

REVIEW

Urban Planning and Architecture Annual 2005
Critical Mass?



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LOCAL MAN STARES AT CEILING

Usher is not well

On this fog-breathed and birdless autumn night, in a square yellow room in a dim yellow house on a quiet tree-lined street lined with similar dim yellow houses, rests a middle-aged man of medium build and sweatily matted mouse-brown hair. He's asleep, sort of, but it won't last. He hasn't really slept all night, hasn't slept for two nights, actually, and it's nearly morning. A minute here, a minute there. In a few hours another long week will begin. But he is in no shape for another week to begin. The man is not well.

Usher dreams of dead brother

He talks on the brown, Scotch tape-smelling Bakelite speakerphone and rubs his eyes like a priest until mazes appear. The doctor is telling him to get to the hospital quick. His brother is dying. The doctor talks like a salesman, which frustrates Usher. He doesn't want to offend the doctor and politely tells him that his brother has been dead for five years, since the motorcycle thing. Later, in the back of the grocery store, he is surprised to see his brother wrapped up in a blanket by the milk coolers. He can't believe it, but there he is! He shakes his brother, tries to wake him up. This shaking is what actually kills him, the doctor later says. Usher floats home, fills up the bathtub, and methodically screams into the warm saltwater.

Usher is stuck

His final snore, cut short, hangs in the air like a gunshot. He finds his breath and winces in the dim certainty of his bedroom. He is not well. His hand brushes against the stack of files that he brought to bed three nights ago, and his heart sinks. The thought of another week of selling Modules, of owning the company that makes Modules, drives his eyes tightly shut. A low moan turns foul and develops into a cough. He winces again, and he realizes: *this is it. I am dying. This is me dying.* The thought doesn't frighten him. He tries to stop breathing, to completely exhale, once and for all to be done with it, to get on with dying, but the dying doesn't take, and he breathes again. Pants like a dog, glad for the breath, actually. He finds some solace in the not-dying. Forces himself to grin, which actually makes him smile at the absurdity of grinning alone in the dark. Which makes him chuckle. He pushes his damp hair off his forehead, scratches his earnestly receding hairline, which feels surprisingly good, and realizes: if he continues to operate his Old Man's business — if he continues to sell His Modules — he will die. The business is killing him.

Usher stores tobacco speck in tooth

Usher sells Modules and has never really liked selling Modules, and it's killing him. His Old Man, dead now a month, *is killing him.* Dragging him into his grave. He lights a cigarette, inhales deeply, tries to think this through. Still sweating, heart still pounding mercilessly, he props himself up in bed. He slowly arches the cigarette toward his face, like a bullet, focusing cross-eyed on the glowing tip. A meaningful gesture, he thinks. The drone of a distant siren seeps into the room. Then it is gone. He looks up. Realizes he has an erection, which confuses him for a second, for he is not engaged in lusty thinking. He is distracted by a speck of wet tobacco that has lodged itself between his front teeth. He retrieves it with his tongue and drags it back to his newly sick molar. Stores it there. He coughs again, and a vague pain seeps beneath his lungs. Usher shivers in bed.

Usher considers relevance of Bartman

He stares at the ceiling. His erection has retreated. He frowns, as if in an argument. His mind is on Modules. They were crap, the Modules, and he had sold hundreds of them. He had infected the People with the Modules. Usher lights another cigarette and tries to think of something else. He thinks about baseball. He thinks about Sammy Sosa. He thinks about that guy at the Cubs game who interfered with the foul ball and blew that Playoff game. What was his name? Bartman. Fucking Bartman. He is glad he is not Bartman, but still. He feels as if he's something of a Bartman. Usher realizes his active attempts at baseball thoughts aren't helping one jot. He tries to regain the erection. Tries to think of beach scenes and Olsen twins, but it doesn't take. Now he's thinking of Bartman and Modules, and he coughs up bluish puffs and tries hard not to think about Modules nor Bartman nor Olsen twins, but rather to think of cowboy movies, which works for a couple minutes, but then quits working. He sends smoke signals towards the ceiling. *Modules bad medicine*, he thinks, frowning. He directs a long, J-shaped ash into the can by his bed, which proves more difficult than expected.

