When I first graduated from college in 2007, I started working for a writer who is blind. I was a part-time weekend reader, which meant that I would show up on Saturday or Sunday mornings and read the newspaper, starting with the front-page headlines and the business section, the *New York Review of Books*, the *Nation*, and a weekly investment rag called *Barron’s*. I would also read anything else that needed to be read: mail, instruction manuals, invoices, opera librettos, notes. Sometimes I read books, though less often then you might think on account of the availability of commercial audio books and the Library of Congress Talking Books service, which mails recorded books to Americans who have vision loss or other disabilities that make using print books difficult.

He generally employed a human reader when a text was so difficult that it required recourse to footnotes or other supplements or was too new or obscure to have been recorded.

Initially I thought I’d do the job for a few months, at most, but I ended up working for him for seven years until I moved to Toronto for graduate school. At points I worked full-time but mostly I worked part-time, often with big
gaps. In that seven-year period, I also volunteered as a reader at The Lighthouse, an organization that provides health services and other assistance to blind or visually impaired New Yorkers.

These experiences changed the way I read. They also happened in a period in which reading technologies, even mass-market ones, changed considerably. Going mostly on instinct, without thinking too much about it, I ended up experimenting with new ways of reading that have stayed with me even after I have returned to being a student.

The longer I worked for the writer, the more types of things I read. He tended to read the tougher things during the week. As a result, when I started working more hours I began to read more literature, which had to be read in different way than the speedy way I read newspapers and magazines.

The first serious thing I remember reading aloud was *Moby-Dick*, which I read with a special dictionary of nautical terms. I had attempted the novel before but never gotten very far. Now I was starting toward the end of the book and stopping every few minutes to repeat a sentence or look up a word. I probably only got through 15 or 20 pages but the story was so vivid that I found it completely enveloping. The ineffability of these reading experiences makes them frustrating to write about. I had the feeling of being inside the story, on the ship, if that makes any sense. I also remember reading *Henry IV* and *King Lear* and other Shakespeare plays, including every word of every footnote. It was a demanding, inscriptive way of reading. I discovered, in this process, that some writers I thought I didn’t like (Faulkner) or couldn’t quite understand (Joyce) came magnificently alive in reading aloud.
That said, the reading process was mostly mechanical. I never felt that I was narrating anything—I never did voices or attempted to put any emotion into what I read. I tried to read as quickly and neutrally as possible. I read certain types of punctuation, but only the marks that were necessary to understand the meaning of a sentence. Periods and commas could be marked by a brief pause. Semicolons and hyphens basically disappeared. But I had to read colons, dashes, exclamation points, quotation marks, sometimes even question marks. One example—if I had to read the following sentence (which comes from a recent New York Times article that I chose simply because it happened to contain a variety of punctuation marks):

His autobiography, “Clock This: My Life as an Inventor,” was published in 1999.

In 2000, Mr. Baylis walked 100 miles across the Namib Desert—partly for a charitable cause, but also to demonstrate a new invention, electric shoes.¹

I would read it as:

his autobiography quote clock this colon my life as an inventor end quote was published in nineteen ninety nine in two thousand mister baylis walked a hundred miles across the namib

desert dash partly for a charitable cause but also to demonstrate a new invention electric shoes

I had the feeling of being a technical tool in a process. I keep using the first-person singular to describe it here, but at the time it didn’t feel like that. It was someone else reading, but I was the voice. When I first interviewed at The Lighthouse, the volunteer coordinator gave me a cheerful warning: You’re not going to be reading the next Patricia Cornwell! People come in and think that’s what this is, and they end up very disappointed! I knew what she meant. You don’t get to choose. It’s not about you.

