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NOTHING THAT MATTERS IS NEW OR FAKE. NOTHING CAN'T BE CONTROLLED WITH A JOYSTICK. BUTTONS ARE ORIGINAL THOUGHT. PERIPHERALS ARE UNPREDICTABLE. SYNAPSES ARE MYTHIC, LIKE THE WORDS WE LIVE BY.

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NOTES:

Page 99: Excerpt from *Navidad & Matanza* printed here by permission of Open Letter Books.

Page 110: Milan Orlić's "A Poem Floating in a Bottle, via Email" is from *Žudnja za celinom* (Longing for Wholeness), 2009.

Page 111: Milan Orlić's "Metamorphosis" is from Bruj milenija (*The Hum of Millennia*), 1998.

Page 159: Mark Svenvold's poem "Lines Composed an Hour and Ten Minutes by Interstate from South Orange, New Jersey, from a Title Written by a Student and Drawn at Random from a Hat, in Late August, 2011" will be published his forthcoming book, *Orpheus, Incorporated*.

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TLR

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
LATE FALL 2013

THERE IS NO TECHNICAL MEANS OF REPRODUCTION THAT, UP TO NOW, HAS MANAGED TO SURPASS THE MIRROR AND THE DREAM. LOOK AT ME, I SAID TO THE GLASS IN A WHISPER, A BREATH. —ELENA FERRANTE

EDITOR'S NOTE

The first three things that come to mind (in order of importance) when I hear the phrase *artificial intelligence* are: 1.) Enslaved replicants in a Philip K. Dick universe rising up against and squashing the human oppressor. 2.) Artificial limbs—especially extremities that can be controlled remotely by some kind of brain implant. 3.) Vacuum cleaners that sail around the house collecting dust while you are at work. A cosmology of non-stop thrills with profound implications for our human stamina and quite likely our salvation.

How that world of brilliance and machinery morphed into a collection of stories and poems about emotional posturing, defense mechanisms, protracted confessions, and a surprising bouquet of *j'accuse* themes and variations, is a mystery. Quite possibly, the act of reading in the midst of a technological frenzy forces reinterpretation of any futuristic utopia. Progress isn't speed; it's psychological acrobatics—the wherewithal to not only survive our moment of tenuous intelligence but to live and love creatively, to claw at the surfaces of technology.

It seems inevitable that when I think a theme is going to lead us to a lively, even playful issue (which is how I envisioned this issue turning out when we planned it last year), we end up in the pits of despair. I find this a rather despairing (though exquisite) issue. (Not even Jack Garrett's playful romp "Happiness" warms the soul.) Though you, dear reader, might remind me that the funnest part of Philip K. Dick is his bleak, blighted vision of the world and the way he hid safely from all potential minglings of Man and Progress behind a forcefield of crazy. Those vacuums that clean for themselves are preposterous, extravagant, and kind of loveless. And that we have a greater need than ever before in human history for artificial limbs (the extremities in particular) because of the newfangled anti-personnel technologies of war and terror.

Ralph Baer, the man who invented the electronic game Simon (on our cover), is known as the Father of the Video Game. In addition to Simon, which was launched at Studio 54 (disco dystopia) in 1978, he invented the prototype for the joystick, known as the Brown Box—a multiplayer, multiprogram video game system. One

of the 1967 prototypes that you can see in the archives of the National Museum of American History has a shotgun wired to the little brown melamine control. The punch plastic homemade label on that iteration is called "target practice." I mention it because it is striking—and because drones (more advances in artificial intelligence) belong in the category of new-fangled war games and because video games for better or worse are the bridge between gadget and cultural watershed. I played Simon for hours when I was eight; it may have been one of my all time favorite Christmas presents. I love it as a symbol for this issue because it embodies the *if:then* algorithm of primitive computer language, as well as the mindless seduction of repeat-after-me, and the blinking lights and primary colors that represent the eternal hope of childrens' toys. Simon is a perfect expression of futurism for our moment, redredyellowredbluegreenblueblue faster and faster bleeping and blinking into the abyss of time spent. It is an artificial intelligence indeed.

Minna Proctor

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

LATE FALL 2013
VOL.56 / NO.4

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STORY

John McManus
Elephant Sanctuary

The story of the creation of my elephant vampire songs begins on the December morning when I killed Aisling, heroine of our last album and my fiancée, in one Porsche and fled Texas in another. The second car belonged to our manager, and stealing it was a snap, I just called down to the front desk. The valet even asked for my autograph. I signed the parking ticket and headed for I-35. Early in the tour my father, Ike Bright, Sr., had pretended to die in the tsunami in Japan; since then, he'd been hiding out near Texarkana. I guess he'd owed a lot of money. To hoard his address around America had made me feel more powerful than the people around me, whether or not their own fathers were alive. It'd had me singing "Barnacle" in a major scale so that our fans hopped to it instead of swaying. Now I drove nonstop through Dallas, Sulphur Springs, and then northeast toward the Palmetto Flats, following signs for a wildlife refuge. Just over the Red River I came to the mailbox that said Blackhawk, my father's fake name.

He was snoring in a chair on the covered porch of a farmhouse, wearing a pinstripe suit as if he had arrived from a casino. "Dad, it's Ike," I said, kicking at his legs until he stirred into awareness of me.

"I read what you told *Rolling Stone*," was the first thing he said.

I had explained that the Pacific Ocean had needed to swallow Ike Senior before I could write true songs about him. "I was pretending to mourn you."

"You done touring?"

"See the news?"

"I'm off the grid."

"I'm in some trouble."

He pointed over my shoulder, where I saw, studying me from a fenced pasture that stretched to the denuded hills, an enormous African elephant. It was about twelve times my size, with sickly pink splotches all over its ears. "Meet Gracie," my father said.

She was plucking weeds with her trunk. I pictured her hollowed out, with the paparazzi and cops and Aisling's parents waiting inside. "Where are we?"

"Camp David. President doesn't want it anymore."

"Did you win this place with a Dolly Parton?"

Nodding, he poured whiskey for himself. I realized he wasn't joking.

"So it just randomly sits beside an elephant."

He nodded. "This one talks to me in my head."

"How's that work, Dad?"

"Like you and me, but in my head."

"Is this a zoo?"

"Getting warmer," he said, his whiskey sparkling in the early light. It occurred to me he meant to profit off Gracie somehow.

A Dolly Parton was a nine-five combo in Texas Hold 'Em, and my first bike had come from his refusing to fold one of those. I'd lost my braces the same way, and had forgotten to say so to *Rolling Stone*. It wasn't a good hand. With a Dolly Parton, you lost almost every time. Maybe that's why the few he won sent him on winner's tilt.

"You're selling Gracie to a zoo."

"Getting colder again."

"Look, I'm in some shit."

"It's a sanctuary for old, abused elephants. They've been tortured and driven insane, and now they live on this farm."

I followed his eyes to where Gracie was grazing. Ask me a goddamn question, I was saying in my thoughts; I needed to talk.

"Old lady elephants, sixty years old. They each have a favorite fruit and a favorite song. Isn't that something?"

"Want to hear what's going on?"

"They're basically like people."

"So that's the refuge on the signs."

"They're private. The refuge is us."

"I don't follow."

"In any case, lots of bedrooms. Take whichever."

I wish you'd been in Japan, I wanted to say, which I realize was petulant. I don't want to imply that I wasn't grieving Aisling. But this is about my elephant songs. I did slam the door on my way in, to protest Ike Senior's code of honor. The code held that men didn't pry. No matter if the men were father and son, or the son was a little boy; the boy had to commence the talking. I'd traded Aisling for this, I thought as I lay down in a bedroom with faded red walls and a view of the mangy meadow beyond the yard. Never again would I make a seatbelt of my arms to hug her from behind. She wouldn't drink days away anymore like the heroines of the hardcore songs I wished to write, rather than the fey songs I did write. My songs were about yearning, mostly. In them people yearned to be places they weren't and do things they didn't or couldn't do. The critics called the songs gauzy. One reviewer had written that our last album was "full of fuzz." Thinking about all this, I had a sort of temper tantrum in my head. Some ugly thoughts were churning in there when a voice said, What question do you want?

It hadn't spoken in words. It more reached in and conveyed a feeling. I sat upright. Thirty hours and as many drinks since my last sleep. Until I saw Gracie out the window, eyeing me from her field, I thought I was dreaming.

"Is that you?" I said, facing her. My dad had said she spoke to him. All my life he'd been telling tall tales, but here was Gracie, staring at me.

You said you wanted a question, she seemed to reply, again not in words but as a sensation that had me reliving the desire.

Not from you, I thought back.

From who, then?

From my father.

What question?

Every question.

Give an example, she said in my head, at which time I realized what Gracie was doing: tricking me into admitting my crime.

It was one thing to imagine confessing to Ike Senior. Ike Senior would be a pot calling a kettle black to criticize me. This was an innocent, tortured beast. Probably she wasn't speaking to me in my head at all. I shut my eyes and said good day to her, and awoke to find the sun low in the other side of the sky.

I appraised the situation. Aisling was still dead, I was still a fugitive murderer, and Ike Senior was still drinking on the porch. He had been joined by a leathery-skinned woman in her forties whose horsey jaw fell open when I came outside.

"Is this Junior?" she asked with fond surprise.

"James Junior, meet your future stepmom, Clara."

"I work at the sanctuary," said Clara. "Have you made the ladies' acquaintance?"

"He met Gracie this morning," said my father.

"From 1970 until last year, Gracie lived alone on a concrete slab. Her feet are ruined. They whipped her daily."

"Hurt elephants, you should die," said Ike Senior, with righteous anger in his voice. I scanned the meadow for Gracie, listening for her in my head. She didn't seem to be near.

"James Junior, James Senior may be the last good man."

"You're the one saving the ladies," my father told Clara, which was when I knew he must be conning her out of her money.

I thought of warning Clara what was coming, then spiriting Gracie away to safety. Gracie didn't deserve being around my father. *Altruism can't save deadbeat rocker from lockup*, read the ticker tape in my head.

"Elephants understand English," said Clara, her eyes adoringly on Ike Senior. "They're smarter than people. Complex in every way, and sweet."

"That's why they avoid me."

"You're not complex?"

"Or sweet."

"Gracie visits you."

"She's not either, maybe."

They continued this silly back-and-forth as if I couldn't hear. Ask me a goddamn question, I thought. When Aisling was alive, I'd kept a list of reasons to break up, topped by "Never asks me about the past." Even on coke she inquired only about the future. "Always the fucking future," I shouted back at her once, with a randomness that startled her. That's because my real fight was with Ike Senior. Ask a question, I chanted now in my head. By the bottom of my first glass, he still hadn't done it. Even when Clara went in for ice, he glanced at me only to see if I laughed at his jokes.

"How do you shoot a red elephant?"

"With a gun," I guessed.

"With a red gun," he said.

"All these elephant jokes, as if they're funny," said Clara when she returned. "I mean, the elephant falls out of the tree because it's dead?"

"And the idioms," said my father.

"It's awful. Elephants in the room and the white elephant and pink elephants and a memory like an elephant."

"Elephants deserve better," said Ike Senior, surely playing her. That's not why I began dreaming up scenarios to make him feel bad; it had more to do with his attention level. I thought of claiming I'd been tricked into believing him drowned. Then I recalled replying to his tsunami email.

"Can I use your truck?" I said, only to see if he would ask my destination; it wasn't safe for me to be seen in public.

He handed the keys over and said, "No title in it."

"So just don't get caught? That's it?"

"No insurance card, either," he said, with that subtle grin that asked the world to join in his wonder at how droll everything was. I took the keys. He was doing what he believed I needed, and I hated him for it. What's the trouble, Ike, what have you gone and done? Cry if you need to cry. So vividly did I react to his not saying these things that Gracie must have heard me in her head, wherever she was.

I accelerated down the highway. Before I knew it I was crossing the Red River. Not the best choice to enter Texas again, but my fans were all sniffly emo boys and stoned vegan girls who lived in cities, not the kind of people you find at a trailer bar above a river gorge. I parked under a blinking neon sign for Busch and headed inside. In the dim interior a girl with bluebird shoulder tattoos was perched down from some ranchers in hats. "Double bourbon," I told the bartender, taking a stool beside the girl. It felt good to be in a bar again. I'd thought maybe I'd flee the country without setting foot in another one. The bartender poured my drink, passed it over to me. My skin tingled from being so close to the girl, but I didn't look at her as I mulled over my options. Hide out in Switzerland like Polanski. Live in a Third World capital. I would stand out by my skin color.

"You're the one saving the ladies," my father told Clara, which was when I knew he must be conning her out of her money.

Maybe Moscow, I was thinking when the girl said, "You seem fun," in a pleasant Ozark accent.

Tilting my drink down my throat, I turned to face her. She was cute, with cheekbones that sloped down toward her chin in a svelte triangle. "I'm mentally ill," I said.

"What kind of music do you play?" This shook me. It's only my face, I told myself, or my messy hair or my hollow eyes.

"I'm a restaurant chef."

"Nearest restaurant's thirty miles."

"In Venice, California."

"Are there foods that stop you from feeling emotions?"

"Which emotion is the problem?"

"Sadness, and happiness."

"Well, I'm just the sous-chef, you know."

I was starting to enjoy myself. She gestured down toward the ranchers, three of them in overalls and hats, all ogling her. "Could you kick their asses?"

"What did they do to you?"

"Stare when I'm flirting with guys."

Musical ignorance, I told myself, because I needed not to like any girls now; favorite band probably Led Zeppelin; hillbilly twang. The chaos I sensed in her blood when she squeezed my hand.

"So you'll do it?"

"What's your name?"

"Haley, you misogynist," she said, which cracked me up.

"I'm James," I said, wondering about my last name.

"Feel like a tequila, James?"

"I think I do." I bought us two shots.

"Welcome to hell," she toasted.

"Is that a warning?"

"You've seen this place."

I nodded yes, I had.

"Why else am I an alcoholic?"

"I drink a lot too," I told her, glad to hear that she was one.

"Yeah, where have you been all my life?"

I admit it, the word *depraved* rose to mind when I heard myself say "Looking for you." I swatted it away with another shot of alcohol. I was having too good a time. We got to talking about drunk jags we'd been on. I told about blacking out in the U-Bahn, and she told about blacking out in Denton, Texas. She said she wanted to die like Whitney Houston. "Gram Parsons," I countered, carelessly naming a singer *Pitchfork* had compared me to. But nothing came of that.

We kissed to catcalls, scooted tables out of the way to dance. "Cheers, mofos,"

I called out to the ranchers as we maneuvered around to a country tune.

As I spun Haley, I heard someone say, "Twenty K per tusk."

I fell out of rhythm. "Pardon?" I said to a red-haired fellow in overalls.

"Pardon who?" he replied, as I steadied myself.

"You said twenty K per tusk."

"I was discussing my job."

"What line of work?"

"Know James, in the Shadwell place?"

"He in the ivory trade?"

"I'm only saying yes cause you'll black it out."

"I'll do no such thing," I said, wishing Aisling would yell at this man on my behalf. I turned around to speak to her. Seeing Haley instead overwhelmed my brain in a sort of power surge. One of our LPs, *Lumber,* treats the subject of blackouts, mainly what you realize during them and then forget. The lyrics are pure fiction, since they're about blackouts. We must have kept on talking. I caught little glimpses, which I still possess, like Haley whispering in the red-headed man's ear. Looking for my bandmates, I wandered away. The bar was shaped like one in Portugal, in Porto, where we'd played Primavera Sound. It seemed to me I was back there again. "Eu gostaria de uma cerveja," I said, and then it faded away and I awoke naked on a carpet rug.

Haley was asleep beside me. "Hey," I said, poking her.

She awoke, snuggled against me. "Hey, cowboy."

"I'm scared to move," I said, referring to my hangover, but it was a deeper dread, one I could have described only by playing music.

"As you should be."

"What's that mean?"

"You live in the Shadwell place."

"I don't live in Texas."

"This is Arkansas."

"Whatever it is."

"Haley, who are the Shadwells?"

