and thereby avoid both recording and replaying any of their sensory experiences. Many of them had recorded sensory experiences far more painful and bewildering than my own—would spend whatever money necessary to avoid replaying them. But I did not shy from my recordings—I made myself replay them, again and again, regardless of how painful or bewildering they may have been. My organic data-collecting machine had existed for seventeen years when I had begun working in the factory, and I worked there from that day until only several days ago, but every night I wrote my stories. After years spent in my machine, I wanted to communicate the data I had collected to others trapped in organic data-collecting machines of their own. Nothing, I thought, could be more important than this—after so many generations of us, so many of us at work on this same project, a collaboration would be necessary to come to an understanding of the things we had recorded. I began collecting the memories of others, studying the memories I had overheard at the factory, at the theater, at the parks where others threw rubber balls to dogs. One had slept in a bus station, using a backpack as a blanket. One had seen the birth of a camel during a warm and lashing rain. One had shoveled snow from the driveways of strangers, at night, while the organic data-collecting machines who owned those driveways slept within their houses. Another had imagined a conversation with a ghost; another had fed slices of cucumber to a dog, secretly; another had kissed the wife of another. One had

laughed alone. One had burned a mattress in a grove of trees. One had lost the same pair of gloves several times. All of it together, what did it mean?

My organic data-collecting machine grew hunched. Its teeth loosened, its hair grayed. I fed it tarts from the bakery my mother's sister had lived above until the bakery closed, and then I fed it tarts from the grocer near my own apartment, tarts that were wrapped in plastic and that had been made in a factory much like my own. Never did I eat walnuts. Never did I lower myself into an automobile. My blueprints for other organic data-collecting machines were never used, were never needed. Always I worked in the factory, and at night I told my stories, often going sleepless, typing from sundown to sunup. For years I told them, on typewriters and then on computers, as beyond my apartment's windows brick walls became billboards, as telephone booths became sidewalk, as the lights of the stars were met by the lights of satellites—as the lights of the stars became even outnumbered by them. I printed my stories onto paper. I spoke them out loud. I attempted to persuade others to reenact them, to perform them on stages for audiences of others still. I existed only to record, then to duplicate those recordings for others.

What I found, however, is that I did not have a story to tell. Other organic data-collecting machines were indifferent to my experiences—were bored by my stories, were unaffected by the memories I tried to communicate. This, then, was my failure. I had recorded nothing of value—I had seen nothing of use to anyone, had touched nothing of significance. For all of the preserves in the jar of my skull, none of them were worth the tasting.

## About The Author

Matthew Baker is author of the story collection *Hybrid Creatures* and the children's novel *If You Find This*. He was born in Michigan.

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