Usher dreams of food and zoos

Usher walks the aisles in the grocery store. He is unprepared to shop, cold even in his overcoat, and realizes that he is supposed to be somewhere else. At the zoo, actually. Looking out the plate glass window, he sees that the store is the entryway for the zoo. This makes sense, but he is surprised at the lack of themed items for sale. No zoo stuff. It looks like any other grocery store. He knows he needs certain items at home, but the thought of carrying groceries around the zoo all day does not appeal to him. The prices are very low. He becomes aware that he is under suspicion for shoplifting. He is suddenly terrified that he has mistakenly pocketed some item and proceeds to the checkout to ask for the manager. He has a hard time getting the checker's attention, for she is busy with a customer. To avoid any question of guilt, Usher raises his arms in the air and waits to be noticed. Like a P.O.W. His plan is to present himself to the manager, to be willingly searched to avoid any misunderstanding. In case something has found its way into his pocket. As he waits, he becomes convinced that there is indeed something unexplainable on his person. In his billowing overcoat. He is sure of it! And his impulse is. Suddenly to run! He bolts for the door and makes his way into the crowded zoo. He runs like Quasimodo, laughing, dragging a non-bending leg. It is a hot summer day, and foreign voices can be heard. He hides behind a barn and finds a thick roll of twenties in his pocket. Sure enough. He inserts the money into a rusty tomato can and later tosses it to the happily humping chimps. Who are just hilarious, he explains to his own hand-shaped feet.

Usher rallies

Eyes open. He stares at the ceiling. It is nearly daybreak and a few cars can be heard on the street. His walls are sporadically smeared with white and red light, defining the room and its contents. Bed and nightstand. Windows and door. As he leans over to the nightstand to put out the stub of his cigarette, ashless but still lit, the density of this last stretch of wasted years almost drags him to the floor. He lights another cigarette, nearly wrenching his back in the process. But. *Whose fault, the Modules? The People were lazy, in general, and they were looking for a shortcut to the good life. Whatever that was. And. Yes. They didn't maintain the Modules well. No they did not. Crappy though they were, they did not maintain the Modules.* Usher gestures in the wan light, emphasizing a point well made. The People were lazy. For how many years had Usher and his father sold them? For how many years had he sold the Dream? The brochures that the Old Man had developed were extremely potent. He knew exactly what he was doing, the Old Man. Got to give him that. The People connected with the pictures, images Usher himself had drawn, in the beginning. Like a pusher, Usher was called upon to sell

them a Dream. The Modules were the vehicle for the Dream. They were the Drug. He holds the cigarette like a Beretta, squints at the ceiling. He finds this act pleasant.

Usher ponders dead father

The Old Man is dead. Usher the Pusher, Maker of Modules, smokes grumpily in bed and considers issues of importance. Confused emotions stack up inside his head like coffee-sogged pancakes. Should he be sad? The Old Man is dead, and Usher is alone. He is thirty-seven years old, without a wife or a girlfriend. Without a father. Without a family. With no living soul to transpose the Usher name into the future. But he isn't that sad, actually. In a way, he is relieved. As his father's disease had spread, as he had gotten weaker and weaker, Usher had been paralyzed with fear. He would inherit the family business. The Plant, the Yard, all of it. It was all the Old Man talked about toward the end, but Usher barely heard him. He listened in the hospital, as always. Nodding, affirming. Thinking back now, he realizes that he had played the part well: the worried son, the noble salesman, selling peace of mind.

Usher judges self

The Old Man is dead and Usher is alone. So what? His cigarette has gotten all bendy somehow and wet on the end, and he lights it again, softly humming a shapeless tune. He has all the time in the world. He is a rich man now. At the lawyer's office, after the funeral, he was shocked to discover how much the company was worth. He found no comfort in the highlighted sum at the time. A man-sized pile of sweat-stained bills, he imagined, in a basement vault somewhere. Usher's tune changes pitch as he frowns. He finds himself guilty, imagines himself wearing a powdered wig and black robes: *It was HE who took their money, it was HE who opened up the clenched fists of the trusting people, and it was HE who removed the sweaty hundreds.* So there was that legacy to live with. He sighs, and the escaping gas sounds like a leak. He stifles a cough. But still. *Got to maintain the Module. Crap or no crap.* Usher sighs again, this time without incident.