"Well, James, they're teenage folk singers who murdered their parents and blamed it on slaves' ghosts."

So these Shadwells were in prison, I thought, where they fell in with some chick who conned them out of their home, got paroled, then met her match in Ike Senior.

"Maybe an elephant told them to," I said.

"It was years before those elephants."

I was thinking I might ask her if she could hear Gracie talking, but then her phone rang. She sat up and looked at the caller ID.

"My husband will kill you," she said.

A memory flickered and went dark again as she reached for my guitar. Lifting it like a weight, she raised her eyebrows at me.

"Must belong to the Shadwells," I said.

"Say why you're lying, and I'll sing one of my songs."

"Are you a songwriter?"

"Frank owns this house, is the funny thing."

"Haley, what songs?"

"The songs I write," she said, beginning to strum. "I finished this one last week. It's called Three Days Thirty Years Ago."

In a rich, sultry contralto Haley sang about a boy who'd strolled the lavender rows with her in the South of France. He had woven flowers into her hair, long ago in a place called the Luberon Valley. That was where she yearned to be, not Texas, but strolling the poppy fields in Provence. The song soothed me into a lull, so that it startled me when Haley held out the guitar and said, "Now one of yours."

"Are there foods that stop you from feeling emotions?" "Which emotion is the problem?" "Sadness, and happiness." "Well, I'm just the sous-chef, you know."

I took the instrument, held it awkwardly as if I didn't know what to do with it. "I'm a chef, remember?"

"My husband met your dad in prison."

"My dad?"

"Same name?"

"Who's this husband?" I asked, startled into another memory. It vanished when Haley's phone rang yet again.

This time she answered. I heard a man's dull monotone but none of his words.

"Okay," she said, gesturing toward my guitar.

I shook my head no. She signaled again. I said no a third time.

"I won't be long," she told the phone then, as if my choice determined hers.

She hung up, got dressed. "Wish I could play," I said.

"Call me when you've learned how."

I followed her out to where a blue Corvette was parked by my father's truck. I didn't remember that car at all. She kissed me bye. As she drove away, I wanted to

chase her down and shout the truth, so she would leave her husband and come write songs with me in another country, but I just stood there watching her disappear.

Alone, I wandered the house until I found Ike Senior asleep on a chaise longue. Clara wasn't around. Absurd to feel lonely after just two minutes. I sat down at a desk, where I came up with some lies that I put down in a letter to my bandmates. Then I burned the letter. By now I was in a sorry state. Bile was swimming in my stomach from the hangover, and I wasn't cut out for being disliked. Maybe my guitar would cheer me up. I carried it to the porch. Sitting in the bentwood rocker, I played *Barnacle*, song by song, until Gracie the elephant came shuffling up to the fence.

She didn't stop there, however. She waltzed right on into my head to tell me my songs were ugly.

"What?" I replied, although I'd heard her: the songs that comprised *Barnacle* were chintzy and fake. They were overwrought and shrill and tasteless, she said, using words that once again belonged to no human language. If she'd been human, these are just the words she would have used.

Which parts? I asked.

She didn't answer.

Gracie, say which parts.

All the parts.

Thinking we could understand each other better if I came closer, I carried my guitar downhill and sat on a log in her shade. "Why are you here?" I asked.

I seek peace, Gracie replied in my mind.

With her trunk she lifted some grass into her mouth. "This is peaceful," I said.

It was until you arrived, she told me. You keep screaming for questions.

The last person I wanted those questions from was a feeble, abused old-woman elephant. "Hey, I'm good now. Let's talk about you."

Okay, let's do, she said, still speaking in feelings rather than words.

She began to tell me about a two-bit circus that assembled in Kmart parking lots around the south. The brute Melungeon who ran it, Scoopy Bunn, had beat her daily with a prod. I'd never heard of Melungeons, so I knew Gracie was the one conveying Scoopy to me, but I hadn't brought a pen. The only way to remember was to put her story to a melody, and convert her nonwords into lyrics.

My lingering dread over Aisling subsided as I sat there rhyming about the Florida midway where Gracie had longed for Lake Malawi. As I played guitar, she spoke in hints and thoughts that became my lyrics. I sang about her déjà vu and

her dead brothers and the malarial swamp at water's edge where she had fallen in love. No wonder Clara grew maudlin, I thought, shepherding Gracie's inklings together in paired melodies. Already I could see her as the nucleus of a new song cycle. I wondered how I would record the songs. Elephants held captive in an alien land whose dullards still mourned the Civil War. Elephants who never blacked out drunk, a thought that before I knew it had me reliving the car wreck.

Suddenly the ground was trembling. I broke off from playing guitar to see that Gracie was turning from me.

"Wait, she was dead already," I said, "I didn't leave her to die," but it was too late, she was waddling away.

I climbed the hill to the porch again. I felt pretty awful, but after a few shots of whiskey I told myself fuck it, and scribbled what I recalled of the new songs. *I heard you thumping for me in another country*, went the first line of a mournful number about Gracie's homeland, where her depraved mother had rendered her undead. She never forgot that. Infinite life, finite storage space in the brain. One day in the Middle Ages, her brain reached capacity. After that, forming memories caused her pain.

I plucked an ugly tune about this, shouting its words until my throat was raw. Ike Senior came outside. "You'll shred your vocal cords," he said, sitting down next to me.

"Least of my worries," I said, baiting him to inquire about others.

"You were speaking to Gracie."

"I was sort of meditating."

"Hear of that family in Siberia, only learned yesterday about World War Two?"

"I guess you'll study their technique?"

"Well, it's harder these days. Use to be, you just crossed the state line."

"I need a new passport," I said, thinking he would be curious to hear why.

"Under the bed you slept in, there's a shoebox."

When I stood to go fetch it, he laughed. "What's funny?"

"You are. Think we're in a spy movie?"

"Fuck you," I said, but went to look anyway. I really did need a passport. And there really was a shoebox, but it held only slide photographs from decades ago.

Holding them up to the light, I saw no Shadwell sisters, no people, either, only calico cats. Dozens were sunbathing on the porch of that house where we were hiding. Thirty in one picture. I couldn't help feeling some calamity had wiped them out, or they'd fled en masse from the same energy feeding into my new songs.

I lay down to write. Drinking, I puzzled out a refrain, a sort of theme. It's good Ike Senior doesn't care about me, I thought; this way I can focus. I jotted down titles. "Hannibal," about elephants in war. "Elegy," about elephants mourning. "Logic Train," about intelligence. The lyrics came as fast as I could write them down. I'd tapped a vein, I could feel the songs surging with a voltage I'd never harnessed. The yearning was pitched not toward gauzy maudlin people but toward real people. If I could record and mix these somehow, I thought, and send the CD off in a predated package, I could die in a disaster of my own.

Night had fallen by the time I heard a familiar rhythm through the wall that I couldn't quite place. There was muffled talk, too, so I laid down my guitar and went to the kitchen. I found my father and Clara playing poker with three strangers.

"You're in time to buy in," said Ike Senior.

"James's kid," said Clara, as it struck me: they were listening to the trumpet solo of my latest single, "Empty Harbor."

"Fifty bucks, James's kid," said the beefy redhead to my father's left, who looked familiar.

My pulse at cocaine tempo, I sat down between the other two men and laid down fifty dollars. My father gave me a set of chips. The song's climax about lying drunk girls crescendoed into my vow to drown in Pacific water, and then damned if "Denouement" didn't come on, final track of the album.

"Who put this on?" I asked.

"Mack," said Ike Senior, pointing to the bearded professor type to my right.

"My girlfriend downloads stuff," said Mack.

"Porn," said the redhead, and the black guy to my left guffawed as if it was funny. I had never seen him before, but I had met the redhead at the bar. Frank was his name. And the table had expanded—the sort of unreal detail that jars you awake from nightmares, except there was only a leaf in the table.

"Singer sounds cute," said Clara.

"Something less gay would be nice," said the black guy.

Ike Senior reached back to the dial of what I saw was a satellite radio. My dirge about the feral child Kaspar Hauser gave way to Merle Haggard.

I calmed down. Mack dealt me a pair of kings. "Dollar," said my father.

Everyone pushed a white chip into the pot but Clara, who stood and turned the dial back to my song. "I folded so I could put this back on," she explained.

It occurred to me they would think it a tell, how my thumping heart made my shirt flutter as in a breeze, but I didn't care about my kings. Not even with a flop

of king five four. Sirius XM won't play you twice in a row without a reason to. This is the end, I thought, placing a bet only in order to look normal. It got raised and matched until the pot held $75. For the turn Mack produced another five, giving me a full house. Meanwhile "Denouement" had reached its unsubtle pinnacle. I squeezed the table leg and kept matching the outrageous bets.

"Hear about that family in Siberia, only learned yesterday about World War Two?" "I guess you'll study their technique?" "Well, it's harder these days. Use to be, you just crossed the state line." "I need a new passport," I said, thinking he would be curious to hear why.

The river came: another five.

"All in," said Ike Senior.

"See you," I said, pushing my chips in. The song was about to end, and with it my freedom. You didn't have to know Ike Senior well to see he would bluff his fortune away, swindle his lover, give up his son all in a day's work. But then the music stopped and the deejay said nothing, and Ike Senior laid down a nine-five off-suit.

"You know how a Dolly Parton works," he said, raking in his winnings.

Clara unplugged a phone from the stereo, and Merle Haggard came back on.

In my relief I drank more. It goes without saying that I'd been drinking all day. I bought back in for fifty dollars. No one knows what I've been thinking, I told myself, not even Gracie. The wall had blocked her, and she wasn't real. None of this seemed real. Aisling had never been alive.

I'm rich, I can afford lawyers, I was thinking when I heard the word *ivory*, and turned to hear Mack whisper to Frank, ". . . a million, in dollars."

"As opposed to what?" said Frank, which was when I recalled Haley referring to a husband by that name.

"Yen, retard," said Mack.

The ivory markets, I thought with alarm.

I tried to meet Clara's eyes, but somehow she wasn't at the table.

"Is there something to eat?" I said, because I needed to sober up.

"Tired of eating my friend's wife?" said Mack.

"In my home, my son eats who he wants," said Ike Senior.

"Give me a second," I told them, standing up.

"Take all the time in the world."

I walked to the refrigerator, found it empty. Behind me the men were laughing. The game had stopped; they were just sitting there scheming. I needed to figure this out. Was it for the smooth running of a con that Frank had let me borrow his wife? Protect Gracie, I thought, but I'd known her only two days. Look at the girl I'd loved for years.

Truth was, I'd have struck Gracie dead along with every elephant if it would have brought Aisling back.

It occurred to me to put this in one of my songs, specify in the liner notes that a fraction of profits would go to the sanctuary.

I went looking for my notepad. Along the way, I got lost, because I awoke in daylight with the words *first blackout* written on my hand. First blackout, I lay thinking, awaiting the headache. This latest one might have been my thousandth or five thousandth, but I recalled one thing, the tusks. Frank and Mack had mentioned ivory. What I didn't recall was who Frank and Mack were or why they knew my songs. If they'd seen the Porsche. If I'd forged any plan.

In hope of dredging up useful memories, I thought back to my first blackout, on New Year's Day, 2000.

On New Year's Eve, 1999, Ike Senior had arrived in Port Arthur after some years absent and announced he was kidnapping me. "If I've been praying for it, that's not the verb," my mother replied, so it came to pass that my namesake drove me across cypress swamps and oil fields to New Orleans where he said, "A whiskey before the end of the world?"

To shake my head no set bargaining in motion: you choose the label, you keep the change, we'll sit by the river—except my long-lost father gestured not to a river but to a steep, grassy hill that rose twice my height above our dry position. As if it took no effort to fool a twelve-year-old. As if you could do it in your sleep. So I couldn't help retorting, "That's a hill, you sorry bastard, there's no river."

Ike Senior looked older to me then than he did twelve years later on the elephant farm. He aged years before my eyes, this man I self-consciously believed had broken my heart. "I've lied a few times, but give a sorry bastard a last chance."

Chanting *fuck fuck fuck fuck* to staunch my hemorrhage of sympathy, I followed my father upslope. Let's get this chance over with, I was thinking as we crested the grassy hill to behold a sea lapping at a shore higher than the city.

"Gasp away," he said, earning several more years of my trust. Forever after, if I saw the French Quarter in photographs, my shame rose to that hundred-year floodplain where I'd apologized for hours on end. "Don't dwell on it," he kept telling me

that night, which didn't reassure me until my first sip of Jim Beam. Then suddenly it felt like the sun was bursting into the night to pour energy into me. It made Ike Senior happy, I saw as much, because we were feeling it together. Years later I would tell *Spin* I'd found my tribe at 11:59 that night, when a beautiful song I'd never heard beckoned from a bar and he said, "Neil Young."

Fireworks exploded above us. "Who'll be the first chick to suck my cock in the year 2000?" shouted a man in the crowd.

"Tawdry ending to the century," remarked Ike Senior, a statement around which I would build an EP a decade later. We began the new century on a terrace of the Margaritaville Café. "If this were a film," he said, "I'd take you to meet the whores."

"Huh?" I asked, as he poured bourbon in our Cokes.

"One of those flicks where the old man calls his kid 'Kid'."

I felt a thrill at this open maw of uncharted country, but I was afraid.

"The father wants to help his son come of age, but the son starts hating him. Father shown to be a failure."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't the whores worry it's a sting?"

"Oh," I said, imagining myself drunk the next day, drunk through high school. If the whores didn't worry, it was because they were drunk.

"Has your mother said what I do?"

"You're a con man," I whispered.

"Folks can't hear you."

"You're a con man," I said a little louder, still afraid of him, trying to lock eyes with any wasted stranger.

"No one but you knows it."

"Mom knows."

"She guessed it. To you, I'm admitting it." And just like that, he drew me in. "Who else can I trust? No one, that's who else. And I'll tell you what, Junior, not an hour goes by when I don't think about you. I've missed you so much."

Tears sprang to his eyes. How could I have judged them to be false, when after years away he sat before me weeping from both eyes.

"I want to live with you," I said.

"There's stuff to learn."

"I'll learn it."

"I don't want you becoming a mark."

"Teach me," I said, and he began to. As he instructed me in spotting marks,

I buzzed with pride. My vision was tilting to one side. Although I didn't know it, my brain had ceased making new memories. Did I like girls? Did I like penthouse suites and poker? Yes, yes, and yes, but before we could enjoy those things, I awoke at sunrise on the levee slope, with trash strewn around me.

My father stood over me with a brown paper bag. "Feel like a doughnut?"

I took one. I could smell bilgewater, and feel shadow memories lurking in my pounding head as I leaned to puke.

He tossed the bag down. "It's been fun," he said, "but we'd best head home."

"Yeah, I've had fun," I replied, standing up, and out of shame or stubbornness I'd been saying similar things ever since. If someone had been around to tell it to that morning after the poker game, I'd have said it again.

Licking a finger to scrub *First blackout* off my hand, I went and found my father snoring in a trundle bed. It was a relief that he was alone. After all, what would I have said to Clara? Hide your elephants?

I would have broken her heart, I thought, wandering out into a windy, cold day. Gracie stood by the fence, eating some clover. I walked down to her.

"We need to get you out of here," I said.

What's it to you? she seemed to ask, raising her head.

"You're in a lot of danger."

So are all elephants, she said.

My dad cheats people and lies.

Maybe I cheat and lie too.

For a moment I was shaken by déjà vu. My next album's about you, I told her, at which point the tenor shifted in our exchange.

All along she had communicated without words, but now she conveyed no feelings either. She just put up a shield so my feelings would bounce back at me, like my concern that was driven only by my new songs, and my desire to cancel out bad deeds with good ones. "No, it's not like that," I said, fiddling nervously in my pockets. I felt a cell phone there, not my own.

I looked in its music library. Both my albums were there.

"Listen," I said, cueing "Four-Leaf Cover," because I needed Gracie to perceive the sadness I felt about other people's pain. Ugly or no, the song will demonstrate it, I thought until a calliope horn sounded, redolent of circus sleaze.