Much as I believed at the time that I could make it not about me, I now find myself writing about how my experience transformed the way I read. I don’t claim to understand the experiences of readers with vision loss, and I don’t aim in this essay to tell their stories; only they can. But there is something in my own experience that I want to share, in part because I found myself exploring something I was deeply curious about, a type of reading antithetical to any I had previously undertaken. It was far apart from the typical poles of reading for pleasure and reading for work. Reading for pleasure is often described as escapism, as forgetting yourself. The implication is that you’ll never be held to account for what you’ve read. On the other hand, reading in preparation for work (academia, law, drama, business, politics, etc.) requires that we think, on some level, about our public or professional image while we read, and the necessity of self-preservation makes us read more intensely in order to avoid the public embarrassment of misreading a text or demonstrating only a very shallow understanding of it.
In these circumstances, I felt liberated from analyzing or judging what I read. At the same time, the mechanics of reading aloud forced me to pay complete attention — nothing could be truly skimmed — and engage deeply with the language. In a sense, reading aloud was almost like translating or reading in a foreign language, when a lot of effort is expended just to get the right words out there, when you have to ruminate just to get to the end of a sentence. Questions of anything other than the most superficial meaning get pushed to the side, to be answered at some later time. I remember once the writer had me read some Chekhov stories whose mood was intriguing but whose meaning completely eluded me. After each one he would ask me (uncharacteristically) what I thought the story meant and I had no answer, and we would just continue without answering.

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In this same seven-year period, I acquired my first Kindle: one of the early versions, which was not like a tablet. It wasn’t backlit and it didn’t feel like a screen. It was mostly usable for reading Amazon-compatible e-books or rich text files, although it did have a short list of “experimental” functions. One of these functions was a text-to-speech reader, which would read any book aloud in a robotic voice. I loved it. I listened to it while I read visually. It mispronounced things, it messed up words, the pacing was weird, but I couldn’t get enough of it. I had never liked audiobooks because they were too slow and dramatic and because I preferred audio as a supplement to visual reading rather than as a replacement. But in those early Kindles I found my ideal. When it got to the end of a page, it would
flash to the next one and continue reading, which meant that it was effectively a page turning technology as well. I could do tedious tasks, like washing dishes or chopping vegetables, while listening to it and reading the pages. And when I wasn’t occupied, it paced me and made me slow down.

I felt for a little while that I had found an almost utopian way of reading: simultaneously visual and auditory and completely un-interpretative. This was not solely because of the computerized voice and its implication of impartiality. I felt I had been granted access to books without all the insinuations about the status of author and the temperament of the reader implied by covers, blurbs, bindings, layout, and font. The Kindle used the same font, applied the same flat voice to everything. You could adjust font size and voice speed (and, I later found out, gender of the automated voice) but it was much more uniform than printed books. I felt that I had finally uncovered a pure form of a book, comprised of only voice and text, stripped of affect and design.

Most people I knew were sort of appalled at my love for the Kindle. Don’t you know what damage it does to the publishing industry? The name alone is horrifying — one friend told me — isn’t it telling you to burn your books? My roommate, a painter, was maybe more baffled than appalled: he read a lot and loved the physical qualities of books, and he couldn’t understand how I got any warmth out of that thing. He nevertheless gave me a small painting of myself with the Kindle in hand (the frontispiece of this essay).

Like all utopias, though, it was short lived. I was on a rush-hour bus into New Jersey when it died on me out of the blue and I never quite forgave it for abandoning me in
the middle of an excruciatingly slow trip. The newer basic Kindles don’t have the text-to-speech function anymore, although the tablet-like Kindles apparently do. I’m not sure whether Amazon eliminated the text-to-speech function because most people didn’t like it or because of pushback from organizations like the Authors Guild, who argued that it infringed upon the sales of professional audiobooks. I still kept using a Kindle, but never as zealously as I had at first.