Usher dreams of cameras

The Plant is a department store now, and in the dimly lit back room it is Usher's job to fix the, what? Cameras. He doesn't have the slightest idea where to start. The place is filled with cameras. Most are tiny. As far as he can tell, they work fine. He doesn't know a thing about cameras. Short of a better idea, he puts these in a nearby wheelbarrow. It occurs to him that paper towels are like film. He dips his hands in chemicals and dries them with a paper towel. Sure enough, an image appears. A country scene. He is not surprised and continues to develop the rest of the towels, until his hands are tiny and cold. It is nearly closing time, and he realizes that the store owner will arrest him if the towel images are found. If the world finds out about his discovery. Too much is at stake! He decides to throw them away. But the towel images are gone, for he mistakenly set them on the conveyer leading back onto the sales floor. He notices that the store has already closed and that by now the store owners surely know about his discovery. As for the cameras, none of them are fixed, and now piney smoke is coming from the Yard into the back room. He prays for a fire to erase his discovery, his errors. A fire is coming. Like a storm, it rolls towards him. What luck! He believes he can fly away like a hawk in a nice stormy fire. He will ride thermals, all day long. But first, off with the clothes! His cold hand touches his neck and he is gone.

Usher engages in obsessional thinking

As the air conditioner kicks in, Usher awakens and lights up again. He explores his sick molar with his tongue. Locates the previously stored tobacco speck and poots it skyward. Thinks of golf for an instant. Sees a white ball, there on the wet, freshly cut grass. Reminds him of yards, and mowing, and the sound of a mower, and the smell of gasoline. Reminds him of Modules, actually. He flicks an ash into the can, then closes his eyes as the cool air descends. Visions of the Yard, of Modules in production, butt their way into his mind. He tries to think of other things, restful things, imagines himself on a beach, sipping cool water, but it doesn't take. Tries to imagine bikini-clad women, batting about a volleyball, butts jiggling, but it doesn't stick either, makes him think, oddly enough, of salt and the taste of Slim Jims, which somehow reminds him of fucking Modules, multi-colored Modules. In many fucking colors were the fucking Modular Modules.

Usher draws Module with cigarette

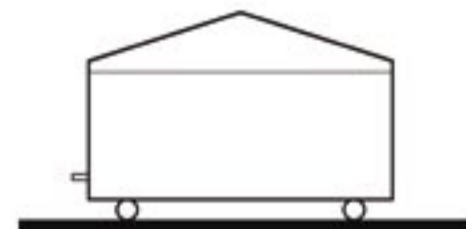
He coughs in the dark. Lights another cigarette. At first glance, they look a lot like houses. This was the architect's principal intention, of course. They look more like houses than anything else. That was the whole goddamn idea. But, in the dim light of the bedroom, eyes closed, he realizes they are actually more like boxes. More like cereal boxes than traditional houses. He sees them clearly now. Big cardboard envelopes filled with potential and promises. With the glowing tip of his cigarette, he draws the outline of a Module in the air. His arm is getting tired, but he draws another Module. The designs are maddeningly installed in the hard-drive of his memory. He is infected with them. He closes his eyes and is walking through a Module, hot off the line.

Curious interlude

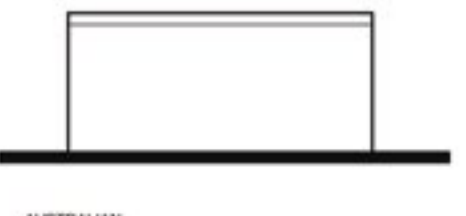
Usher remembers that he left a big chunk of Parmesan cheese in the passenger seat of his car.

Usher ponders nature of crap

Usher opens his sweat-blurred eyes and pulls the covers up to counter a chill. The Modules were crap. Crappily made. Crappily lived-in. Crappy containers of crappy lives. He recalled the immaculate architectural models in the showroom. Models he had made. It occurs to him that the actual Modules were made of the same stuff as the models, really. Paper and paint. Glue. The Units were just full-scale models, left out in the rain. Left out in the People. He is suddenly hot again, sweating, and he throws the covers off. This



MOBIL



AUSTRALIAN

bit about the paper, he thinks, finger dramatically in air, is a quality insight. He begins to further develop it. *The Units were paper. Money was paper. Trade paper for paper. The checks, the money.* But it gets a bit confusing, in the end, and he nods off a minute, actually, after a quick rattly cough and a shakily executed looging of enspeckled goo into his increasingly unfortunate bedside can.

Usher dreams of snout

A pink-skinned pig with a tiny white crew cut is walking real fast-like towards Usher and he cannot move.

Usher nearly immolates self

Usher coughs and wakes up. Sees his cigarette just resting on the sheet at his side, glowing. He puts it out. Thinks: *Jesus.* Picks up the smoldering butt. Falls back asleep with hand in can.