Who was worse to an elephant: a killer of young women or a child who begged to see the circus? I skipped to the next track, "Mom." "She killed herself," I said to explain the ugliness of "Mom." Gracie was still plucking weeds. Who fucking cares?

she seemed to be asking, until I recalled that she'd heard me play it already, on the porch.

Then it hit me: she recalled it today because she would recall it forever.

By playing it, I wasn't just making Gracie like me, I was stashing my catalogue in elephant memory.

I've always believed life has no value if no one will remember you in a hundred years. Until now, though, I had been thinking only in terms of people. Now I saw that Gracie was my portal into eternity: if elephants survived, elephants would remember me. So I knew I had to level with her, if I wanted to get on top of my story.

Already I'd confessed by accident, via fleeting thoughts, so it shouldn't be hard. I sucked in air, steeling myself. "Last week it was ninety-five in Austin," I said, delivering words at a small fraction of the traveling speed of memories. "The air was humid, sultry, maybe Africa feels that way?"

Gracie was pretending not to be bothered, but I could see her listening. "All day we drank on the rooftop deck of this shabby marina bar," I said to her. "Billy, our bassist, was afraid we'd get too plastered for the show, and Aisling told him, 'Don't be a gaywad, I'll find us cocaine'."

Like everyone she'd ever taunted, Billy folded to Aisling's demand. That's the kind of girl she was, I explained to Gracie. We toasted and drank. In that winter heat we were matched to our time and place, said Ren, the guitarist. I agreed. We improvised a song about it and sang it with some ranchers who'd driven from Uvalde. In the distance the Austin skyline poked above the juniper like little filaments of wire. I had probably read that description in a book, but I put it in the lyrics just to show off. "You have a gift," said one of the ranchers. I nodded, smiling. Hearing I had a gift was why I wrote songs. I loved for people to think of me a genius, gambling ever more carelessly with my life. It turned me on to imagine dying young. By sound check we could barely walk. In the nick of time, though, Aisling came through as promised, and what a show: our shirts off for hours of noise and love that the crowd really felt for us; it wasn't the drug tricking us into believing it. Girls loved us, boys did too, and a few of them invited us afterward to a mansion on a cliff above the foam-green Colorado.

As meticulously as I could, I pieced through that night: Aisling disappearing, some girls leading me into a vanishing pool where we stripped and swam and made out until one said, "You two kiss" and I turned to see Billy there. Gaywad, I thought, guiding his head in with my palm. I made love to his tongue with mine. Was he weeping or only wet? He seemed to like it in any case. I help people, I thought as

I hoovered up another line. The girls' skin gleamed in reflected moonlight. The moon had risen over foliage so Californian that I decided we were back home on the west coast.

As I dried off, a man with faraway hillbilly eyes and a liter of gin said, "I'd like to book you for South by Southwest."

"If you'll give me some gin."

"This is filtered water."

"It says gin right there."

"Bar's on the terrace."

"Guess we'll play Coachella instead," I said, exulting at my wit. I turned to recount the scene to the girls, but the pool was empty. So I wandered into the garage to find Aisling alone in the passenger seat of a Porsche 911 Carrera.

I got in beside her. The keys were in the ignition, turned to accessories, and "Lumber" was playing. I remember because she skipped over it with a jab of her finger. Why, was it a weak song? "It's weak because it's about you," I said, and so on until she called me a con artist like my no-good dad.

I couldn't help it, I turned the engine and gunned the car in reverse, sending the garage door crumpling off its runners.

We went screeching backward down a steep driveway. "Cheaper ways to jerk off, pissy-pants," said Aisling.

"I'm wet 'cause I was swimming with two girls."

"Same name, same acorn, same tree," she said, as I spun us around toward a far cluster of city lights. I think she was too busy mocking me to buckle her seatbelt. My songs were plagiarized, my cock was small, I would never feel real love. Over her drivel I couldn't think which way led back to Sunset Boulevard. At a split I veered abruptly downhill. Her stomach must have fallen out, because she shut up.

"I don't think this is the way," she said.

"Depends where you're going."

"This goes nowhere."

Never would I have asked my fiancée the way to somewhere, but damned if a TomTom didn't power up and advise, "Left turn, mate," in a congenial Cockney accent.

"Follow directions," said Aisling with the force of a gavel strike, leaning in to push the wheel left with all her might. We went spinning off the road shoulder. The car skidded across talus until the ground fell away and we were sailing into space. Ahead of us a cantilever bridge spanned a wide, moonlit river. I had never seen this

section of Los Angeles. Aisling howled. Was she upset? "We're only having a wreck," I said, before we hit the water.

There was more—climbing the hill, hitching a ride on Capital of Texas Highway—but I trailed off. Two of Gracie's friends had appeared on the hilltop. The phone was playing the album's closer, "Turgenev." I imagined the other elephants were too far to hear me croon a vow to commit Ike Senior's same crimes if it earned his respect in heaven, but Gracie heard. She studied me like her own eye in the mirror.

"Like I told you, I didn't leave her for dead," I said, feeling sort of desperate now for Gracie's forgiveness. Before she could give it or deny it, my song faded into a ring.

I answered. "James," said a woman the device named as Franklin Pierce. It took me a minute to figure out why she sounded familiar.

"Yep," I answered, meaning I was my father.

"Where are you?"

"By the elephant fence."

"And the others?"

It was Haley, I realized. She believed I was Ike Senior.

"They're on their way."

"James, stay inside while this happens."

"Sure, Franklin Pierce."

"Wait until it's all over."

"I'll sit playing solitaire."

"I've enjoyed getting to know you," she said, sounding on the verge of tears.

She hung up. When I called back, the phone gave a busy-circuits signal.

What Haley wanted, I realized, was for my father to stay in the house while she and Frank harvested ivory.

I'd been seeing evidence for days now: they would shoot the elephants, saw off their tusks, and sell them on the black market. It would happen in thirty minutes, I thought, as Gracie languished in the mud, reading my mind as indifferently as ever. It struck me what a tiny fraction of her mass her tusks comprised. It was the same with oysters and pearls, men and their gold teeth.

And then it came to me: I had it backwards, this elephant hated all human beings equally. We were torturers who had put her in a cage alone for forty years. Most elephants were dead because people had killed them. In fifty years they would all be gone. What did Gracie care if I had killed a girl?

She was glad I'd killed a girl. It was one less human.

I'd known something was wrong with Haley from the moment I saw her, I told myself as I hurried uphill. If I'd wished to live with Haley in another country, half of me was bad like her. It was time to let that half die, and save Gracie whether or not she wanted it, I thought, spacing the words to match the pounding beat in my head as I climbed to the house.

Alone on the porch, I scrolled through the phone contacts looking for Elephant Sanctuary, then Sanctuary. No luck. Clara wasn't listed either. I hit redial and got another busy-circuits signal. I paused for a drink. Pouring, I spotted a copy of the *New York Times* lying open to a picture of me, Ike Bright, Jr., in tuxedo and boutonnière.

In the picture I had fallen over backward in the sand in a beach chair. Beside me, Aisling, in a bikini and ball cap, was tying my shoelaces together.

I stared down at the caption until I could read a single word, *gold*. Then immediately I flung the paper out of sight so fast that a number of possibilities remained.

The lead investigator in my case was named Gold. My bounty was to be paid to Aisling's father in gold. In the wake of my new notoriety, my records had gone gold. I had misread *manslaughter* and mistaken it for *gold.*

"Catching up on the news?" said Ike Senior behind me, causing me to drop the bottle. It crashed with a thud on the porch floor and spilled.

"I'm telling Clara your elephant plan," I said.

"My plan to give them my money?"

"To sell Gracie's tusks."

"That was a ruse, to test how evil you find me."

"Then it's a redundant ruse," I said.

"I was hoping we had a future."

"You and me both, Dad."

"But you believe I would hurt those elephants."

"Fool me twice," I said, pulling out the phone.

"I've fooled you more than twice, Junior."

I could hear an engine approaching. We both turned to see a police car pull up in the ditch. A black man in a fedora got out, the poker player from before.

"Am I interrupting?" he said as he strode toward us.

"What's this about?" said Ike Senior.

"You're harboring a murder suspect, old man."

Here's what I thought, just for a minute: that this cop would earn a bounty from Aisling's father by betraying mine and giving me over to the state of Texas. My

dad had trusted everyone, even me. In a pinpoint storm's eye I felt glad to know that Ike Senior wasn't betraying Clara. But then his inscrutable grin never diminished as the policeman climbed the stairs. It seemed to me Ike Senior should stop grinning. Before I knew why he didn't, the cop was handcuffing me to the porch railing.

"You can't do this," I said, still expecting my father's smile to wane.

"Turn yourself in, file a complaint," he said, taking the phone out of my other hand.

"How much money?" I said, still believing that the money was because of me.

"News will tell you a thousand per pound for ivory," said Ike Senior, "as if there's just one black market in the world. In Beijing you'll fetch close to two thousand."

It hit me, all of a sudden, how dimwitted I'd been to assume there was a bounty. In three days people haven't survived their first stage of grief, let alone set bounties.

"You're monsters," I said.

"My buddy wanted to let you help," Ike Senior said, "but I told him what you're like. You're as bad as that animal-rights activist you brought home yesterday morning."

"Gracie, charge," I shouted, aloud and in my head, screeching like I did in the songs Gracie hated so much.

"He believes Gracie talks to him," said my father.

"She does," I said. "She's smarter than we are."

"That night in New Orleans? I taught you how not to be a mark."

"I blacked it out. What you taught me is to be a drunk."

"You drink too much, that's for sure."

"Why are you doing it?" I asked, but I knew. Because he was good at it. Because of adrenaline. Because of alcohol. He had a lot of nerve, telling me I drink too much.

"They're old and sick," he said. "If you never forgot things, wouldn't you want to die?"

"You said they're like people."

"People, elephants, I roll this way with all animals. Hey, it's in the blood. You think I didn't know all along why you're here?"

"Why am I here?"

"I've done stuff in my day, Junior, but leaving her to die? That was low."

As my father stepped down from the porch, I was speechless, but only in my voice. Not in my head. Flee, I shouted to Gracie in my head as Ike Senior led his

buddy toward the garage. Charge the fence, tell your friends, except she wasn't answering me anymore.

My father and his partner emerged with two automatic rifles apiece and crossed into the elephant sanctuary. They disappeared over the rise. I was working my handcuff down the railing. When it was low enough for me to kneel, I leaned forward and caught my breath. Now I could relax a little. It was during that spell of calm that I came up with my final song, which never made it onto the album. I didn't get a chance to write it down. It's about regular elephants, not vampires. It takes place fifty years from now, in the year 2063. In it, the computers of 2063 learn to decipher the part of elephant speech that's too low for human ears. Although elephants are extinct by then, videos of them remain online. In my last song the citizens of my future play elephant videos one by one, as their computers translate, and it's like finding ten thousand Anne Frank diaries; the people weep over those staggering words and say, "We wouldn't have let that happen." The African videos are bad enough, with their desperate cries while gunmen mow down elephants from helicopters, but the worst come from the sanctuary, where every old lady brings to the watering hole her own history of exquisite torture, and compares notes with the other cows, puzzling out what's next.

I succumb to something like postpartum depression after writing a good song, but in that moment, listening for the first gunshot, it felt nice to finish one. I heard the distant wail of another siren. No, no, no, I thought, because as awful as Gracie's fate was, I had quit feeling sorry for myself. It faded, the siren. For a few seconds before it picked up again, I felt proud of not screwing up. I would remain free. If Ike Senior was dealing in ivory, he could smuggle me across the border with my songs. No one would steal the songs, not that I'd guessed yet that anyone would try. I was in luck. I supposed it derived from my having inherited my father's inscrutable poker face, which girls called enigmatic. Most of them couldn't get enough of it. Not just girls, but critics, too. Critics sought my answers, trusted that they were full of subtext. Comment on the metaphorical structures in your songs, the critics would say to me, and I would reply, "There aren't any."

Charles Simic
Once December Comes

There's another kind of sky,
another kind of light
over the wintry fields,
some other kind of darkness
following in its footsteps,
eager to seek our company
in these frost-bitten little homes,
standing bravely
with no dog in sight.

The New Widow

Weren't you to be her prisoner for life
in her father's wood shed once?
Didn't she make you strip your shorts
and cover your eyes with one hand,
so she could touch you with the other,
till both of your knees went weak
while a rooster kept crowing in the heat
and deep slumber of the afternoon.

The Execution

It was the earliest of sunrises
and the quietest.
The birds, for reasons of their own,
kept mum in the trees
whose leaves remained
calm throughout
with only a small number
in the upper branches
sprinkled with fresh blood.

Autumn Evening

Poor goldfish
some kid threw in
a rain puddle.

No, worse than that!

Swimming
in a dead man's
pickle jar.

Yes, one poor fish.

Black Butterfly

Ghost ship of my life,
weighed down by coffins
sailing out
on the evening tide.

Edmundo Paz Soldán
One Night Stand

Translated from Spanish by Kirk Nesset

I never liked one-night stands, but I couldn't say no to him, and all that was left the next day was a humiliating thank-you note, a phone number, and a name. Since then I've called once a week, or more often. Each time without fail his voice responds from the message machine, saying he isn't in, but if I leave my name and number he'll call later. I've never left my number or name, or a message; I'm too proud for that, and confident I'll catch him the next time I call.

I'm married, and my son is fourteen, and sometimes I think what's most absurd and incredible is that I haven't caught him. Maybe he moved, I tell myself, and forgot to disconnect the machine; but the idea of somebody paying to keep a phone on fifteen years in an empty apartment seems even more absurd. Maybe he didn't disconnect the machine, maybe he left it on in the empty apartment for me, and me only, to torture me in intricate ways, since for this reason or that that night wasn't the night he expected. But no: Somebody has to live there. He's there still; he must be.

Whatever the case, I will keep calling—until he finally answers, or something cuts off the ever-faltering flow of my breath.

Afternoon Ritual

I just saw my daughter Duanne making love with her boyfriend. Another furtive afternoon tryst in her bedroom while we're away—I found out her secret a long time ago, found out by accident. I'd forgotten my glasses and went back to the house, and heard noises I couldn't identify. I tiptoed to the bathroom, which smells of violets in alcohol, the bathroom adjoining her bedroom, and saw through the hole under the mirror a pair of bodies in harmonious rhythm, a disarray of gray sheets, down-filled pillows flung on the floor. My first impulse was to raise holy hell and throw them both out. But words didn't come. I stood hypnotized, staring in fascination and horror. Not unlike, I suppose, the first time I looked through that hole, provoked as I was by scanty dresses and shorts, intrigued by the metamorphosis, woman from girl.

After that, it became habit: dropping in afternoons, lingering a while up the block as the current boyfriend arrived, letting the mayhem begin, stealing through the garden and back door to the bathroom to anxiously peer through the hole, slipping away as she and he, supine on the sheets, studied the ceiling (prolonging momentarily that blast of pleasure, or trying). This has gone on for two years. Surprisingly long. Why hasn't Duanne noticed the hole, or detected my footsteps, the tight anxious rasp of my breath? Maybe she has, and does what she does in her room knowing someone is watching. You learn very late that as far as the big questions go, your kids know more than you. You've barely begun the journey, and they've left and returned.

This story might have ended happily. But no, here I am locked in the john, frozen by a vision I savor and suffer, smelling violets in alcohol, ecstatic panting permeating the wall. Even still, one can't help but wonder. These last visitors I've seen bear unsettling if touching similarities to me. They've got the same sharply drawn cheekbones, the same firm, striking jaw, same faint lines of ribs in lean bodies. Maybe Duanne finds in them this thing I can't offer. Maybe she'll discover in me whatever it is that they offer.

Karyna McGlynn
Square Rooms

Once, we lived in a perfectly square room.
It was drafty but had a working fireplace.

I thought, okay, my life is finally beginning.
He put a big metal chicken in the fireplace.

I loved this. Even though it was very cold
he never had to tell me to put on a sweater.

His ex-wife hated these quirks: his metal
chicken and toy piano, bluebirds nested

in a martini glass, taxidermied squirrel
tableaux, his defacement of Thom Yorke:

tabula rasa on the cover of *Rolling Stone,*
pale slot mouth spewing skee-ball tickets.

