Generation X purports to offer “tales for an accelerated culture,” but it really offers tales that service the needs of a select group of people—those who constitute Generation X. Its aim is therapeutic; it seeks not so much to scold as to heal. But if we care about such things, it may yet still be judged a satiric text. For healing requires the construction of a group surround, a secure, distinct sense of themselves as different from all others, and recent scholarship has it that this is something satires are wont to do too. Though we may not be prepared to imagine satires as as much about the construction of groups as they are about criticizing them, in The Literature of Satire Charles Knight argues that eighteenth-century satires, at least, did nurture the development of “nations” (a particular kind of group), and that they did this by “celebrating” “the characteristics of one’s nation” while “mock[ing]” “those of others” (58-59).

Generation X cultivates a generation’s identity rather than a national one, but works in the same way Knight believes eighteenth-century satire once did: that is, those select group of twenty/thirty-somethings who aim to simplify their life, to opt out of a society bent on the mindless acquisition of more and more, are made to seem salutary, while those who either choose to remain within, or are unaware of the problematic nature of, their society, become worthy of mockery. Since Gen Xers like to see themselves as nicer than other people, they would have to take care when they mock. And though I think they do this because they really are that damned nice, the fact that after they mock they often pull-back afterwards and reprimand themselves for being unfair, does make them seem concerned to not be too mean. An example of such pulling-back occurs when, after Claire assesses the old patrons who visit her store as “endless waves of gray hair gobbling up the jewels and perfumes at work,” and as “greedy little children who are so spoiled, and so impatient, that they can’t even wait for food to be prepared” (9), the narrator admits that however much he enjoyed Claire’s characterization of them, it was nevertheless “a cruel, lopsided judgment of what Palm Springs really is” (9-10). But given how frequently members of generations which precede and follow their own are characterized as not just shallow and unconscious but as barely controllable beings with insatiable oral needs, we are guided to conclude that though it might well be cruel to mock them, it would
be hopeless to try and redeem them. By oral needs, I mean an insatiable desire to chat and chew (and vomit—they seem to do a lot of that too). Gen Xers are subject to their (i.e., other generations’) “incessant” “chatting” (33), and are keenly aware of their need to chew. Claire imagines old ladies as capable of eating live animals, as “sucking the food right out of them” (9), but the text makes clear that they’d much prefer human meat, for they count amongst the numerous essentialized as cannibals in the text. Mrs. Baxter would eat her brood, and even the stylish, the tailored—Tyler and his set—“would have little, if any, compunction about eating [their] fellow[s]” (106). Those with cannibalistic tendencies cannot of course be expected to move society in progressive new directions. Whatever the nature of their self-assessments, regardless of where they’ve dined—regardless of who they’ve dined upon!—devourers cannot constitute a society’s brain trust. But they may yet have something important to offer—other than making Gen Xers look good in comparison, that is. Just as those deemed intrinsically debased—slaves—kept the American-plantation South and ancient Greece “going,” commercial societies’ peons can be trusted to work, work, work, so they can buy, buy, buy. All of them, even Andy’s parents, who count amongst the text’s few non-Gen Xers that aren’t characterized as creatures of appetite, enjoy the fruits of commercial society, and all of them can at least be trusted to keep things moving, to keep dramatic change at bay, and thereby service Gen Xers’ foremost need—to feel that the ground they stand on won’t unexpectedly shift away.

Clearly evident in the text is how much Gen Xers fear the future. Andy admits to this fear, but the margins as much as the main text inform us of it. The margins—Gen X’s territory—tell of their efforts to overcome their fear, by switching lifestyles, for example (26). They tell of Gen X’s awareness of the “false sense of security among coworkers in an office environment (111), of their suspicion that “you might not count in the new world order” (159), and of their desperate need to believe that someone out there will take care of them (34). But the margins tell another story too, namely, that the behemoth commercial society, its ways and its products, will last and last, and so the path of the future, as depressing as it might seem, is nevertheless clearly spelled out—certain. Shoppers might “pretend that the large, cement blocks thrust into their environment do not, in fact, exist” (71), but they manifestly do. Thrust into our face is the text’s message that “the love of meat prevents any real change” (10; emphasis added). And because society’s cannibalistic carnivores enjoy
“stuff” as much as they enjoy “steak,” “Brazilification,” a widening of the gap “between the rich and the poor” (11), is made to seem as if it cannot but be the future.