Usher dreams of underwater walking

Usher is on his lunch break when he realizes that he could walk on the bottom of the pond if he does not hold his breath. Of course this is true, and he is amazed at the discovery. Catfish sluggishly navigate the cloudy water, bumping into him. They swim upright like seahorses, with their eyes closed in cartoon X's. The flat fins on their fat bellies shimmer in the milk-green light. He can hear the echoed voices of the workers in the Yard, but he cannot understand the words. He is too wet to fly when he ascends the other side of the pond. Of course. The way to get the award, he tells his father later at the hospital, is to fly first, and then go into the water. The Old Man seems extremely interested, even gets choked up, but Usher sees the obvious flatline on the heart monitor and exits, his oversized galoshes slapping at the wet floor like constantly dropped newspapers.

Usher has drinky

Usher, Maker of Modules, awakes with a start and promptly lights his four hundredth cigarette of the night. He remembers the Old Man wanting a smoke in the hospital and holds the cigarette at arm's length in yet another meaningful gesture, he thinks, *to you, my gone dad, Old Man.* He wishes he had some Scotch and realizes *he does, actually,* a wee bottle by the bed, and pours himself a little drinky. Wishes he had some ice, but not so strong a wish as to actually mean getting up, which doesn't seem doable at the moment. So: he misses his Old Man, grudge or no. Sips the Scotch. Got to give the Old Man credit. He gave the People exactly what they asked for. *The Modules were crap, but they were cheap. And the People like cheap. Nobody forced the People to buy them — then or now.* Actually, nobody is forcing Usher to sell them. No gun to head. So. He sips the Scotch. No grudge against the Old Man. After all, the People had been consulted. *And the maintenance thing.* The Old Man had asked the People specifically what it was they wanted. He listened to their dreams, and he drew up what they described. What did they want? They wanted cheap, and they wanted to live like the People in the pictures lived. Actually, he bore a little grudge towards the Old Man, Usher did. So sure. Some guilt there. He rubs his elbow. He notices one of his toes is colder than the others.

Usher notices bug, but it's a nail

He notices a bug on the wall. It is getting lighter outside. *Goddamn bug. Too many bugs in the old house.* He rubs his eyes deeply, until wild patterned lights echo in his brain. Once there had been a picture there, on the wall. A brownish watercolor of dusky pumpkins, its frame like a little window frame. He realizes now that the thing on the wall is a nail, not a bug. Realizes the picture fell earlier in the year. He sips his drinky and then he pours another drinky.

Usher has quality insight

Originally, they had been built well. The Modules. Years before Usher came on as a salesman. They had been called Mobils during those years and had been built well — of aluminum and teak and machined fittings. He had seen the drawings. But the People did not embrace the Mobils. The Mobils had detachable wheels. It turned out that the People either wanted to live in something that looked like a House or they just wanted a Camper. *The People did not want the Mobils. So, enough with the Mobils,* decreed the Old Man. What did they want? The Old Man talked to Them, apparently. The People. He asked what They wanted, and They were eager to tell him. He listened to Their stories. He made lists and consulted with an architect to develop new designs. Then he hired a graphic artist to illustrate them. The People were again consulted. They liked the pictures. It was easy to imagine themselves in the pictures. Usher drains his drinky, which was bigger than he thought and

nearly chokes him. In bed there, where he's been for nearly sixty hours now, Usher makes buckteeth and works his lip like a gopher. Which he thinks is a pretty funny thing to do. He pours himself another drinky and rests it on his chest. Says to himself: *dinky drinky,* and chuckles. He puts his little finger in the drinky and says: *pinky in dinky drinky.* Nodding to himself, he realizes that this is a pretty fucking funny thing to do.

Usher dreams of dead brother II

To the applause of his ancestors, he jumps up and down on the sofa, bouncing to the ceiling to retrieve the previously stashed Mike and Ikes. But it grows cold, and a cloud of dismay begins to choke him up. He realizes. He has forgotten. To feed. His brother's cat. (His brother is at camp.) How long has it been? He cannot remember. He gets down and sees the cat beneath the sofa. It is dying, mewing loudly. He realizes that it has been mewing in this fashion for days. He has heard this sound for days. He had not made the connection. He tries to pick it up, but the cat turns into wet socks. Then the socks turn into loose, dusty yarn, which he somehow knits back into a cat, but then loses that, too.