Might as well make kitsch on the built-ins.
Have you ever been in a perfectly square room?

You feel as if you've arrived at the center,
on time for once, everything inside equidistant

and equally possible. Emily Dickinson's room
was a perfect square, but I didn't get it until

the moment I set foot in his apartment.
I felt a little bit famous. I said to myself: okay,

I will become his second wife, his real wife,
binding and unbinding things, recklessly—all that

symmetry and space, a factory floor!
The New Modern Love Bride, like,

wearing a white dress, but warily, like,
okay, I *know*, but fuck let's do this.

A square room can do that to you. But then,
he had an armoire of leftover wedding champagne.

One was called “You.” One was called “Us.”
The most expensive was called “Sex.”

We drank them when we ran out of money.
Straight from the bottle, around our perfect

square of a coffee table, in our square room,
making faces at each other in the cold Michigan

sunlight through huge, square windows.
His name was Adam and I thought for sure

this was it: that we’d go on making things,
naming them, but when we moved South

into awkward rectangles, something stopped.
We sat on opposite ends and drank sparkling wine

from the store. What was it? It didn’t have a name.
He kept rearranging little shipwrecks on the shelf.

You Are My New God

I know this because I *so* wanna dance in yr chorus.
Wanna whisper shit so sweet in yr ear the center
of 1989 will rot and fall out, and through that hole
an eleven-year-old me will see her True Name on
the nape of yr neck and know how to break-dance.
My deer, I think I've been learning this sidestroke
all my life to slam-dunk my apple in yr basket
and really rock out in this slow lagoon with you.
And I wanna be so Girl for you that I get all "Yeah"
with my bubblegum baby-making machine,
like I want to mermaid up inside yr Cultural
Memory to fight off Tom Hanks and Hasbro.
Like, hey boy, I want to fly up inside yr Men's
Grooming Kit and die there so I know how
it feels to be yr thing scented and clipped
with safety scissors and get so lost in yr Man Cave
I need you to invent a new legend for the map
made of footprints that teach me to foxtrot
where I bend over the hot oven in my butter
colored frock and make muffins that make
muffins that make banana nut muffins
and rename me in a pile of your sweet laundry
that is *sooo* dirty but won't do itself, *dumpling.*

Wedding Poem

In the middle of the pressboard church
I wore a lattice dress.
"Fix me a water!" I pleaded, turning
in circles on the Colgate red carpet.
"Somebody fix me a water!"
Some aunt thrust a cloudy glass
into my hand. "Sip it," she hissed.
I drank. It was water, but it was not
fixed, plus the pastor was running wires
through the fake plant in my hair.
Moreover, the cake had arrived.
It had wheels and working taillights
like a truck. It went honk, honk.
I put my finger inside it. Red velvet.
An aunt slapped me hard on the hand.
But I knew my husband was baked
into the trunk, and that he was not
the person I was fixing to marry.

Swing Revival/Stunt Double

We sit in the dark palace.
Bottle-blonde twins conjoined at the armrest.
We are watching a movie where two girls die in a theater.
In the car her breath is hot in my ear:
I won't be a single syllable, she says.
I want to be called Anastasia, she says.
She pulls a black thing from her purse.
I think it's a gun, but it's only a wig.
We are arguing on the porch of our shotgun house.
Someone takes a picture.
The blue window round as a porthole.
The whole scene swaying on its cinderblock foundation.
Our heels high as smokestacks. We can barely stand up.
I lock her out of the house. No, she's hidden my key.
She looks exactly like me. *You love me*, she says.
You're never wearing any of my clothes again, I say.
She licks me to sleep like a kicked dog.
In the dream I can't find her.
I look out the window of our sinking house.
There's a mountain of clothes on fire. Every pencil skirt.
Every t-strap shoe. I can't tell what's mine.
The heap smolders and stinks like tires in our uncut yard.

I knock on her bedroom door for twenty minutes.
A smell intimates under the door and up. Frangipani.
It gets deep in the sea-foam carpet and puts its fingers in me.
My mother says *we call this transference*.
She inserts a thumb under my wig, my wig cap.
Lets it snap back. *That was your old life,* she says. *Forget it*.
But how can I while she's under the house?
When she might still shimmy out into daylight.
Dirty cheeks and red lips, strapped in her lavender halter.
The late '90s hitches like a cola can left in the freezer.
We're learning to lindy-hop. Down the block a car goes ka*boom*.

Dead to You

Before I knew him, he had a project.
The project was called "Dead to Me."
Once a week, he would write DEAD TO ME
on a poster board. Below that, a numbered list.
Somebody took the pictures. Pieces of him
frame the poster: hands gripping the thin
neck of a ringer tee, jawbone, deadpan slot
of his lips, faux snarl.
He posted the pictures to his livejournal,
a blog now dead to him. He was in college.
DEAD TO ME
1) "Ethnic" Poetry
2) Chokers
3) Experimental Jazz
4) Gin
5) Bamboo Furniture
6) Ashley W.
I wanted him to revive the project, but no,
it was dead to him. He wouldn't listen when
I tried to play vinyl or rekindle cummings,
Yet, he really did love me. Sometimes I said
"I don't know why you even love me."

This made him very angry. He thought it was
a passive-aggressive way of saying "I don't love you."
These things would not be reexamined—
like Ashley W. and "gourmet" mac & cheese.
This is the "no" work of one man's education.
I clicked back, back through his archives.
It was like watching him walk through a house,
entering some rooms, not others. Standing there
in the doorway, or slamming the door at once.
I watched the house grow smaller and smaller until
he came to a single room with only two doors.
This is the room where the man I love walks in.
And it is a necessary sadness. Because this way,
not that. Because cummings and never again
and get out. Because we made lists and crossed
some things out. Because of "no," a "yes."
Two people in a room with lisable borders
they could already read in the dark.

Jesse Goolsby
Pollice Verso

Three months after his prison stint for starting a forest fire that killed a man, Armando's father drives his family past the Supermax outside Florence, Colorado. He's in good spirits.

"You know the guy that invented the Richter scale? Dude was a nudist," he says.

The Diaz family laughs together inside their minivan as they head back to Colorado Springs after an overnight campout in the Wet Mountains. Fifteen-year-old Armando sits in the back seat with his younger sister. She holds her stomach and smiles. Armando half listens, half mentally undresses a girl in his grade named Avery who sports a pinkish birthmark on her cheek that resembles Wisconsin.

"I can't help but imagine a naked guy, pool-side, when an eight-point-oh strikes a couple miles down the road. Bet he wishes he had some pants on."

Armando's mother smiles and play-punches his father in the shoulder.

"So you got gladiators," he says, "and they battle it out and finally one stands over the other one, sword high, and he looks to the emperor to see if the near vanquished will live or die and the crowd gives the thumbs up. You say, 'good news,' right? No, my dear family. *Pollice verso*. With a turned thumb. The movies have it wrong. Thumbs down, sword down. Thumbs up, dead."

"So we should give a thumbs down when someone does something right?" Armando's mother asks. "Weird."

"There's a flower that only opens up at night," his father says. "Bats do the work, not bees. Your turn."

Armando extends both thumbs up and smirks at his sister. His mind works as a school bus passes the other way. "There's blind fish in caves."

"One huge, linked cave. In Kentucky. What else you got? Give me something good."

"My English teacher says Shakespeare ripped his stories off."

"Shakespeare didn't rip anything off 'cause he didn't write the plays. Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford."

"You're full of it," says Armando's mother; then, looking back and winking at Armando, she says, "A half, maybe a quarter is true." She reaches and squeezes just below his knee.

"Ask me anything about sports. Anything."

"We got the Olympics," she says. By "we" she means Mormons. The Diaz family has visited Salt Lake City twice: temple square, the tabernacle, two Jazz games. "We're going."

"Luge and ice hockey," says Armando's father.

"Maybe we can get him into luge," his mother says, thumbing back at her son. Then, tone rising: "How many people can be into luge? A hundred?"

"A thousand, worldwide. Still good odds."

"What do you say?" his mother asks, then looks back.

"That's head first, right?" Armando asks.

"It is? Forget it then," she says.

"But you'd be okay with feet first?"

"Drop it."

"Figure skating," says his sister. "I can see you in skates."

"I could wear pink," he says.

Armando's father whistles, sees the approaching dotted yellow center line, flicks the left turn signal on, and accelerates out into the left lane to pass a brown truck doing fifty, but as their van draws even the truck speeds up, so he pushes the accelerator, but the truck matches him, and four seconds in he looks over and spots two shirtless boys, the young driver smirking, glancing at his speed, and nodding to his buddy, and Armando's father presses the brake, but the truck slows as well, and Armando's mother reaches up and touches her window and says, "Hey. Hey," as the dotted line goes double yellow and Armando's father smashes the accelerator down as they fly along a bend, the van tilting hard, and a car coming for them in the far distance flashes its lights as the van's engine wails a high pitched squeal, and Armando freezes in the backseat and sees his father's head lean forward as the van

gains a bumper ahead, then a full car length, and his father turns the wheel and cuts the truck off as the oncoming car whips past, horn ablaze.

"Shit!" his father says, lifting his right arm up with a fist.

His mother moans.

"My God," she says. "Slow down. Slow down. Now. Please."

Armando's father lifts his foot from the accelerator, but the pedal sticks. He presses the brake and the van shakes.

"Stuck. Pedal's stuck. Shit," he says. "Help me."

Armando glances outside and watches the red rock and pine trees rocket by. Among his still-forming fear he wonders if they're doing a hundred.

Later, Armando will know that his father's mistake was not shifting the car to neutral or not making any attempt to turn off the engine. But no one in the minivan knows that now, so while his father hammers down his left foot on the parking brake and his right on the main brake pedal, his mother unbuckles her seatbelt and leans over the center console and yanks on the accelerator. The burning brake stench overpowers them. From the backseat Armando watches his mother's lower back jerk and jerk. He's never seen her body move so wild and the act scares him more than anything that's happened up to this point until his body launches sideways then presses taut and he hears his father yell out "Na!" as the van begins its roll.

As his vision straightens, Armando sees his sister's wet face and the ground at the window behind her. Something presses on his neck and he reaches there and grabs at flesh, bone underneath, and he moves it away from him. A dangling, shoeless foot on a leg—his mother's leg extending out at an impossible angle toward her body. He hears voices nearby, and reaches out in the space in front of him, toward his sister, and sees his hands there as the darkness overtakes him.

One afternoon, eight weeks into Armando's mother's coma, Armando's father picks him up from school in their loaner van and drives them past the luxurious Broadmoor hotel and out on Gold Camp Road toward Pike's Peak. Aspen flank the packed-dirt path. They talk about the Broncos beating the Redskins, about John Elway, how he may have a few more seasons left in him.

His father says, "The guy once knelt on home plate at the Stanford baseball stadium and hurled a baseball over the center fence from his knees."

Armando pictures young Elway kneeling on home plate before the throw. Elway's in uniform, warming up, windmilling his massive right arm loose as a small

crowd gathers near the backstop. Then a baseball appears in his hand, and in one superhuman motion he flings the ball high and deep. The ball still climbs into the sky passing dead center, headed for the clouds. Young Elway smiles as Armando shakes the vision out of his head.

After a small crest his father turns south, guiding the van into a valley. A mile down the bumpier road he pulls the van off by a stream and parks.

"Never eat an armadillo," Armando's father says. "Leprosy." "I'll never eat an armadillo."

They follow the stream for a while and piss at the base of a rusted-out sign before peeling off and hiking up a hill and resting on a granite outcropping.

"Never eat an armadillo," Armando's father says. "Leprosy."

"I'll never eat an armadillo."

"You never know when you'll be tempted to try. New Mexico. Arizona. Some weird freaks down there."

"What's the weirdest thing you've eaten?"

His father smacks his lips. "Weird, of course, is relative. But, to answer your question, human."

"Human?"

"You believe me?"

"I guess."

"Be careful."

"Okay."

"I ate a rabbit eyeball for twenty-five bucks."

"Dad."

"Hard Jell-O marble."

Armando looks out on the modest vista—gray rock and trees scattered together. He picks up a small rock and tosses it down the hill. Tiny dust eddies circle into the afternoon. He looks at his legs and sees dirt on his jeans and swipes. He imagines Avery calling his house and leaving a message he'll find later that night. He remembers the yellow shirt she wore at school, her exposed collarbone. Near the end of the day she mentioned to him that she wanted to see *Se7en*—he's heard something about a severed head.

"Your mom will wake up," his father says.

"Yep."

"I mean it, son. She'll be back with us soon."

"You gave her a blessing?"

"Doesn't have to do with that."

"Okay."

"There's free will, but there's God's plan. There's volcanoes and shit, too. God's always watching, which is a pain in the ass. And, of course, Freud is always watching, which is less a pain in the ass, but still. So, there you go."

The wind blows through the trees and they hear the branches move.

On the way down they stay silent, but as they near the van, his father tells him to wait by the stream. He walks to the vehicle and returns with a glass jug and matches.

"It's getting darker," his father says. "Okay." He uncorks the jug and holds it out to his son. "Smell," he says, smiling, but Armando can smell the gasoline from where he stands.

"Little smoke cause there's no green on it," his father says proudly, stepping close. "Always pick dead ones."

It's then that Armando notices the tree next to him. The tree is largely limbless save a few dead branches near the top.

"I'll do this one," his father says. "Now listen. You just burn one. I got too cocky. Out of control."

He steps to the snag and pours gasoline over the bottom two feet of the tree.

"Wow," his father says. "Yeah. That's the smell." He pinches a match and holds it in his left hand between his thumb and pointer finger.

Armando stares in wonderment. "They'll see the smoke," he says.

"Getting dark, son." His father takes a deep breath. "And there's no they."

"Okay."

"Some of the law is good, but some of it's shit." He shakes out his arms. "You already know that. You may think different, and I don't care. Just never say I didn't know what I was doing. You understand? Don't ever say that." He points the match at his son's chest. "That's the worst thing you can say about someone, that they don't know what they're doing. If you have a drink, that's fine. Your mother will wake up and disagree."

"I try things."

"Good."

His father strikes the match on the side of the box and cups the miniflame. Armando's head buzzes, and he steps forward.

"Can I?" he asks, but his father ignores him, and Armando sees his father's

mouth move, but there's no sound. His father flicks the match at the base of the tree and the flame catches and climbs. The tree lights up quick—a twenty-foot torch.

Armando can't find words to say, but in his mind many cartwheel by: *beautiful*, *free*, *power*, *hot*, *trouble*, *crime*, *glorious*, *God*, *coma*, *dead*, *Avery*, *prison*, *run*.

Then: his father's voice.

"She said I was a slob or something. Things go back and forth, then you dig the good stuff up, and I end up calling her an über bitch. So she says she's going to stay at her sister's in Cortez. Fine. 'Good,' I say. And she gathers her stuff, her priceless diploma. Gets in the car. All ready to go. But she just sits out there forever. She's not crying. Not doing anything. Just sitting. Not even touching the wheel. Finally, she comes in. 'It's Sunday,' she says. 'Can't spend money on gas on Sunday.' That's it. She stays."

"Mom?"

"Can't spend money on Sunday? Can't live like that, man. Don't talk about it." He takes a step toward the fire.

"And they say I killed a man. Bull. He killed himself. Intent matters. We pay people to kill. We give them awards. We call people heroes just because they get shot down trying to bomb people. How does that make you a hero? You survive the Hanoi Hilton and you're a hero? You firebomb Dresden or Tokyo and you're a hero? Look up LeMay."

"What?"

"You need to know I've never killed anyone. Doesn't make sense. Why would I do that?"

"You wouldn't."

"Go," he says. "I want you to go."

Armando doesn't move, still mesmerized by it all. His father walks over to him and gently squeezes his neck.

"Get in the car," his father says. "I'll see you at home. I mean it." He turns his son to face him and smiles.

"Dad, I don't have a license."

"It's okay. Drive slow."

"Dad."

"Now, son."