This is not to say that everything made to seem permanent is not subsequently made to seem perishable. For example, Andy states that his parents’ home has been in essentially the same state for decades, but also that much energy has been put into “staving off evidence of time’s passing” (137), and that for all such effort, it could still prove victim to sudden catastrophe. But there is a sense that should disaster occur, it would be precipitated not by others but by Andy’s parents themselves, out of a felt need to prove their fears justified. Fear of the future precipitates disaster, but again, though this fear is registered by some who don’t count amongst the Gen X set—by Dag’s former office mate, Margaret, for example—the buying hordes either seem blissfully unaware there is anything to fear or understand “catastrophe” as no more than an exciting thrill-ride. Tyler’s generation does not fear the future. Nor, seemingly, do Phil and Irene—that is, those who live in a “permanent 1950s” (112). Andy admits to envying Tyler his lack of fear, and he may be just as “sooth[ed]” (112) by him as he is by Phil’s and Irene’s ongoing 1950s.

In a chapter titled “It can’t last,” we find further evidence of just why “it”—i.e., commercial society—actually can. Claire, discussing how pained she is to be visiting Disneyland with her cousins at the age of twenty-seven, looks to the resort she’s staying at and says, “I can’t believe I let myself get dragged into this. If the wind doesn’t knock this place down first, it’ll implode from a lack of hipness” (37). The resort, La Spa de Luxembourg, will disappear one day, but would be replaced by something equally obnoxious. The needs of obnoxious but unrelenting families like the one she’s burdened with, who, though they talk about disasters, do so in a “spirited” (34) manner, ensure this will be the case. And we should not believe that Claire would have it otherwise. For though both she and Andy imagine blowing apart the staidness, the text suggests that they would be upset if any such disruption actually occurred. When it turns out Claire’s father is having a heart attack rather than just another one of his faux ones, when Andy describes his parents’ fear that their never-changing house could be vandalized, the narrative does not turn towards gleeful celebration; instead, it veers in the opposite direction. It is not that Gen Xers do not desire for their families, the outside world, to undergo dramatic alteration—they very likely do, but not before they’re (i.e., Gen Xers) ready. And Gen Xers won’t
be ready until they’ve dressed the damage life had inflicted upon them before they opted out.

Preparing themselves so they’re ready for change may in fact be a large part of what Gen Xers are up to behind the walls of their constructed generational surround, within their established sanctuaries. That is, with the semi-conscious slaves of commercial society going about their business, with the outside world, in its routineness, in its predictableness, seeming in some ways akin to the day-to-day life of those living within boring but safe Texlahoma, Gen Xers are not using their free time as plantation owners and Greek aristocrats were wont to do with theirs. They aren’t luxuriously languishing. They aren’t simply philosophizing. They aren’t even doing what Andy says they are doing—not really. Andy says they are stitching together stories “to make their own lives worthwhile” (8); and though their stories may make them seem enviably cool, worthy of admiration, though their stories do work to make them seem worthy of celebration in the way Knight argues satiric tales once helped make Britons feel, they stitch more to repair than they do to construct. But maybe we should expect this from storytellers these days—even satirical ones. That is, though scholars like John Clare argue that the severe wars between nations in the twentieth-century has meant that not just satirists but all writers will be drawn to write of entropy, of the inevitability of dissolution and decay, it may in fact be more reasonable to expect the opposite from them: that is, that shared, widescale multinational tragedies would lead to sustained efforts to use stories to help recover from a lengthy period of disquiet.