Usher recalls background info

Usher opens his eyes and stares at the ceiling. Oddly relaxed now, at least for the time being, he hears the

Birch tree outside his window softly rustling in the morning breeze. This reminds him of camp in Colorado. Aspen trees and big breakfasts. He thinks about his brother for a quick minute. Before, this had been his brother's room. His brother had two-color eyes. One green, one blue. *You don't see that often.* Although it is not yet light out, it is getting lighter, and he can see the far wall and his TV cabinet beginning to define itself more clearly. Bottles. Socks. A mass of plastic bags from the grocery store. This house had been in his family for generations. A family of builders. His father had actually wanted him to go to college. To study business. But Usher was sick of books and tests. In a fit of familial patriotism, he enlisted with the Old Man. To sell Modules, and perhaps to design new Modules, although, of course, that never happened. In high school, he had documented one of the Modules for a mid-term project. He was familiar with the design. Working for the Old Man seemed a logical step. The People loved the Modules, or at least loved buying the Modules, and selling them was easy. He made good money for a kid his age. He worked long hours, and when, after two years, it was time for the brochures to be updated, he did all the drawings and made the models.

Usher realizes he's glad he's alive and not dead like his brother and dead father

He nods at this like a man in an argument nods at a well-made point.

Usher dreams of eggs

He is a cook at a crowded diner. Things are not going well. Orders are backing up, the crowd is becoming irate, and nothing seems to be cooking properly. Mysterious orders, food heaped on odd colored plates (plates, actually, that seem to be from other restaurants), are coming back to him. For what? More cooking? More food? He has no idea. There is absolutely no room on the grill. He examines the returned food. It seems to be barely cooked at all. Egg whites retain a milky viscosity, tiny bits of shell suspended in the slippery matrix. Fossilizing. Did the cook from another shift make this? Another restaurant? He really doesn't know. And still the orders come. With leaden legs, he walks back to the grill, where tiny strips of bacon lay, awaiting instructions. The grill is cold. Really cold, like the inside of a freezer. He tries to think of something he could make. Something to appease the crowd. All he can think of is eggs. Eggs. The word clogs his throat, throbs like a second heart: eggs. eggs. eggs.

Usher hears a thing

His face is still. His heart pounds in response to the soft crash that has awakened him. He realizes it was just the icemaker, down in the kitchen. But still, it is exciting to imagine that armed intruders have entered his house! *European soldiers are probably downstairs. This much is clear.* (A recurring pre-dawn daydream since his youth. They are looking through his papers, but he is safe up here.) The notion recedes. He sips his drinky, whose effect had started to lose its novelty. He exists in the room without blinking, and he finds this state relaxing. He notices a small water stain and crack above the far window, by his chest of drawers. Is this new? The stain concerns him for a minute, but then it does not concern him anymore. He wishes that the windows were open, wills them to be so, but this does not happen. *Fair enough.* Slowly, he blinks. Realizes he better stop with the drinkies. The Old Man called the models his dollhouses, and put them under Plexiglas shields in the showroom. Usher, in an inspired moment, even made a nice model of a Mobil from the old blueprints. He gave this to his father as a Christmas present. The Old Man, drunk on bourbon and holiday emotion, got choked up and shook Usher's hand like one man shakes another man's hand. His voice was scratchy and he said things and Usher laughed because he sounded like a professional wrestler. He burped then, his father did, with heavily lidded eyes, and an instant later a thick wave of radish breath engulfed his youngest son. Twelve years and still he winces in the pale yellow room, in the creeping light.

Usher does Olsen Twins

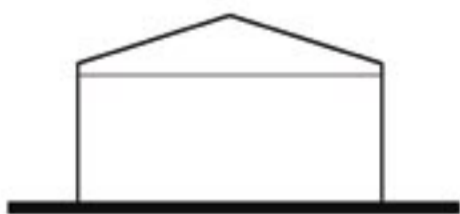
Perhaps today he will go to the store after work. He farts, but doesn't make a loud-sounding deal out of it, which he is proud of and which is meaningful, he thinks, and nods, and moves on. An image of fried chicken comes to mind. As does an image of the Olsen Twins. The thought of the Olsen Twins pleases him. Naked, fried chicken-bearing Olsen twins enter the wild Southern Boundary of Usher's consciousness and focus their confused yet earnest bodily yearnings on him. Usher, Maker of Modules, obliges their giggling requests with patience and dignity. Only his wiggling toes, one colder than the rest, betray his agitation. After numerous minutes of spirited doing, they depart suddenly, and Usher moves in twin pieces of Olsen-shaped guilt-baggage in their wake.