Armando opens the driver's door and gets in. He sits in the seat and sees the burning tree, his father's back to him, and he squeezes the wheel hard and he reaches his feet out to touch the break and gas pedals. He'd practiced driving twice in their

old van, but this is a newer Aerostar, electric doors and windows and side mirrors, and already he's decided not to adjust anything, but the seat is too far away and it takes him a few nervous seconds to find the button that brings him closer to everything. Armando turns the key in the ignition—keys left in the van—then lights on, dashboard to life, deep breath, a little break, and he grabs the shifter and feels the minor click to reverse, off the brake, and movement. The lights of the van spotlight his father as he pulls out, and once Armando reaches the road leading out, he gently shifts to drive, but keeps his foot on the brake. He wipes his hands on his pants and looks over. He's not sure why the thought comes to him as he watches the lit tree, his father's hands on the top of his head, but it's then that he knows his mother will never wake.

Beautiful, free, power, hot, trouble, crime, glorious, God, coma, dead, Avery, prison, run.

On the drive back Armando keeps it at thirty miles per hour. He focuses on the road, how close the van's right-side tires parallel the shoulder, scanning for oncoming headlights, late-night loggers, but after thirty minutes of slow driving he enters a space of half-awareness as he replays the tree lighting, the glass jug, his father's shiny face ranting, the invisible smoke flowing into the night. He considers his father, a man who seemingly knows everything, but knows how to do little, who showcases benevolence and service, a diehard Broncos fan, a hugger, quick to smile and encourage. He's also someone who attends every fire station open house to climb on the trucks, a man who lights a match and blows it out after every bathroom trip, a person who, no matter the intention, has burned someone to death.

While his father was in prison his mother would tell him and his sister that it was the dead man's fault for not heeding the warnings as the fire crept toward his log home. It was never a passionate defense, but it was practiced, and soon she stopped talking about it altogether. Sometimes his mother wouldn't come home at night, and he would call the dentist's office where she worked, and they'd let him know she'd left hours ago. Once she called him from Raton to tell him that there were extra frozen waffles in the freezer in the basement, that this would take care of him and his sister until she returned. But she was always home on Sundays, when she would dress up and haul them to church, a family procession he didn't mind unless it was NFL season and the Broncos had the early game.

Driving down off the Front Range, a large truck passes him heading the opposite direction and although he can't see the driver, Armando imagines a Forest

Service uniform and a sidearm. He slows the van and pictures his father standing near the fire. When the truck pulls up to the still-burning tree will his father run? Laugh? Align his wrists for cuffs? Then the thought that he might have to be the one to pull the plug on his mother if it comes to that. He doesn't know the rules, but as he speeds back up for home, he thinks of standing over the hospital bed when the doctor hands him the form to sign, points, says, "Sign here." He sees his messy signature materialize.

When Armando gets home his sister is watching *Xena: Warrior Princess* and eating a bowl of Corn Pops.

"You stink," she says.

The next day, there's nothing in the *Colorado Springs Gazette* about a fire, no rumors at his school, and when his father shows up at their house two days later he's wearing new clothes.

"We're going out to eat," he says.

Armando's mother wakes up twenty minutes after O.J. Simpson is acquitted. Thinned out and shaky, she carries some internal organ damage, but the doctors tell the Diaz family that their mother will be just fine, save a limp and the need to regulate her insulin for the rest of her life. Besides the needle, it isn't that bad. The first thing his mother asks for is a chocolate pudding pie in a graham cracker crust. "Just this once," says the doctor. The dessert is Armando's favorite, and just as she's about to finish the entire pie she asks him if he wants a bite.

"No," he says, amazed.

In the weeks after his mother's return home she discovers she no longer likes to read, has perfect pitch, and the color yellow brings on headaches. Armando never hears her complain about the needles.

What he does hear is her singing. Never one to sing outside of church—and even then, quietly—his mother devours CD after CD as she sings along at top volume. Her favorites are Chicago's *The Chicago Transit Authority* and Tower of Power's *Tower of Power*. One day he comes home from school and his mother hands him a trombone.

"Learn, for me," she says, eyes wide and expectant. "You don't have to play at school."

Soon Armando finds himself with his trombone in hand sitting down for private lessons in a padded room inside a rancher on the east side of town. The

instructor is a blind man pushing seventy.

"Hot Cross Buns," the man says, face toward the ceiling, already nodding. "First, second, third position. Ready. Play."

The first thing the Diazs buy with the four hundred thousand dollar settlement from the car company is a two-story stucco home on a hillside near The Broadmoor.

This is the home where their family watches *The Empire Strikes Back* on an April Saturday night.

When the film ends Armando's mother says, "The force is the gospel. That movie was inspired. I believe that."

"Mark Hamill plus car crash equals ugly Skywalker," his father says. "Kind of looks like Joseph Smith."

"You're not serious," says his mother.

Later that night, while his family sleeps, Armando watches *Risky Business* in his bedroom. They have a free six-month HBO trial, so he has been staying up late. As Tom Cruise starts fondling Rebecca De Mornay on screen, he feels himself go hard and he wonders if he should masturbate for the very first time. He doesn't know if there's actual no-masturbation doctrine anywhere in the Bible or Book of Mormon, but there's enough context clues in Sunday School to guess that God would be pretty pissed at a young man jobbing himself hours before taking the sacrament. But still, he's sixteen, and De Mornay is ungodly hot, and he thinks he might come even if he doesn't touch himself. He wonders if there's a concession between release and salvation somewhere in the night, and within ten seconds he thinks he's found a compromise as he grabs his penis, but doesn't move his hand. *If something happens*, he thinks, *then it happens*.

Armando feels himself hard and pulsing, his heart and eyes and groin in heartbeat rhythm. He lets the pressure build and overtake him as De Mornay straddles young Cruise, smartly sliding up and down, up and down, and for a few seconds he thinks he may suffocate before hearing himself breathe. He slightly squeezes himself, and for a split second he thinks of dry humping the new couch, and he hates himself and absolves himself: he didn't seek out this I-want-to-do-this-beautiful-woman-for-days urge but here it is, undeniable and strong, and yet, this sensation collides with the vision of a white-robed, muscular Caucasian God, looking down, shaking his head, shaking a tiny bottle of Wite-Out, taking out the little Wite-Out brush and painting over "Armando Diaz" on the "Welcome to Heaven" list. And then,

too quickly for him and his racing insides, the sex scene ends, and fully clothed actors talk on screen in daylight and his blood slowly settles and a dull ache ebbs forth from his testicles. His penis goes limp in his hand, and already he thinks about how he'll be okay if he's asked to say a prayer in front of people in ten hours. He's still clean.

Mid-July on the eleventh hole of The Broadmoor's West Course and Armando clips his shot off to the left and the white ball splashes into a pond. It's early afternoon and the clouds have just begun to gather over the peaks as he reaches into his bag for another ball, but he's out. He's a poor golfer, which he accepts, but he still waits a second before asking his mother for one of her balls. She used to be a scratch player, but now carries a four handicap. "My car crash four," she calls it. She still maintains an effortless swing, but there's a hitch now when the weight transfers to her scarred left leg, like she's trying to stop everything a split second before it happens.

Armando's mother wears a blue visor and a form-fitting white polo. Thirty-six years old and attractive, her slim waist and long hair are often a target of silent male acknowledgement. Armando notices the minor nervousness of the two strangers who play with them. One wears a bright yellow shirt. The other, he overhears, is a retired Air Force Academy economics professor. Mr. Yellow Shirt looks up at the sky and smirks each time Armando's mother flattens her back and sticks out her butt during her pre-shot routine.

Armando's parents married when his father was twenty-two and his mother nineteen. He was a return missionary from England, smart enough to showcase a sliver of his bad boy status by drinking Coke and growing long sideburns. His mother was a junior at Cornell. Within a year of their marriage, she was pregnant with Armando. His father never finished his studies at Brigham Young, opting for a decent-paying job in the diamond business, but his mother keeps her framed diploma in their study on the wall above their new Apple computer.

While always weary of the attention his mother's looks receive, Armando is proud of her golf talent when they are alone on the course, but he isn't thrilled to be humbled in front of strangers—including a stranger who responds to "Colonel"—by asking his mother for a ball, which he knows will be a pink Slazenger.

"Need one, Mom," he says.

As his mother opens the side of her golf bag and reaches in, he sees a gun among the golf balls. It's his father's black 9mm. The Colonel and Yellow Shirt don't notice, and Armando's body clenches.

"In the ancient days these used to be made by stuffing goose feathers in a

leather pouch," his mother says, impersonating her husband's voice. She fingers the ball before tossing it over. "Swing hard." She smiles.

The rest of the round Armando catches himself staring at the Ping logo on his mother's bag, thinking about the weapon behind the light-blue fabric. He loses two more of his mother's golf balls, and each time watches as she unzips the bag and chooses a replacement.

On the way home he's worked up the courage to ask about the handgun, but his mother says, "Tell me about Avery. How much should I be worried?"

That night, he and his mother sit at the kitchen counter eating chocolate pudding.

"You had a gun today," he says. "In your bag."

She swallows a bite, then takes her spoon and swirls the remaining pudding in her bowl. Her elbows rest on the polished granite slab.

"You never know," she says. The tone in her voice signals the end, but Armando presses.

"For bear?"

"You never know."

"Where else?"

"Let's see," she says. "I carry a smaller one pretty much everywhere. I don't care if you know, but don't tell your sister. Got it?"

"To Broncos games? Little League?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

She spoons some pudding up and eats it.

"I grew up with guns, and you drive around long enough and you see bad situations. It always comes across as this random thing, but it's not. Do you understand?"

"I guess," he says, mouth full.

His mother looks above him. "I never want a fair fight. I don't know why anyone would."

"Yeah. That makes sense."

"Now eat your dessert or I will."

As Armando spoons the pudding to his mouth he peeks over at his now quiet mother. She stares just beyond her bowl at the gray and white and black swirls of granite, so Armando sits there and listens to the sound of his mouth tasting then swallowing the pudding.

Her face has thinned and Armando wonders what she's thinking about. *Guns? Fights? Pudding?* Although his dad is the talker, his mother has always retained a compelling intra-family authority. Almost all decisions for the family end with her approval: trips, major purchases, minor allowances, movies. This power enchants Armando and his sister—their father talks and talks and talks, then, in the end, waits for their mother's head nod, smile, or grimace. When his mother was in a coma the family would encounter unsettling swaths of silence after a debate, no matter how minor, before realizing that her approval was absent. But as Armando thinks about it now, he realizes there's something different about Sundays. The slow, lazy procession into stiff clothes. His mother, quiet and solemn. Mozart, Schubert, Rachmaninoff on the home stereo. The short drive to the building. Nice, old-smelling people. The men to Priesthood, the women to Relief Society. A boring hour altogether interrupted by bits of bread and tiny cups of water. On the way home his father spells out the plan for the rest of the day, which largely details the way in which everyone will leave him alone, no questions asked. Sundays. Begging to watch a Broncos game. Sundays. A fair fight. His mother in the car, refusing to turn the key. *Can't spend money on Sundays.*

This power enchants Armando and his sister—their father talks and talks and talks, then, in the end, waits for their mother's head nod, smile, or grimace.

Under a cloudy and surprisingly hot autumn afternoon, Armando and his father rest on the corner of South River Boulevard and West Walnut Street in Independence, Missouri. The manicured grass surrounding them is a gorgeous, shiny green. Armando's mother and sister are in one of the Temple Lot's visitor centers.

"We'll never know if all this is true unless we find out it isn't," his father says. "But if we're right God is supposed to come down from the heavens and land right here. We'll get the message, drop our stuff, and congregate at this exact spot. It'll be busy." He breathes in. "I tend to believe it. You'd think God would choose Tahiti or the Yucatán. But that's too easy." He scratches his forehead. "Missouri. Damn, it'll take God coming down here to get me to relocate. Lots of fat people running around."

"What about Jerusalem?"

"Jerusalem sounds more important, but it's not. You know, someone in Jerusalem, right now, is high on dope or banging a prostitute or reading the Bible."

Armando looks at the perfect mower lines in the grass, confused.

"Come on, Kansas City or Jerusalem."

A city bus stops near them, then drives away. A man walks by with an ice cream sandwich. A note of fertilizer floats around them.

"Do we have to walk here?" Armando asks.

"That's the rumor."

"Is that written down?"

"Good point. I doubt you were trying to make a point, but still."

"But we have to walk?"

"Walk to salvation with all of our friends."

"People in Europe are screwed."

"Good point."

"But what would happen if you didn't? Say we drove here. Is God or Jesus going to tell us to go back home?"

"Put down your lendings. Put down your lendings." He laughs. "'The Fourth Alarm.'"

"What?"

"Cheever. You'll get to him one day."

"Who?"

"If the difference between driving and walking to Missouri is the litmus test for eternal life, then most are in trouble. Yes."

"So the prophet will let us know when."

"I figure when we see the red chariot flying in the sky we'll start our trek."

"With bolts of lightning."

"No, you're confusing mythology with Revelations." His father balls his fists. "You're too young sometimes. Soon, you won't be. It's my fault. I've wished you older."

"I know the difference."

"Good."

Armando looks at his father, who picks at the grass between his legs then tosses it at his shoes. His father does this time and again, picking away a small circle section of lawn.

"Let's not talk," his father says.

Armando leans back and stretches out on the ground. It's too hot to get comfortable, and his gray shirt is starting to sweat through. He closes his eyes and listens to the traffic and his father pick blades of grass. He imagines walking here,

to this place. His legs hurting, sleeping on the side of I-70 as cars and diesel trucks zoom by. How many will be with them. Then what? Do they live here forever? In Independence? What would they do? Look up at the sky and wait? Would they get bored? Is there a choice? He recalls a vampire book where the eternal bloodsuckers get bored out of their minds and need antidepressants to get through their days. Then, a Sunday School talk comes to him where the well-dressed speaker said that when contemplating the notion of forever the audience should think of a hummingbird pecking away at a piece of granite as big as earth. In comparison to how long it will take that hummingbird to peck through that granite, "Well," said the speaker, "eternity is a lot longer than that."

With Colorado driver's license finally in hand, Armando makes Gold Camp Road his makeout parking location with Avery.

Avery is patient and understanding of his quirks: no gum, fascination with her birthmark, U2 and Bon Jovi slow songs. And him of hers: breaks for air when she says so, and once in a while a lazy George Strait song.

After school one day, while he and Avery hang out in the living room watching reruns of *The Wonder Years*, Armando's mother walks into the room holding a banana and an unopened condom. She asks if he can put a condom on the fruit. She'd watched a television special the night prior where Tom Brokaw narrated a town hall on safe sex, complete with banana-condom demonstration. Though unsure, he says he can perform the task.

"I'm not condoning premarital sex," his mother says.

Avery buries her face in her hands.

"If you are using this, you're past the point of trouble. But if you're past the point of trouble, use this."

Armando's mother puts the banana back in the fruit bowl and leaves the condom on the counter.

Armando's father corners him one night after he's late getting back from Gold Camp Road. His father holds up the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, and points at the cover, two beauties instead of the regular one, leopard-print bikinis, gleaming smiles.

"The lineaments of gratified desire. Say it with me." He pauses. "The lineaments of gratified desire."

Armando squints and shakes his head.

"An orgasm is pretty awesome, son. You know this. But it's not mystical.

Semen shoots from your penis. It feels good. These pictures have nothing to do with that. People were having orgasms long before photography and papyrus."

"Okay."

Confused, Armando waits for more from his father, maybe something about masturbation, pregnancy, late-night HBO, Armando has no idea, but his father only nods, somehow satisfied, and tosses the magazine at him and walks away.

Part of Armando's chores now involves stacking his mother's dialysis-fluid boxes every week after a large truck unloads them in their driveway. The machine in his parents' bedroom stands on his mother's side of the bed and makes puffing noises as it circulates her blood. Often this is where his mother will dispense her advice—hooked up, ready for bed—including her opinion that nothing good happens between teenagers after eleven at night.