It was interesting to see, in that period, how new technologies affected the reading habits of people I knew. Some friends stopped reading. Smartphones were arriving, the markets were crashing, it was hard to focus. They only ever seemed to read a book if there was a Wi-Fi outage, and then they read intensely. Curiously those friends were the most adamant that listening to a book, being read to, was not the same thing as reading. Others, particularly those whose jobs involved physical work, were finding more sources of potential audiobooks. One friend, a visual artist, used to bike all over the city while listening to the Kindle, and then in the studio he would listen to a crowd-sourced audiobook site, where groups of amateur readers would each contribute a chapter of a popular text (the one I remember most was *Frankenstein*). In a way, it made me feel that even though we had been learning about reading since kindergarten, none of us really knew what it was anymore nor how it would figure into our later lives.

It was indisputable that most people I knew were reading less, and yet at the same time, it was clear that digitization — the thing usually identified as the destroyer of reading habits — was also making reading more accessible. Screen readers like JAWS had been, for decades, offering the possibility of reading a wider variety of material and correspondence, and the proliferation of personal devices
and assistive technologies allowed access to massive libraries with greater ease and accuracy.

The combination of reading aloud and using the Kindle seemed to open up my mind to books I had previously resisted. I had been a secretive reader, one who rarely took recommendations (or quietly resented it if I did). In this seven-year period I started to read all kinds of things I thought I couldn’t read because I had previously thought they were too slow and too, for lack of a better word, obvious. Now I could get to the far reaches of Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope. I sometimes recorded what I read, not because I wanted anyone else to listen to it, but because reading aloud had become one of my ways of reading.

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I recently found a short video I made during this period. I was cooking in my kitchen in New York and I had dropped an egg. The Kindle kept reading to me. Evidently something about this moment struck me because I recorded it, albeit in a terrible, grainy video. It’s an exceptionally bright, sunny day. My legs are visible only as a shadow stretching across the broken, yolky egg on my green linoleum floor and I turn toward the Kindle, which is flatly voicing Washington Square and adding pauses at strange moments:

well what do you advise me now to be very patient to watch and wait and is that bad advice or good that is not for me to say mrs penniman rejoined with some dignity...
Next to the Kindle are appliances and comfort objects that got lost in my move to Toronto: the tray my grandparents brought back from Egypt, the little metal stallion that my roommate had brought back from Pakistan and which we used to hold our kitchen towel in place. Watching the video — hearing that now-lost voice that had accompanied me for several years — conjured up an overwhelming memory of the room and time, a sense of the irretrievability of how I used to read.

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Reading for graduate school was a big adjustment. Even before I started classes, I realized that my way of reading had changed from when I was an undergrad. When I was prepping for the Literature GRE subject test, I had to read short samples of canonical works and identify them. Some I could identify by the character names, scenario or style, but the only ones I identified immediately, without even thinking about it, were the ones I had read aloud in a repetitious way. It’s hard to describe how it felt to recognize those passages. The sensation that comes to mind is the reverberation of a bell.

It was hard for me to come back to reading for academic purposes, because to some extent I had become accustomed to close reading everything. But for some things it has proved useful. Whenever I need to analyze a passage in detail, I force myself to take the time and read it aloud multiple times. It has made me space out my reading — I think it has given me a sense of how much time it takes to read, and how reading quickly is not universally valuable.
In a sense, it created a second register of reading that was at once both rigorous and very free. At a party last year, I somehow ended up telling an English PhD student about how I’d read those sections of *Moby-Dick*. She told me that reading so that you understood every superficial reference was called *surface reading*, and I was irrationally pleased that there was a name for what I’d done, that it could be seen as one mode of reading among many.

And it expanded my concept of reading as an act confined to a book. It made me consider why I thought a pure form of book existed, and why I thought that pure form involved a text stripped of anything but its words. Why I thought that the truest form of reading was somehow anti-visual, when at the same time, I was recognizing its inherent visuality by volunteering to be the visual interface for others.

I no longer have an automated reader, but I still sometimes find myself searching for crowdsourced online recordings to listen to as I read visually. Hearing voices from all over the world reading to one another feels nothing like hearing a single, automated voice, but it retains some of the raw, amateurish feeling that drew me in, the captivating sense that reading is not static, controlled, and disappearing, but changeable and communal, able to be expanded and reinvented as we go along.