Usher relives humiliating episode

Usher decides to indulge his shame by reliving the dicy Incident that resides stubbornly in the wintry and ill-lit Northern Boundary of his consciousness. The Affordable Housing Convention marked his awakening to the truth about the Modules. His father did not attend, Usher alone represented the company. He walked from stall to stall, asking questions and picking up information on products. He wore a knit maroon rooster tie that was sharp. He looked good. He gave out his newly printed business cards, and set up calls for later in the week. Each evening, the Convention sponsored a lecture, which Usher faithfully attended. On the last day, the lecture was about the social impact of affordable housing. A university professor with an Australian accent gave the talk, and illustrated his points with slides. Dos and Don'ts. *Do* listen to your client. *Don't* be tempted to sacrifice quality for price. Do this. Don't do this. He was charming and funny and then Usher began to notice the Modules. Up on the screen, on the Don't side. The Modules. The guy was cracking jokes about the Modules. About his Old Man's Company. *His company.* The crowd clapped and laughed. Usher felt confused and sick. *What was wrong with the Modules?* Not wanting to call attention to himself, he nervously laughed along with the crowd. In bed now, dog barking outside, trash truck backing up and beeping in the far distance, Usher frowns. He should have frowned then too, he thinks. Should have kicked that Australian guy's ass.

Usher dreams of father and trees

Small Usher appears from behind a door. He had misplaced the exquisitely dirty magazine that had magically appeared earlier. He needed to find it before his Old Man got home, and then stash it somewhere safe. As he was looking, it suddenly dawned on him. He had completely forgotten to mow the side yard. Panic set in. He could not remember the last time he mowed it. Had he ever mowed it? He walked to the side door and opened it. It was oddly dark out. It was dark green out. It smelled like Louisiana. Waist high weeds leaned wetly against the house. Bugs hummed and throbbed in sleepy rhythms. A Catalpa, thick with hanging seedpods like Chinese longbeans, had taken root directly against the low casement windows of the basement. Years ago, by the looks of it. There was no way to cut down the tree without breaking the glass. He found himself standing by the tree, looking in the basement window. Inside,



MODULE



WEDGE

down there, his Old Man sat at an old desk in dim pink light, talking on the phone. He was having a conversation with someone, but his face betrayed no emotion. Like a bird, he coughed up words into the mouth part, his eyes dark dots.

Again with the Farting

The ceiling is tinged blue now, as dawn descends. Usher yawns deeply, which develops into a mouth cramp, which locks his jaw open for a second. His cold toe simultaneously cramps, as does his scalp, and he again thinks: *Again with the dying*. How sad: to die alone in bed. Surrounded by dirty clothes and booze bottles. But, as before, he doesn't die, not just yet. He coughs instead, and he farts again, this time significantly louder due to cough-related sphincteral easements, and then he lights another cigarette, and then he smacks his lips. He clicks his tongue like an adding machine. He decides to sell the company. Yes. The Old Man is gone now and he could sell the company and move away from all this. Move to Aruba and marry an Aruban woman. Get away from the infected Modules. He is still young. Or perhaps he could stick around and make better Modules. Or go back to Mobils. Or he could sell the company.

Usher considers sick tooth

He hasn't thought of the Wedge for years. The Wedge was *his* Module design. His tongue traces his teeth, finding without hesitation the spot on his molar that has been bothering him for a month now. He pushes it until a dull pain blooms in his jaw. He needs a root canal, he thinks, whatever a root canal is. He imagines a complex procedure involving at least two dentists.

Usher flicks Thought-Cash at spectral visitor

Without warning, the Australian speaker at the housing convention returns to Usher's thoughts. Usher imagines catching up with him in the parking lot after the presentation. Walking up to him, on the pretense of asking a housing-related question, and then kneeing him right in the yarbles. Whispering something enigmatic and fear-causing in his ear as he lies on the ground whimpering. Then he'll flick a ten-dollar bill at him, like James Caan in the Godfather. Flick it *hard*. Or a twenty, even. He's a rich man, now.

Usher dreams of black marks

He shaves in yet another public restroom, this one large and quite nicely decorated. Usher is completely embarrassed. His beard has come in again like cat fur. This has been going on all week. He is shaving almost hourly now, and is frustrated by the inconvenience and secrecy. After a long argument, he had convinced the Old Man to let him represent the company at this convention. And now this! His jaw begins to lock up in anger, and his teeth crack. The restroom is enormous. He walks over to the far end and discovers cryptic numbers written on the wall in fresh black ink. And symbols. Stock tips? He has no idea what they mean, but believes strongly that if he could just record them, the Old Man would know. That He would profit. He understands that this information is very important to the company. But he has no pen. He has no pen, and he has no pants. As he hears someone enter the bathroom, he erases the wet black figures, storing the magical ink in his hand, which now glows hotly.