Still, on weekend nights Armando and Avery drive out on Gold Camp Road and pull off in the trees, kill the lights, and try their best in the cramped backseat. He is the novice, and while he doesn't know the extent of her experience, he knows she's had a couple boyfriends, good and bad, but at sixteen, he doesn't yet know the vast possibilities that separate good from bad.

One night they drive out to the spot where his father torched the tree by the small stream. They maneuver past their normal shirts off, her bra off, let's see how far we're willing to go stage, and she begins to unzip his jeans. In that moment he wouldn't have said "Stop" with a gun to his head. He feels Avery at the top of his jeans, running her fingers in the thin space between denim and skin, then fumbling with the button, then slowly unzipping him. The roof closes in and spins. In that dark space, out in the middle of nowhere, he only wants to live forever just like that, and for a moment he does, weightless, alive, and king, and then he hears her, barely at first, crying.

"Avery?"

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm okay. Lie back down. I'm fine."

But she isn't okay, and he lets her cry for a while with night all around before reaching out for her and holding her, feeling her breasts and warm skin on his skin.

"It's not you," she says.

"Okay," he says.

They don't talk about her crying that first night in the shadow of Pike's Peak or any other night. Not even after several late-night parkings and other attempts at unzipping him and the tears that follow. He never asks her to try again, but she

does. It isn't every time they park, but she says "relax," and presses him down often enough that he figures she battles something fierce. Even after he tells her, "No, you don't have to," she ignores him like he isn't there, and pushes him down and straddles him, her hands on his chest and stomach and hips, moving down.

So it is often, after their drive out into the front range and the mix of limbs and jaws, around midnight, Armando lies down staring up at branches and white stars through the rear window, listening in simultaneous pleasure and fear for a sign, waiting for her mouth on him, but always hearing her short breaths, then gradual sobs coming from the dark before taking her in his arms, then dressing, and driving home.

On the windy drives home there is plenty of time to ask anything he wants, but they mainly stay quiet, sometimes holding hands, a quick chat about Avery's dream of living in Arizona, but often just listening to John Bon Jovi belt out "Bed of Roses" or "I'll Be There for You," not knowing at sixteen if he should ask, "What happened?"

Pairs of well-suited men begin to show up in the Diaz family kitchen. When Armando gets home from school there they are, crouching around the worn dining table, jabbing at papers as his parents nod along. They never glance in his direction, but it doesn't bother him. Soon he finds out they are life insurance men.

One night, after the latest set of buttoned-up men flee, Armando hears his father say "uninsurable" over and over before flinging a stack of papers and stomping off to the backyard. His mother sobs while warming water on the stove. She isn't a crier, and Armando thinks about going to her but doesn't. She adds macaroni to the boiling water then steadies herself on the kitchen counter, head down. His father reappears and takes her face in his hands and kisses her on her lips. Armando knows they love each other, but anything longer than a public peck is unusual. He glances over, then down at the carpet, then back. His father runs his fingers down his mother's blue blouse, and then pulls her close, keeping his right hip angled out away from her injection site.

Armando isn't interested enough to ask why his parents are in the market for life insurance—or what life insurance even is—and his parents don't volunteer the information. But he is interested in this lengthy kiss, and he stares at the strangeness of his parents pressed together for so long. He's not sure why he wants to cry or how he knows to stay quiet, and as his mother tries to look away his father pulls her back and kisses her again, but she's crying too much now and the kiss has moved

from pressed lips to pressed faces, chin to forehead. When his father says, "Go somewhere else, son," Armando walks to his room where, after thinking about his parents and his forest forays with Avery, he can't help but think about how no one has ever taught him the right way to touch someone you love.

Eventually, one pair of insurance men circles back with frequency. The older one with gray hair always messes with his tie. His crumpled suit struggles to cover his bulging midsection. He and his younger partner come back, time and again, and after one particular visit Armando knows they will never return because his mother hugs them and kisses them on their cheeks and his father shakes their hands and hugs them and calls them "My brothers."

That night Armando's parents take the family to the Cliff House in Manitou Springs, where the family drinks Martinelli's sparkling cider from champagne glasses and his mother sings "Saturday in the Park" on the way home.

One January morning, Armando's mother undergoes a kidney-pancreas transplant in a gorgeous hospital in Denver. Two nights later—just he and Avery home—Armando swipes a five-foot-long thick cardboard tube used to ship fly-fishing rods from his neighbor's trash. He gathers up a few racquetballs and tennis balls, a screwdriver, and a red gasoline can from the garage. From his father's gun safe, he grabs a can of black powder, a fuse, and two M-80s. On their way to the backyard lightly dusted with snow he asks Avery to get a set of tongs and oven mitts from the kitchen.

He positions the tube at a forty-five-degree angle over the back fence, aiming toward the lights of downtown Colorado Springs. He pushes the screwdriver through the tube near the base and threads the fuse through. He places the M-80s in the can of black powder, and the can of powder in the tube, ensuring one of the fuse's tips rests deep in the small, dark kernels. The pungent smell surrounds him. Once the contraption is stable, oven-mitted Avery dips two racquetballs and four tennis balls into the gasoline with the tongs, then drops them down the tube.

Armando pulls a lighter from his pocket and walks over to Avery, still mitted, as she backs away.

"Holy shit," she says. "This is a great idea."

"God forgive us," he says. "Get the car ready. If it's big we'll take off." He smells his hands.

"I want to see it."

"Okay."

"Wash your hands first," Avery says. "We should wash our hands."

"Good."

His still-damp hands hold the lighter and the fuse. A helicopter flies overhead so he waits. Then another.

"Fort Carson," he says. "Invasion."

"Red Dawn?"

"Go Army. Start up the tanks."

Armando flicks the lighter and sees the small flame jump to life. He lights the fuse and backs away.

"Cover your ears," Avery says, hands on her ears.

"No."

"Cover them."

He can still hear the helicopters in the distance—the spinning rotor blades compressing the air tight. He watches his cardboard cannon, all potential, all rush, blood racing in his ears, floating, and then a fire illuminates the tube from within, a split-second reverie of light and heat before the orange-tinged explosion rocks the night.

Armando's mother returns home three weeks later with someone else's organs tied inside her body. Her face bloats from anti-rejection drugs, and she suddenly grows light blonde whiskers on her chin and a few strands hug her cheeks. If the new hair humiliates his mother, she never says so. In the few photos he'll keep from this time, his mother still manages a toothy smile. Still, he wonders why she doesn't begin to shave, but he doesn't have the nerve to ask.

His community service for the backyard cannon explosion doesn't start for another month. His father told him two things when the judgment was handed down: never confess and never do the same thing twice. They pay someone to fix the fence.

Armando doesn't see the life draining from his mother until she grows scared of leaving the house, then, of walking, then, standing. Accompanying his mother's growing fear of the physical is her entry into large swaths of silence. Her singing disappears, and now, lying on their green living room couch, drinking 7-Up and chewing saltine crackers, his mother won't speak unless spoken to, and even then, she only offers one-word answers.

Armando, his father, and his sister try to play games with his mother or read to her every now and then, but mostly she lies there with a glassy stare. Still, at the

end of the nightly story, or when he wins at Sorry or Uno she says "yes" or "good" and strains a smile, but the Diaz home grows sullen with the February snow, and he finds reasons not to return home until late at night. He kisses his mother on his way to bed and she looks up at him, still somehow knowing him, and although he hates himself for thinking it, he crawls under the bed sheets wondering if the quiet person confined to the couch is still his mother, or if she is something else now. On the worst days, when his mother barely moves or eats, he battles himself wondering if he should pray for a swift, pain-free death, but then the anger overtakes him and he forces images of his mother standing, walking, singing.

One night his family plays the game Taboo. The score doesn't matter to them as Armando's mother mainly stays silent anyway. This time, when it's Armando's turn, he draws the word "tower." The taboo words eliminate his verbal resources, so he starts out with "It's tall, straight, and long," and before he says another word his mother shouts "Penis!" His father, his sister, and he freeze dumbfounded. For an instant, silence and perplexity mix, and then, his mother laughs, and laughs again, and her giggles swell into full throttle, full belly roars. The implausible sound fills the room, and she sits up and doubles over, grabbing at her belly.

"Penis," she says, and her eyes water and she laughs and hoots and snorts uncontrollably, and Armando's sister and he laugh, and his father wipes at his eyes, and his mother keeps saying "penis" and busting up, and grabbing at her stomach, and she can't stop herself and they don't want her to stop, and as she roars she says, "It hurts. It hurts," and she grabs her body, and all of them can tell she's in pain, but she keeps laughing.

"It hurts," she says, and her cheeks are wet with tears, and she keeps her hands pressed to her.

"Stop," she says. "Stop it." But she can't stop, and she laugh-speaks, "Help," but it takes them a while to understand, so his mother says, "Help me," and his father rises and goes to her. He puts his hands on her stomach and asks, "Here?"

"Yes," she says, her laughter swiftly shifting to groans. "Press." Armando's father presses his hands and they sink into his mother's scarred belly. His mother brings her hands to her face and wipes at her cheeks.

"Harder," she says, so his father presses further in, and she moans and takes a deep breath. When his mother calms down his father helps her recline flat on the couch, easing her head down onto her favorite red pillow. With their bedtime near, Armando and his sister pick up the word cards and put the game away. Somehow his mother's laughter still wafts in the room. They kiss their mother's forehead

and say goodnight. They walk down the short hallway together, to the bathroom, and Armando squeezes toothpaste on his blue toothbrush. His body tenses as he watches himself in the mirror, and as he brings the toothbrush to his mouth he sees his sister reach out and touch his arm.

"Mom's okay," she says. "She's getting better."

"Yes," he says.

He brushes his teeth and his sister brushes her teeth beside him. They rinse, and his sister picks up her first tube of lipstick, still new and unused, that their mother and father let her buy in advance of her eleventh birthday.

"What was the secret word?" she asks.

"Tower," he says.

"Tower," she repeats, then pauses. "But you said 'long.' That doesn't make sense. A tower isn't long. You should have said, 'blank of power.' She would've gotten it." She shakes her head and turns and walks away.

One morning, after another week of his mother's slow sink into the couch, soundless, his father comes into his room as Armando readies for school.

"She wants you to play," he says. "It's no big deal. Just relax. But please. She's asking for you."

"Dad."

"Just do it. It's okay. I know what you're going to say. Please."

Armando brings his fingers to his lips as his insides evaporate. He visualizes his blind instructor, his words, "No. Again. No. Again." He hasn't picked up his trombone in a few weeks, and hasn't progressed past a few basic scales and simple kids' songs.

He grabs his trombone and walks downstairs to the couch with his head hung. His father and sister have pulled up chairs. His mother is covered with blankets, and they've propped up her head. She looks off in the distance above, somewhere in the air below the vaulted ceiling.

"Mom," he says.

"Chicago," his mother whispers.

He shakes his head at his father.

"Play anything," his father says. "It's okay."

"Anyone. Know. What. Time. It. Really," she says.

"Mom, I can't."

His sister nods at him. His father holds his palms out.

"Just play. Anything."

He brings the instrument to his trembling lips, smells the slide oil, breathes in, and exhales hard into the mouthpiece. A metallic belch echoes in the room. He lowers the instrument.

"Chicago," his mother whispers.

"Play. Just play."

His father walks over to him and lifts the trombone up.

"You can do it."

"Chicago."

Armando feels the humiliation, the impossibility, and the mouthpiece on his lips. He closes his eyes and blows.

Two in the afternoon, and Armando and Avery leave school early, drive up to the Air Force Academy, and watch cadets fall from the sky. Adjacent to the overlook, a pedestaled T-38 jet points skyward. Facing east, they can see traffic zip by on I-25 and, high above, a slow circling airplane. Wave after wave of tiny dots escape the plane in five-second increments before blooming red parachutes. On the other side of the lookout, a group of tourists take photos, their bus hulking behind them.

Avery has her notebook out, drawing landscapes, mainly high-desert-cacti scenes. She leaves a six-inch-by-six-inch square at the bottom right of each page for poetry. Armando has his hands in his pockets. He scans the level airfield and watches each cadet's impact—a few graceful, standing landings, but most perform a speedy, weirdly managed feet-to-hip crash. Somehow they gather their chutes and walk away uninjured.

Although he lives only twenty minutes from this place, it's just his third time on the base, the other two to watch the Thunderbirds perform at graduation, but when Avery saw him with his head buried in the crook of his arm during fifth period, she tapped his back and said, "Let's go." She didn't plan on bringing him here, but driving north they noticed the parachute-spotted sky and pulled off the interstate.

Avery finishes a drawing and leans over and shows it to Armando.

"What's the first word that comes to your mind?" she asks.

"Water."

"Too many cacti?"

"I like cactus."

"Have you ever seen the big ones?"

"Sure."

"The big ones are almost extinct. Phoenix and Tucson and places like that cut them down. There's some at White Tanks by my grandma's house."

Armando looks at Avery and nods.

"You always look at my birthmark," she says.

"Not always."

"Always."

"I like it."

"You don't like it. You say that so I won't feel bad."

"Am I allowed to like it?"

"I don't know. There's no way to get rid of it. I've looked into it. Anything I do will just make it worse."

Armando looks back to the crash-landing cadets. A pressure grows near the back of his head and he squeezes the base of his neck.

"I don't expect you to understand," she continues. "Your face is perfect. Not even a mark from chicken pox. Seriously, no crash on your bike? No sister revenge scratch?"

The large tourist bus starts its engine. Someone says, "Okay, it's time. Next stop, the chapel."

The plane has circled back high above and a new group of dots fall and bloom.

"My mom's growing a beard," he says. "I know you don't want to come over."

"No."

"I don't blame you."

"I'll come over."

"Listen to me. You don't have to."

"If you want me to."

"No. You shouldn't. It's pathetic."

"I'll come."

Armando kicks at the sidewalk. His shoe squeaks.

"She doesn't care she's growing a beard." He wipes at his cheek. "I want her to care about that. My dad doesn't care. Nobody's doing anything about it."

"They care."

"Stop."

"It's not her fault."

"I didn't say it was her fault. Did I say that? I said no one cares about her beard. No one cares that she just lies there. We don't even move her to the bed. Here, just hang out in the living room. Just stay there. Never do anything to help yourself. Mumble. That helps. Mumble."

"Maybe she wants to be there. It's comfortable."

"Does that matter? It doesn't matter. That's the point. She doesn't want to do anything. Stand up. Do something."

"If she stands . . ."

"I'll pick her up. I'll stand her up. You don't want to walk. Tough. You're walking. Fall over. Cry. Mumble."

"She . . ."

"You want another cracker? Tough shit. You're eating real food. No crackers tonight."

"She just . . ."

"You're fucking eating steak. I'll stick that shit into her mouth. She's eating it."

"Armando."

"She's eating whatever the fuck I give her. Pizza. Ice cream. Eat it and get up."

"Okay."

"You want me to play the fucking trombone, get off your ass and you play it. Pick it up and play."

"Okay."

"She can pick that shit up."

"She can't."

"Don't defend her. I'm fucking serious. Don't defend her." He reaches down and grabs at nothing and stands. "Pick it up. I'll force her ass to stand. You know I will. And if she falls, she falls. Done. But that won't happen. You know why? When someone forces her ass to stand, she'll stand. When someone jams goddamn steak down her throat she'll swallow it."

Avery clutches the notebook to her chest.

"Defend her. Oh, she can't chew. She can't hold a fork. She can't lift her head. She can't eat. Defend her. Fine. She'll eat it all."

In the near distance, a blue plane lands and idles on the runway while a new group of jumpers load up. Through the air, the low hum of the plane's propellers. Behind the airfield buildings, northbound interstate traffic has slowed to a crawl.

Avery strokes the cover of her notebook. Her index finder brushes against

the spiral binding. She looks down at the ground, over to Armando's shoes. Black Nikes, white swoosh. A misshapen smile. A slanted "J." An ice skate. Swoosh. A sound falling through the air.

The last day of school, restlessness everywhere. Armando's government class watches the television as a Colorado jury sentences Timothy McVeigh to death for the Oklahoma City bombing. McVeigh is largely emotionless, but many of the jurors look tired and squeamish.