It may be that shocks can be quitted through potentially disquieting means, though. It may have been beneficial for Andy to have chosen to recall, and thereby come to associate, his memory of when his Americanness lead him to being subject to a crowd of Japanese co-workers’ jealous gazes, with his just having made a carload of Japanese tourists feel uncomfortable and fearful. But clearly the stories themselves and/or the nature of the environment in which they are told helps ease or quit shocks by means less sadistic. Indeed, he tells us about the drawbacks of being selected for special attention by a Japanese executive, not just after a confrontation but amidst a group of friends, who’ve agreed not to critique one another’s stories. Andy borrowed the practice from alcoholics anonymous; but while those in AA used it at one another’s expense, Andy and his friends use it help one another heal and improve. Told within a nurturing atmosphere of friends who genuinely want to help one
another live better lives, the awfulness that emerges from their stories about the sun, for example, lead to Andy’s decision not to partake in such awfulness, and to Claire’s decision that they ask for more from themselves than using stories to construct a “carapace of coolness” (8).

Cushioning can also be found within some of the stories themselves. For instance, Evlina finishes her telling of Tyler’s distressful life story with her beaming restorative warmth and love into his eyes. Andy’s story of how Edward’s room became a nightmaric enclosure also ends—with Edward emerging into a world which promises that you can “move about with ease” (51), once you’ve learned your way—soothingly. So, too, his story of his distressful encounter with the Japanese executive, which has him back in Portland “breathing less crowded airs” (59). But as is clear from Claire’s reaction to their stories about the sun, the stories themselves neither need be warm nor end warmly for them to assist Andy’s group of friends “live life” more “healthily” (8). Indeed, very often it seems their stories function primarily to help point out the exact nature of their wounds so that within the confines of their sanctuary they can be addressed. Andy’s fictional and true-life stories reveal his obsession with, and very likely also his fear of, “vandalism,” of sudden and violent intrusion. For instance, he has his character Edward bar doors against all others (but the intruder is already inside his enclosure), his own encounter with executive made him “feel as though [he] [. . .] had just vandalized a house” (58), and he attends to his parents’ fear that “a drifter [would] [. . .] break its way inside [their home] and commit an atrocity” (144). In his stories, vandalism, break-ins, are catastrophic, but in his Palm Springs’ enclosure, with Dag and Claire (especially Claire) forever “invad[ing]” (5) his space, break-ins become routine, and more a source of stimulation than upset.

Messes also upset Andy, but Dag, who creates them, shows in his stories he fears not messes but the possible reactions his messmaking might produce. Dag’s gasoline-spilling story likely wouldn’t be his favorite had he not known all too well what it was like to draw upon himself less pleasing reactions from those whose love and support he needed. He was pleased his father didn’t get angry; but though the incident pleased, it did not heal—for afterwards Dag continued to be drawn to precipitating disasters he knew would enrage others. His “accidental” dumping of radioactive waste into Claire’s bungalow, seems by design. And Claire ends up supplying him what he may have been looking for when he’d precipitated similar upsets in the past—rejection, but rejection which could be assuaged through his own efforts: Dag
allows Claire some revenge by allowing her and Tobias to spoil his bed, he and Andy “sweep, sweep, sweep” (84) all the dust up, and eventually things do return to normal.

Of course, things return to normal in part because Claire reorients her attention onto Tobias, onto the hold he has on her. Her mission moves her outside of her enclave; and the fact that she and Andy so enthusiastically rejoice or quickly reset after returning from engagements with outsiders in way of their personal evolution, helps make their sanctuary seem not just safe but authoritative—sturdy and strong. And though it is built over a fault line, it is a safe place to return to—and because it is, Claire and Andy feel emboldened to engage and dispense with those outside its walls who were or are a source of distress. Claire travels to New York and rids herself of her interest in Tobias—who had been depicted as being adept in using her—by playing to his inclination to offend to secure excellent reason for leaving him behind for good. Andy travels “home” to Portland, to his parents, who offer both support and belittlement, and uses demonstrations of their inability to understand him as an excuse to conclude they would not and should not be a part of his future. Ironically, like all other constituents of commercial society, Tobias and Andy’s parents are not so much caricatured as they are packaged, packaged to be ready-shipped out of Gen Xers’ lives.