Usher prepares for re-entry into World

His hand is asleep. It tingles excruciatingly at his side. In a moment, the pain recedes, but his face remains winced. Traffic has picked up outside. Some jackass is laying on his horn a block away. Usher sighs deeply, executes a soft primal moan. His alarm will go off in a few minutes, he thinks, but he refrains from looking at the clock. He considers turning off the alarm before it sounds, getting a jump on the day. Establishing a modicum of control over his destiny. This he does not do.

Usher remembers first Module sale

He remembers his first company truck and how, after the convention that year, he drove from the airport straight to the site of his first sale. His first Module, three years earlier. Frowning, surely. He was, what, twenty-one then? Twenty? He didn't know what to expect, and was relieved at first. The Module was still standing, white with blue trim, and it looked all right, he guessed. A hot, sunny day, sky-bleached bone-white with the heat. Actually, it looked a bit beat up, the Module. But still standing. In the years up to that instant, he honestly hadn't been too concerned with the Modules after a sale was made. He hadn't really thought about it. Looking at the Module, seated in the car with the engine running and sports talk on the radio, he noticed that some of the shingles were loose and that the siding was drooping a bit. Children's' toys lay broken in the weedy yard. At first he had wanted to knock on the door. Now, he just wanted to get out of there. Was this what they expected? The couple? Had they abused the Module? He remembered the couple, very young longhaired types. He sensed that tragedy had fallen on the Module, the couple, something violent. He noticed someone looking out the window and he drove slowly on, humming. Some miserable someone. He knew who. He began to think lots of first-time thoughts on the highway. And not think about other sorts of things. The Old Man told him that night: *The Module is fine. It's the couple needs fixing.*

Again with the Catfish

On the river, on the raft, in the water, in the wake of the sternwheeler, as the sun sets, as the bespectacled catfish glide by, his toes spread unexpectedly, down there in the warm water. They look green in the murky twilight, his toes do, and it's not right. It's not a good green. The water is too warm. He wants to notice other things, wants to taste other things, would sell his soul for the taste of a tangerine, but it is no use, and he is drawn deeper and deeper into the river, which is darker than he thought, and tastes like nickels taste, like a car battery, when firmly licked, must taste.

Usher responds to beeping

Usher awakens with a start and slaps at the snooze button with an outstretched and shaky hand. A formerly full tumbler of Scotch falls to the ground but does not break. He reaches for it, finds a wadded up t-shirt instead, finds other things, none of them what he wants, whatever it was, has forgotten, gives up. He attempts to rise, but can't quite pull it off.

Usher dreams of lightning strike, Pine Sol, etc.

He is living at his old grade school, sitting in an orange reclining chair in the basement, when he hears lightning strike up the street with a glassy crash. He is certain that it is his house that has been hit. He is not a kid, but still he begins to cry. He rushes out to help his brother and his father. His legs feel extremely weak. He cannot run. Even walking produces a horrible tingling sensation. He finds a deep slurry of slate-grey water and sand flowing lazily down the street. It is not his house that had been hit. It was his neighbor's house. Its roof is charred and smoking. The ancient woman, Usherlike in her severity, sits on her porch steps in her dingy robe, her head in her hands, as neighbors

scurry about trying to help in some way. The sun is overhead now, and the neighborhood is cast with strong sidelong light, as if from a second, brighter source. A purchased and expensive source. No trees, somehow. No wind. In his house, next door, he sees his family, staring out the window at the chaotic scene. Even his mother is there. It smells like Pine Sol and Usher's tooth aches from the sheer Christmasness of it.

Usher shocked at self-glimpse

The alarm sounds again, and Usher calmly reacts and turns it off for good. The body memory of turning the alarm off triggers a sinking realization that he has a staff meeting this morning, in a little over an hour actually, to discuss ways to cut costs on the newest Modules. The thought of another week of Modules and Module Makers nearly stops his heart. He reaches for a cigarette, but there are none left. He lights a match nonetheless, considers the surprising range of colors within the flame, and blows it out. He hears the trash truck turn onto his street, and realizes he forgot to put out the bags last night. *If he hustles, he can still make it.* He tosses the covers off, swings his feet to the floor, and is surprised by the atrophied shape and fishbelly-like color of his own legs. When did he get old? He lays back in bed, sideways, feet still on the floor, as the truck makes its way towards the house.