"The sad part is," his teacher says as he mutes the television, "they'll make it as comfortable as possible."

Avery's voice brings him back. "Who's that?" she asks.

On the television screen, two elderly people weep uncontrollably behind McVeigh's lawyers.

"Everyone has parents," says the teacher.

As the class moves into a quarter-hearted discussion of the judicial system, Armando daydreams about a clear Oklahoma morning where he spots the moving truck, McVeigh at the helm, at a spotlight two blocks from the unbombed building. He imagines pulling a gun from a shoulder holster and putting a bullet in each McVeigh kneecap and one in each shoulder. When the cops show he holds up a photo with the alternative, no Armando Diaz intervention outcome—a gutted building, 168 dead—and they proclaim him a hero and decide, on the spot, to keep the bullets in McVeigh, to take him to some dank garage and foster life and pain as long as possible.

That afternoon, his father walks up to the school's baseball field in the middle of P.E. class. The sun is out and Armando stands in the dugout shade, joking with friends.

"Your dad," someone says.

He sees his father come through the gate in the outfield fence and step on the warning track. He stands and waves, but his father only nods, and suddenly Armando feels his legs go and he sits. His shoulders hunch up and he remembers to breathe as everything slows down. His father walks toward him, and it all seems to take too long, the length of the field, how many steps his father takes without getting any closer.

"Diaz, your dad," someone says.

As he hits second base, Armando's father scratches his chest. The P.E. teacher meets him at the pitcher's mound and the teacher nods his head and points at the

dugout and stares.

Armando stands and walks up the dugout steps into the sunshine. The sky seems close.

His father crosses the base path and takes his son in his arms.

On the way home Armando's mind pounds out images of his mother on the couch—7-Up sips, Uno indifference, trombone disappointment—and he can't get his mind to work back far enough to when she was whole.

When his father misses the turn home, he doesn't ask where they are headed. His father drives past The Broadmoor and its blooming flowers, past stucco mansions with rock walls, and turns right, heading up into the mountains. As they gain altitude Armando looks out over the valley, all the way across the city to the eastern plains curving toward Kansas. Once the pavement turns to dirt his father says, "When Tesla was up here," but he doesn't finish the sentence. His father rolls his window down, inhales, then flips a U-turn. On the way back down Armando watches the city rise up to them.

When they walk through the front door, his sister rests on the couch where their mother had spent the last months of her life. There is no trace.

Armando retreats to his bedroom and sits on the edge of his bed and stares at a white wall holding up his room. His father comes in and sits down. Armando wants to tell his father that he thinks he's okay, that he worries about his sister, that it's really Avery he wants near, but he keeps quiet and inhales deeply, and sits next to his father, who begins to rub his son's back, first slowly, then faster. Armando listens to his father breathe and feels his father's hand circling fast, warming his back as they stare at the wall because neither of them knows what to say with the words they have left.

ESSAY

Walter Robinson
Nurse Clappy Gets His

A twelve-year-old girl, her hair pulled into a messy ponytail, waits for anyone other than me to walk by the glass walls of her hospital isolation room. She half-sits half-lies on a high mechanical bed with hard gray plastic rails; seven days ago, she had a lung transplant. The transplant happened when they always seem to, in the early morning hours, but we count the days from the first sunrise after you leave the operating room, so today is Day Eight. A transplant is a new birthday, and we count off the days in an official manner.

She is awake and watching the quiet nurses and doctors enter and leave the room by the glass doors; she is bound to a machine by the bed by a pale blue one-inch hose that connects to a clear plastic mask enclosing her nose and mouth, flattening her thin cheeks. A half-inch-wide dark-blue cloth strap encircles her head, fastened by Velcro, holding the mask in place. A click and hiss sound sixteen times a minute, and the hose attached to the mask shudders as the air pressure shifts up and down. The mask and hose push a column of air down her mouth to the back of her throat through her vocal cords and down her windpipe, past the stubs of her old lungs and the stubs of the stranger's new ones, down into these borrowed lungs, down wet pink tunnels and through tubes with rings of cartilage like a dryer hose and others like sausage casings and then on down to the final stop at millions of tiny sacs where only two cells separate the air of the outside world from the blood of her body. These millions of dead-end sacs would like to collapse under their own wet weight, but the pressure in the tube and the mask flows into her mouth, down her throat and into her lungs, holding them open, keeping her alive. Awake or asleep,

never alone, she wears the mask every hour of the long days and nights. Out of her hearing, we say she is "riding the mask" while her body gets used to the new lungs, if it can.

On this morning she is attached to the bed by more than the mask and the tube. In the crook of her right arm rests an intravenous line we use to draw blood. A larger line runs in the crease between her right leg and crotch, and after it pierces the skin it runs up her inferior vena cava into her right atrium, to monitor the work of her heart as it pumps blood to the new lungs. A plastic tube pierces the radial artery in her left wrist; the end of the tube connects to an expensive carpenter's level, sensing the moment-to-moment changes in her blood pressure and drawing two steady waves across a small green screen above her head. Her left hand is splay-taped open onto a blue plastic board covered in white panty-hose fabric for her comfort. Another line, as thin as angel hair, dives into her left forearm to travel up through larger and larger veins to float in the fast-flowing subclavian vein inside her shoulder and chest. Four antibiotics and one antifungal pump through that line in a steady stream, pushed in by mechanical syringes at the foot of the bed. We have poisoned her immune system to prevent it from attacking the new and foreign lungs. Any old germ might kill her in the state she's in. Her right neck holds a supple line for the white liquid fat and the urine-yellow protein solutions that give her body calories because we won't let her eat while she is riding the mask.

Betadine and dried blood have colored her chest yellow brown, but she was already brownish yellow everywhere, with a shade of green in the daylight, because her liver wasn't well to begin with and a lung transplant hasn't helped. Thumb-thick plastic tubes run through her skin in a row under her armpits and between her ribs, coming to rest between the chest wall and the new lungs, draining out any fluid that accumulates. The tubes dangle down the bed and attach to white and blue plastic boxes taped upright to the floor.

The girl is awake and alert for the moment. Two days ago we pulled out the tube that went through her mouth past her tongue and into her throat, pushing aside her vocal cords. For five days after the operation, a ventilator pressed machined breaths into her new lungs, too hard and too fast for an awake human to tolerate. But she got a little better and we took that tube out. With that tube out, we can decrease the sedation. With that tube out, she can speak.

The first word she says is "water." Her thirst is desperate, her lips cracked sandpaper, her tongue a flopping cactus. We knew it would be, and we had warned her before

the surgery. For days we had been draining every milliliter of fluid out of her with tubes and diuretics. But now she starts pleading, sobbing without tears for a drink, and we will not even give her ice chips. We are withholding water from her and she knows it is deliberate and she wants water now; she cannot be distracted and she keeps asking until it is clear we will not give in. She hates us with the solid hate of a seventh grader. She pouts, but doesn't say she hates me. Her throat is sore and dry and she doesn't want to waste her words on me, but I can imagine what she would say.

I am happy to live with pissed-off silence. I can stand to be thought of as that mean doctor.

I take it for a good sign. She's in there, I say. Her head is okay, I say, it wasn't damaged by being on the heart-lung pump for the hours of surgery. I am happy to live with pissed-off silence. I can stand to be thought of as that mean doctor. I know how to wear my practiced smile, the one that says I know what's good for you.

She can't have water. Her swollen body hides liters of fluid, and over the next week it will slowly drain back into her veins. Her body is already full of water, any more will leak straight to her new lungs, and lungs are nothing but living sponges. Fill them up, when they are already touchy, when they are already trying to collapse under their own weight, and she will be in trouble. An hour after water, she will be back on the ventilator, and it will take days to get her back off.

We will not give her water.

So on that morning, she is not in what some more saintly doctor would call a pleasant mood. The nurse and I are standing in the little alcove to the left of the bed, each reading our charts, checking what the consultants have written, entering lab values on various forms, doing the small but constant jobs to keep her body working. The glass doors to the isolation room are closed, but the lights are on. Not much is happening in the room until a clown shuffles by the door.

The clown is a tall man with granny glasses, a red circle on each cheek, a pair of yellow plaid carnival barker pants, two floppy shoes, a long white coat, and a nurse's cap. He is a professional hospital clown. His nametag says Nurse Clappy. He is the Head Clown in the Clown Care Unit, a trio of roving clowns who wander the hallways of the hospital dressed as doctors and nurses, paid for, or so it is said, by a family whose child died years ago, though they could just as easily have set up a fund for social workers. As he passes by the closed glass isolation door, he looks

inside. He smiles at the girl on the high bed. He raises his eyebrows and his nursing cap shifts backwards on his balding head.

His cap is absurd and he knows it. No nurse has worn a cap at a Boston teaching hospital since 1975. No doctor under fifty and certainly no child alive today has ever seen a nurse in her cap outside of a TV rerun. And of course male nurses never wore caps. So Nurse Clappy is in drag; he is wandering the halls of a children's hospital in nurse-cap drag, strumming his ukulele to brighten the day of all those he encounters. And now he is here, outside the isolation room, peering through the glass and smiling his painted-on smile.

He has caught her eye. She looks at him though the glass, and her returned look is all the clown needs. Nurse Clappy now opens his mouth even wider, and smiles so you can see his back teeth. His eyes crinkle and he faces the glass door, preparing his act. She is still looking at him, eyes clear and focused from her raised bed, turning her head to the left to look at him head on. Suddenly he throws his arms open wide, in a howdy-doodle-do, and mimes *Well, hello there!* He waves with his right hand and then pulls a full akimbo back arch with a half rightward head tilt. She is still looking right at him. Her right hand begins to move up and off the bed.

He's got her now, he thinks. He will whisk her away from her bed of pain to his Big Top, to the smell of sawdust and lion sweat, to the *ooh* and the *aahh* of watching the daring net-less fliers, to the plumed beauty standing on white horseback. He will be her guide, she will take his padded white glove in hand and escape this room, if only for a minute.

He cocks his head to the left and lifts his long white coat lapel to smell his plastic flower. She is looking right at him. Her right hand is still moving, slowly, side to side for a moment and then back up, bent at the elbow and palm down, unsteady but determined. He squirts himself with his flower. He pants in surprise and pulls out a handkerchief of many colors to dry his tiny glasses. She is still looking right at him and her hand is still rising slowly off the bed, palm down with fingers slightly parted, slowly rotating out from her body, little finger tucking under and thumb rising.

Is she going to wave? She is going to wave! Nurse Clappy loves to play the waving game, to send those happy smoke signals through the glass walls, to share a greeting between fun buddies across seven feet of open room.

Her hand is sideways now, thumb on top, and her eyes are bright. She has lifted her head off the bed a bit to make sure she can see him over the top of the

mask. He is smiling and waving and she is waiting and watching, making sure he is watching her.

Her index finger twitches slightly. No, he sees, it's deliberate, she is going to wave! She loves his clown song, his happy serenade! She turns her hand over even more, and her fingers curl, but not all of them. The middle finger stays upright. The middle finger, the one with the white plastic clamp that measures oxygen in the blood, does not curl. It stays outstretched as she gathers the others into a fist.

She is waving, all right. And Nurse Clappy catches her special wave.

A low throaty growl fills the room. Panting raspy sound flows off her high bed. Short, sharp intakes of air and low, rumbling laughter rise into the air. Her mouth corners into a smile through the plastic mask. Her tight and tired face comes alive with laughter.

Our mouths are open, the nurse and I. We don't even try not to laugh. We just laugh and smile and wheeze and laugh and she joins us, laughing and laughing. We don't say anything, we just stand at the side of her bed and laugh, looking back and forth at each other and at her, all three of us stopping and then starting again when we look at each other, and then we try to be serious but we laugh again and giggle and snort and cough and wheeze and sigh and laugh and laugh and laugh until we have washed the room clean with our laughter, filled it enough to rinse out the stale smell of blood and Betadine and fear and anger and worry, if only for this minute. We three laugh until we have laughed enough for ourselves and for each other, for the last week and the week to come. And then we go back to work.

Four days later, she sleeps too soundly. She lets the nurse change her drains without a protest. Her eyes are open, but she looks through me, not angry, not asleep, not awake. I call the surgeon, and he calls the radiologist. We connect her to the portable IV pumps as fast as we can and head to the reserve elevator down the head CT suite. We hover over the technician's monitor, watching the cuts come into view. We see it right away, a circle of white on the left, and it gets bigger as the machine moves down her head. A ball of fungus has settled down comfortably inside her brain; a ball of fungus snuck through the hole we made in her defenses.

We move more slowly going back upstairs. I make some calls to Infectious Disease, to Neurology, to her family. The surgeon shows the CT to her family and I have nothing to add. We do everything we can over the next thirty-six hours, everything we can think to do, but we know, all of us, that all we can do will not be enough. She dies on Day 12.

Fourteen years later, I remember only parts of this. I do not remember the nurse's name. I do not remember the color of the girl's hair or if she had sisters or brothers or anything about her family. I do not remember if all of my memories are right, maybe I mixed up two little girls, maybe it was the other surgeon who was there, maybe it was morning not evening, maybe it was Day 7. Maybe it was Bed Space 10. I don't trust my memory for that sort of detail. But I do remember her rasping laugh. I remember the smile on her face and in her eyes. I remember her raised finger every time I see an oxygen sensor. My grief for her flows into my grief for all of them, and I can't remember how I felt when she died. But I can remember as though it is happening now, as though it is always just about to happen, how she wiped the painted smile off the face of that clown. Day after day, week after week, I can go to work, hoping that in every room in every ICU in every city in the country, some clown will get flipped a defiant bird by a thirsty girl with new lungs on a high bed in a glass-walled room, and that someone will be there to laugh with her, and remember.

Stefania Heim
Concerning the Prime and Proper Foundation of Blame

AFTER JONATHAN EDWARDS

By mind, the trick of the balm is overridden
(I used to see myself in the metaphor).

Little person, you'll never be the newest one you know. Another
morning. Another morning.
Another morning.

Monochromatic searching for a monochromatic soul.

I've always known how to float. I've just known.
Now to figure out the science
in the interest of control.

A list of the risks taken:
the sooner, the quicker.

And all the while, nothing knew.

The Lowest Possible Limit of Perpetual Snow

A buzzing
like something

living within.
We painted a found wood slab blue

We used it as a table.

Tell me when crying becomes particular,
uncommon, an illumination

not otherwise planned.
The one who stays thinks of weather

as a catalogue of lasts.
Regarding

comfort, another Sunday clacks along.

A trick of light:
two of me in a mirror,

and in the corner, you, who also knows.

Greetings from blank
where the sky has just opened up.

“A Third Party Who Says Me”

AFTER GILLES DELEUZE

City is a way of forgetting
the darkness that surrounds us

so fly me east toward the gathering
of names.

It’s a dance of mechanics,
just a couple of lights:

not only, but it’s me and lonely.
Sometimes.

In all ugly rooms
all the people are sad.

City is undoing the always
that performs us:

Here I am!
In this space between the lights,

making the space greater
pushing the lines apart.

This is for someone who has forgotten
her flight.

Silly to think we had to know
each other's mind

I mean
how dare you.

There isn't meaning in what we say.
Improvise a little,

just a couple of lines.
We move each other around.

Mark Bibbins
Pat Robertson Transubstantiation Engines

NO. 1

First I was fellating an African despot
for his diamonds, next I was paying

a hooker to give me back
my teeth. You think I'm kidding

about the diamonds; I was looking
also for some gold. I almost

sound cute,
right, like a steamed wiener

shoved in a top-slit Wonder bun.
I unload a mouthful

of warm root beer
down the back of your neck

and tell you it's Jesus weeping
sweet brown tears of shame. Aim

your gutter
this way and give some back to me.

NO. 2

Well it turns out I'm totally activated
by donations. All you have

to say is the magic word,
ISRAEL! and everyone goes crazy.

If we didn't abuse the Bible
it would cease to exist. O heavenly

flogger you should be watching me
on cable right now.