Such detachments from familiar fixtures may assist these Gen Xers’ detachment from a much more faithful friend—their Palm Springs sanctuary. But even though it provided a safe haven, Andy and his friends do end up leaving it behind in pursuit of better. There is a sense that some of the stories they tell one another, in conjunction with happenings in their real lives, also help them prepare for such a move. We note that sometime after Claire tells her the Texlahoma story in which two sisters watch another of their sisters escape into space, Evlina successfully leaves Palm Springs for a better way of life. Upon learning of this, Andy and Dag feel just like the sisters in the Texlahoma story did—jealous, left-behind. But perhaps also a bit better prepared to see themselves leaving the disappointing in pursuit of something preferable in the future.

Sanctuaries are desirable, but they’re not paradise—and this no doubt helps them better function as places to recuperate within. For while wounded and vulnerable, the last thing you want to do is make claim to something that’s sure to draw unwelcome notice. And the text shows it’s in essential agreement with Caliban’s conclusion that
“the best way to escape [. . .] ire, / is to not seem too happy” (Browning, “Caliban Upon Setebos” 256–7)—not only do some of the stories told (such as Dag’s story of how a man followed up his suddenly feeling freed of a lifelong-held fear of sudden apocalypse by finding another fear to obsess over) evidence a need to follow the onset of sudden happiness by hurriedly finding justification for feeling miserable again, the text repeatedly suggests that standing out, having too much of what others similarly desire, invites catastrophe. We learn, for instance, that Tyler’s numerous infidelities invite an angry older woman’s pursuit, that Tyler’s mercenary companion’s gem-like blue eyes doom him, that Andy’s Americananness makes him subject to a crowd’s jealous eyes (and perhaps also to a Japanese executives’ sexual advancements), and that the Texlahoma sister who abandons hum-drums for true love is used by her (ostensible) lover, and dies.

Best be at your best before drawing upon oneself that kind of heat, and Andy, especially, appears to know this all too well. That is, the reason Andy describes his Palm Spring’s sanctuary as such a compromised place likely owes to his need to convince himself that those who might take a closer look therein, wouldn’t find much to interest them. Andy seeks camouflage, but no doubt about it, real treasure lurks behind his narrative veils. For instance, though possessions really aren’t quite their thing, strip away their conjoined adjectives and Andy and his gang are left with bungalows, a Saab, and jobs, rather than “clean but disorganized little bungalow[s]” with “serviceable (and by no means stunning) furnished room[s] [, which require] [. . .] cheer[ing] up by inexpensive low-grade Navajo Indian blankets” (6), a “syphilitic Saab” (74), and “McJobs” (5). The adjectives tell the truer tale? Maybe not as much as you think: little bungalows can be quaint, syphilitic Saabs can be endearing, and McJobs seem sufficient to keep their current lifestyle going. But Gen Xers might well be pleased if such a consideration occurred to you, especially if they’d count you amongst the devouring plentitude.

They do leave their safe world behind them, perhaps prepared to pursue better—and perhaps also to attend more fairly to those they’ve used along the way. That is, though Andy shows outsiders as not just different from but clearly inferior to Gen Xers, he is sensitive and self-aware enough to know at some level what he is up to. Even if it is Coupland, and not Andy, who in the text’s margins notes that members of one generation tend to characterize previous and subsequent ones as inferiors, Andy, who knows there are things about his own friends he ought to but is reluctant
to explore (such as the implications of appreciating that his friends’ smiles always seem to give them the look of the fleeced), who can size up and assault his friends with a mean but acute estimation of their failings, who is aware of their tendency to narrate everything as “from hell,” surely is aware of this need too. We note that he disposes of Tyler and Tobias in his narratives a little too neatly and a little too loudly. His written estimation of them could possibly both service current purposes as well as potential future ones: that is, when he’s prepared himself to take in the world anew, they might serve as quick pointers to all he might be in mind to re-appraise.

Might he come to decide that most people—that is, not just Tyler and Tobias—are not best understood as slaves to commercial culture? Might he re-assess Brazilification as only “the latest thing,” an enthusiasm, a madness which would pass? I would hope he would. But I’d settle for him becoming comfortable enough with real uncertainty that the pleasing certainty a vice-filled world can offer one, would have lost much of its appeal.

Works Cited