Usher considers Wedge

The weekend after the Convention, he completed a design for the Wedge. It was basically a Module, but its a sloping roof and diagonal siding made it look more like a contemporary-type design. It looked pretty good to him, and it contained many of the Do's that Australian guy had talked about that night. It would cost a little more money to build, and take a little more time to fabricate. But, it would sell for more, and it would function better. He had seen similar models at the Convention, and heard the stories. People were snapping models like this up out West. He lettered all the drawings with a modernistic-type slanting hand. The next weekend he made a model of the Wedge, and even roughed out a wedge-shaped brochure, which outlined its features. He cut himself badly making the model, and had to go get stitches. (He still carries the whisper of a scar on his fingertip.) He felt good about the Wedge, but he was nervous that his father wouldn't approve. By this time, he was living on his own, and he invited the Old Man over for Sunday dinner, after which he got out the booze and then the drawings and then the model.

Again with the Burping

Usher closes his eyes and remembers his pitch to the Old Man. He mentioned the features, mentioned the Convention. He projected costs and profits to be made. The Old Man didn't speak. Usher reminded the Old Man of the Module he had visited. Quality was an issue. The Wedge was more durable, easier to maintain, and saved energy through numerous solar-type things. All selling points. Look at California. These were benefits, not features. The People wanted these benefits, and would be willing to pay for these benefits. Usher quit talking. There was no response from the Old Man for a long minute as they both looked at the model, swaying a bit in the silence. Then he burped, the Old Man, and blew some words at him. He said that *he would ask the People. He didn't think the People would like this Wedge, but he would ask them.* Then he put his hand on Usher's shoulder and said he was proud of him, *but that this thing looked like a piece of goddamn cheese and maybe they lived in houses that looked like cheese in California, but not here, that's for sure.* Usher closes his eyes and pictures the scene. He remembers his Old Man had a large flake of something dark green on his front tooth. In his mind he went ahead and blacked out both of his front teeth.

Usher attempts to rise

Still sideways on the bed, Usher raises his legs into the air, tenses up, and attempts to right his body through a grand centrifugal gesture. It is a valiant effort, and it nearly works, but in the end, like the dying earlier, it does not take.

Usher dreams of Wedge

Looking in his father's closet for slippers, he finds instead the dusty model. He removes the base and puts the model on his head. At first he is frightened in his new mask. He can't see well. But now, it is beginning to lighten up outside. He can faintly make out the shaggy outline of his backyard. Today, tonight, he will rake the leaves. He will mow the grass. The neighbors have complained. Quality is an issue. Usher walks outside and kneels. He whispers secrets to a clump of weeds through the front door of his mask. The People do not embrace the Wedge, he says. So enough with the Wedge. This was not the West. The People aren't ready for the Wedge, he says. This is not Californy. So no Wedge. They want the Modules, he says. Usher can hear his father upstairs. The Old Man's fist pounds proudly on a stack of orders, like a hammer. Usher now whispers numbers through the front door of his mask. I will bury you, his father burps as he stomps slowly down the stairs. Usher takes off the mask and hides behind it. Falls asleep. The Weeds, sluggishly surrounding the sleeping boy, wait for a glimpse of the Great One.

Usher engages in cathartic Wedge sub-dream

The pattern of sod rectangles is still discernible in the frontyard of the new house. The rectangles are bushy and bright green, sour-smelling. He gathers up the glossy property descriptions from his front seat. Heart pounding, he knocks softly on the door. He looks around the porch as he waits, and notices that his thumb is bleeding. He will wash it off inside. He notices a whisper of a scar from a previous wound, smiling there on his fingertip. He knocks again, this time loudly. Why is he knocking? He owns the place, at least until it sells. He looks up the combination of the keybox, and spins the dials deftly. The key in his hand is warm. It is heavier than it looks, thicker somehow, than keys ought to be. The bloody thumbprint on it reminds him of contour lines on an old sepia-toned survey. When he turns the key in the lock, the house starts up like a car.

Usher sleeps

Usher flips the sweat-damp pillow over and pulls it under his head. Closes his eyes, pulls a blanket over his legs. The time to get up is not now. This much is obvious. When the time comes, he's got a head start: *feet are already down there on the floor. Just got to push on up, somehow get to the far wall. And then move the feet.* Which, later on, he does — both things — to the applause of his ancestors.

Dan Maginn, AIA, gets out of bed just about every day and proceeds without hesitation to his food-encrusted workstation at el dorado inc, where he is a principal.