

Substitution Play



Sterling Lawrence

Iteration 1

I was in a house recently, which appeared to have been hastily abandoned—broken panes of glass were scattered across the floor, last month’s calendar still pinned to the kitchen wall. My host joked that there was a commode in the basement, but I could not picture clearly what he meant when he said “commode.” His delivery was laced with innuendo, and as we descended the stairs, I was primed for some surprise. This is not how I like to feel while walking into a basement with a stranger. What I saw was both more benign and more barren than what my nerves expected to discover: in the middle of an empty, low-ceilinged room, there was a sort of shanty toilet—maybe the most desolate throne I’ve ever laid eyes on. Slightly elevated on a concrete platform, there were plywood walls on two sides but no doors, no seat, no light, no heat. It emanated shame. I then understood the word “commode” to be a kind of perfect euphemism for my host—it allowed him to be proper and derisive, humorous and knowing, all at the same time.

Technically speaking, what I was looking at wasn’t a commode at all. The full definition of the word includes four very disparate things: an ornate woman’s hat, popular in the late 17th century; a moveable washstand with a cupboard underneath; a box-like structure holding a chamberpot under an open seat; and a low chest of drawers. Four things separated as much by form as by distance in time. My host had made a clever amalgamation of both the courtly heritage and the base human function the word contained. By what turns of human evolution did a fashionable aristocratic hairpiece come to have the same name, come to occupy the same linguistic space, as a toilet? By what substitution play?

Iteration 3

A crowd gathered on the corner. Men and women garrulous with the first sunny days of spring, and watchful children primed for some surprise. Business had opened their windows and the sweet smells of cinnamon buns and sugar icing, coffee and almond cake, wafted out into the streets.

In the center of the crowd, a man whipped and shuttled red plastic cups across a table improvised from scavenged glass and a low chest of drawers. He braced himself with one outstretched leg where the box he sat on, softened by moisture evaporating off the concrete, had started to collapse inward. He had his character down, like he’d studied the New York streets of films of the 70s and 80s—*Taxi Driver*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *The Warriors*. Under a hat propped just so on the front of his head, he performed the banter and rhythm and swiftness of a hustler. He emanated the knowledge that confidence in delivery is the most convincing illusion.

Strangers’ elbows pressed into strangers’ ribs; kids and men jostled for position to watch the shell game, to see if those who bet could beat the dealer. Five red cups and one walnut, the same elements rapidly set and reset, a finite series of configurations, and dollar wagers that a pattern could be predicted.

Iteration 2

He told the story over French Toast. Pouring batter into a warm pan, they made shapes, and guessed at what the shapes looked like: a throne; a man in a hat, a finch on a branch, a walnut.

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