These clouds
are looking like trouble, in these clouds

I'm looking for trouble.
See there, in the clouds, boiling

like a syphilitic
oatmeal snowman, that's my face.

NO. 3

We will serve you if you will get us free
from the French. Then I'll rest

a moment and thank
myself for all

the shit I've chewed
off my own shoe.

I asked: you gave: I snatched
candy from the collection plate and replaced

it with a baby.
My shtick's like a turkey

stuffed full of Kleenex, my feelings
fuzzy as the mold

on the host my licks turn green.
O how the lord's light is good

as a fondle
when I catch it for you

in my gums.
Sometimes the little lady and I prefer

to call my pecker The Wishbone.
I don't know who's luckier

but all my wishes
work for me.

NO. 4

Jimmy in jail and I don't care,
Tammy crack up

and I don't care. Wait a sec, is it
the desert in here

or is my greased-up heart
all a-sputter like a skillet

at a Friday fish fry. Jesus sure
would appreciate

how I redeem things
using like or as,

even if my cue
cards are crooked. Half the fun

of end times
is always feeling full.

NO. 5

I don't have to be nice
to the spirit of the antichrist

but the sweet caul fat of Falwell
melting on my tongue's

like a heavenly lozenge
in a blizzard of ash.

Jerry, that's my feeling. It tastes like loot
in a wallet he sat on all day,

rich
as a tobacco field in heaven.

Jerry, that's my feeling. We'll pray
for some miners and their parent

companies, which is where the real
action is, if you know

what I mean. *Jerry,*
that's my feeling. Jesus was all for share-

holder value, maximum
returns, and when he comes back

I'll chain him to a machine that turns
water into oil.

NO. 6

Mac and cheese for Christmas
dinner: *Is that a black thing?* Gosh,

the planet's weirder
every day I'm on it.

To me I would
punch vomit.

One day Jesus will hit us
like a ton of marijuana biscuits

but some of you won't be around
to see it because *why did you*

build houses where
tornadoes were apt to happen?

Sometimes I feel like
a stopped clock, except

one of us
is right twice a day.

I think we've just seen
the antechamber

to terror.
Mmmmm. Open wide.

STORY

Carol LaHines
Failsafe

It was the night before trial. The Zyclone team had relocated to temporary office space in Newark, near the federal courthouse; an entire bloc of rooms had been reserved in the Marriott. As case manager, Clark had to ensure that the team was housed in relative comfort; that Theo was ensconced in a suite; that the female members of the team were segregated from Gordon, who, over the course of the trial (estimated to be of two months' duration) would try to seduce every one of them; he had to separate Gordon from Theo's secretary, who liked to flirt with Gordon but resented the fact that he had never tried to seduce her; he had to keep Gordon away from Amber, whom Gordon had seduced on a prior business trip, but had since abandoned.

Clark had to ensure that Gordon had enough sleep to function. Clark had to ensure that Gordon and Amber were never in the courtroom at the same time, particularly on the opening day of trial, when Gordon's family, *viz*. his wife and four children, would be sitting in the front row, watching as Gordon made the opening statement, offering an impassioned defense of Zyclone, a corporation unfairly accused of pillaging the environment, polluting the groundwater, contaminating the soil, and on the whole acting in a cavalier manner toward natural resources.

Clark had to ensure that everyone respected Theo's secretary; to impress upon the team of trial lawyers that she was an executive secretary, *Theo's secretary*, and could not be expected to do their typing or run their errands or heaven forbid, take care of their dry cleaning, lest she be impelled to file a complaint with the secretarial supervisor and subject them to further investigation by the

human resources department, which no one wanted, particularly after what had happened in Elmira.

Clark's room was situated next to Amber's; if she needed to unburden herself, to call Gordon names, to fault him for being a bastard and a hypocritical jerk, she could just wander in, seeking comfort.

Gordon and Amber had seduced Lara during an earlier phase of the case. Gordon suggested that Lara join them after work at Fizz, an upscale champagne bar near the office. Amber sat next to Lara on the velvet banquette while Gordon plied her with several martinis from the designer martini menu (Lara's favorite being the "appletini").

Amber may or may not have loosened the zipper on Lara's suit; Gordon may or may not have made certain crude jokes about the propensities of alumnae of the Seven Sisters colleges; Gordon and Amber may or may not have mentioned going together to The Cellar, a sadomasochistic bunker in the Meatpacking district, the week prior. In any event, after three appletinis, Lara allowed Amber, tentatively, to unhook her bra.

Amber and Lara slipped into one of the bar's cavernous unisex bathrooms. Several minutes later, as if on cue, Gordon entered. Gordon encouraged Amber to kiss Lara and Lara to kiss Amber, taking advantage of his superior position vis-à-vis the two to orchestrate an orgiastic bacchanal. Once the line of patrons outside the bathroom had become long enough, the cries of *What the hell are you doing in there?* vociferous enough, the three were ejected from the facilities.

Clark happened to be at Fizz on the night in question. He had been summoned to the club by Gordon, directed to bring the latest version of Gordon's opening statement with him, informed (jokingly) that his job depended on it. He remained uncomfortably on the banquette while Gordon, Amber, and Lara carried on, oblivious to the other patrons, oblivious to urgent texts from Gordon's wife, who wondered when he would be arriving home. Following the misadventure, Clark arranged for Lara's transfer to the Los Angeles office.

Generally it was Clark's function, when not supervising vast amounts of document review, to ensure that no one passed out, or was too hung over to function, or had forgotten privileged and confidential attorney work product in the hotel lounge. He had to ensure that no one harassed another bar patron, or worse yet, the bartender, whom he might have to appease with a cash payout or a lucrative consulting contract as a "document manager," the title Clark had bestowed on many of Gordon's former one-night stands.

Clark's wife, on the whole, did not approve of his job. Clark's wife thought there were better ways to earn a living than serving as Gordon's lackey, appeasing his girlfriends, fixing his morning hangover remedies, and turning the pages in his binder (since Gordon generally improvised and frequently lost his place, it was Clark's job to know where he was heading, even if Gordon had forgotten himself).

Clark's wife was four months pregnant with twins. Clark's wife complained of nausea and unrelenting heartburn, of swollen ankles and constipation so severe she had to be disimpacted by the obstetrician during office visits.

Clark's wife accused him of being infatuated with Gordon, of being secretly in love with him, at the very least of wanting to *be* him, giving opening statements, fornicating with subordinates in hotel suites, plying them with martinis and gin-soaked olives, but Clark of course denied all of the above. Clark denied being aroused by proximity to Gordon, denied experiencing a thrill being intimately involved in his contretemps, or in relocating his mistresses to opposite ends of the hotel, or in listening intently as they recounted ill-fated threesomes in cavernous unisex bathrooms.

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Clark's room contained twenty-five boxes of trial exhibits, all in order and ready to go, unless, of course, Gordon changed the order of witnesses at the last minute, or chose to revise the scripted Q&As. Gordon relied on Clark's knowledge of the case and his familiarity with the eighty million pages of documents produced during the course of discovery to retrieve the right document at the right time, making it seem effortless.

In the event Gordon changed the order of witnesses or the scope of their testimony, in the event he changed strategy at the last minute—for example, eliminating discussion of area 55 from their testimony, or omitting mention of the fish kills, believing that prophylactically bringing the issue up in order to defuse the argument that chemicals were poisoning aquatic life in the creek was not, after all, the better strategy—he could rely on Clark to effectuate the last-minute change. Given opposing counsel's failure to unearth certain damning evidence during the

course of discovery, there remained a distinct possibility that they still didn't know what, exactly, had transpired in area 55, other than some indecipherable gobbledygook about volatile organic chemicals.

The paralegal staff, composed of out-of-work college graduates in obscure liberal arts disciplines, out-of-work actors working off-off-off Broadway, middle-aged misfits, and relatively high-functioning autistics, was not on the whole reliable, and could not generally be counted on to perform high-level tasks that required attention to detail (save for Stanley, who enjoyed collating to an unhealthy degree).

Thus, Clark found himself page-checking exhibits, revising Q&As, reordering witness binders, making multiple copies of the Phase II Feasibility Study. He saw to it that every last publication of the groundwater modeling expert for the adversary had been gone over, scoured for anything that might undermine the conclusions the expert had reached in his report, i.e., the contaminants in the plume were progressing at a rapid rate and were expected to reach the reservoir in less than five years.

Clark was the only one who could be unfailingly relied on to ensure that everything was running smoothly, that everyone was getting along, that Theo's secretary would not misperceive a comment or a gesture as a slight, that Amber would be successfully rerouted to the document warehouse the following day, supposedly on a last-minute urgent errand, so as not to run across Gordon's wife and children in the courtroom.

He found himself alone, in room 405 of the Marriott, watching pornography on the hotel's adult channel, sanitized porn for the business away from home, no orifices or penetration, just exaggerated *ooh*s and *ahh*s and a lot of breasts.

Clark's wife, now that she was pregnant, had DDs, possibly Es or Fs, if such sizes even existed. Gordon warned him that once she delivered, she would revert to a B cup, even an A, breastfeeding known to pummel breasts, to cause them to shrink down, empty shells of their former selves.

It was the night before trial and Clark could not sleep, could not stop worrying about the opening statement, fretting about the order of witnesses, wondering whether Stanley could handle the rapid-fire pace of the courtroom, whether Theo's secretary would go on strike in the middle of trial, or electronically lock people out of their hotel rooms, incensed that she was not being "respected," whether Amber would show up, unexpectedly, after she had completed the assigned make-work.

He worried whether, when Gordon said *superior treatment facilities*, Stanley would know to bring up PX-15, the schematic of the wastewater treatment plant;

whether, when Gordon said *unparalleled commitment to the environment*, Stanley would know to bring up PX-80, the photo of a deer frolicking over the artfully camouflaged resodded sludge drying beds, or whether he would inadvertently bring up DX-49, the picture of sludge oozing out of hundreds of 55-gallon drums languishing out back, waiting for pickup and disposal by an unlicensed contractor known as the "midnight dumper."

He wondered whether the jury would be persuaded by evidence, carefully culled, highly selective evidence, that Zylcone was a good corporate citizen, that Zyclone reasonably believed phosphorescent sludge was inert, that wastewater discharged into the creek would be rendered harmless by process of dilution; certainly, if they saw PX-5, the commendation from the Swiss chamber of commerce, they would be so persuaded.

It was the night before trial and Clark could not sleep, found himself staring at the soft-porn channel with the sound off, wishing desperately for something to happen on the screen, other than caresses and some suggestive cut-aways.

Clark and Gordon had been on the case for ten years now. They had a camaraderie based on drinking and drunken escapades, an intimacy that arose from being together for hours, daily, combing through files in an old document trailer, from consorting nightly together at the bar at the Motel 6, from (on occasion) having sex with the same woman. When Gordon inevitably discarded said woman, fearful of his wife or other mistresses finding out, Clark, loyal Clark, would be there to comfort the jettisoned lover, to listen as she cursed Gordon; hopefully, to fondle her, the lover thinking Gordon would care if she slept with his friend, which of course he wouldn't.

Gordon liked to say that Clark was his right-hand man, his guy Friday, the one he relied on to reorder binders at a moment's notice, to prepare witnesses for cross-examination, the one who could be counted on to keep his wife and his mistresses apart and to be on the lookout, after hours in the hotel bar, for any new prospects, prospects Gordon would seduce and inevitably disappoint, leaving them vulnerable, angry, determined to prove their worth and desirability, and what better way to do so than to seduce his best friend? Clark had been there when Gordon wooed and dumped Jessica, the summer associate; he had been there when Gordon spurned Karen, the bartender at the Motel 6 (later offering her recompense in the form of a lucrative consulting package and incidental benefits); he had been there when Gordon and Amber seduced Lara, an experience Gordon and Amber wanted to share, or Amber wanted to partake in after Gordon had

convinced her that she had latent lesbian tendencies, *viz*. she had gone to one of the Seven Sisters colleges. Following the interlude, Gordon attempted to establish a direct relationship with Lara, apparently violating the tacit understanding he had with Amber. She had forgiven Gordon's first and second transgressions but after the third she ordered him to spurn Lara, preferably to arrange for her transfer, even though Amber had, by her own admission, enjoyed the ménage-à-trois in the cavernous unisex bathroom.

When Lara threatened to go to human resources, when she unburdened herself during long, rambling, obsessive voicemails (voicemails Clark expunged, with the assistance of Bob Wang in information technology), describing how she felt used, dirty, sexually confused, it was Clark who came to the rescue. It was Clark who called Lara daily, to ensure that she was all right, that she had not rashly filed any complaints with human resources or God forbid the EEOC, that she had not confided the misadventure to any of the other second-years, who could not be trusted with the information, whose jealousies would be aroused by the intimacies Lara had enjoyed, albeit fleetingly, with one of the partners. It was Clark who listened for hours daily as Lara unburdened herself, confiding feelings of shame, embarrassment, stupidity, believing that Amber was her friend, not a sexual predator interested in using her as a pawn in sexual hi-jinx; it was Clark who convinced Lara it was better to go to Equinox, to take out her aggressions on the punching bag, rather than to call Gordon's wife, whom Clark insinuated was a delicate woman with a chronic, incurable condition, maybe lupus, maybe MS, but in any event someone with enough to contend with. In order to divert attention from Gordon and Amber, to downplay their proclivities to seduce hapless young female associates in cavernous unisex bathrooms, Clark pretended that he was involved with Lara, hanging out with her after hours, buying her appletinis at Fizz, going home late and incurring the wrath of his wife (who was pumped full of hormones from fertility treatments), who was none too happy with him or with Gordon or with whatever unseemly affiliation the two had developed after long hours of sweating together in a document trailer.

It was Clark who convinced Lara, finally, to accept a transfer to the Los Angeles office, who convinced her that opportunity was to be found on the West Coast, the heart of the entertainment-law industry. It was Clark who bought the one-way ticket; Clark who threw the departure party, omitting Gordon and Amber from the guest list, not wanting any last-minute unresolved emotions to flare. It was Clark who drove her to the airport and deposited her on the plane and breathed a sigh of relief; even though it was not Clark who had seduced Lara in a cavernous

unisex bathroom, convincing her she had latent bisexual tendencies; even though it was not Clark who fondled Lara while mouthing *I love you* to Amber; even though it was not Clark who inadvisably suggested that the three reprise their ménage in a suite at the Mandarin Oriental. It was Clark who had saved the team from imploding, who had fended off an investigation by HR; Clark who had expunged all e-mail communication between and/or among Gordon, Amber, and Lara, copying onto Lara's hard drive certain love poetry that could only be characterized as the product of a troubled, unstable individual, even of a saboteur, intent on destroying the Zyclone team with fabricated stories of inappropriate relationships with members of the firm and ménages in bathroom stalls. It was Clark who had alienated his own wife, and Clark who had suffered the repercussions at home, Clark who had been exiled to the spare bedroom, to ponder his transgressions while his pregnant wife groaned and complained of a strangulated colon.

Clark had to consider that maybe, indeed, he did love Gordon; that whatever affection he felt toward him was not the mere byproduct of drunken fealty, or of having sex with the same woman (sometimes in the course of the same night), or of admiration for an intelligence who could remember the schematics for all five iterations of the waste-treatment plant or the characteristics of the gneissic rock in the Cohansey formation; that whatever he felt for him was not the result of vicarious thrill, of a perverse transference/countertransference from all of the spurned former mistresses/lovers/transient objects of affection in Gordon's life, but a true feeling, if his arousal level on the date of their ill-fated threesome had been any indication; at one point, during the sordid interlude, the woman wondered whether she ought to just leave, since she seemed only incidental, an excuse for Gordon and Clark to "get it on," a comment both pretended not to hear.

Gordon performed superbly under pressure; indeed, he thrived under pressure, exhilarated by what others would find to be nerve-wracking, crushing eventualities: the possibility of his mistress happening upon his wife; the possibility that his wife, working on information received from any number of sources, untraceable hang-ups, anonymous tips, calls from ostensibly concerned parties, might uncover his latest tryst; the possibility that Linda, the bartender at the Marriott, might report him to the hotel supervisor for unseemly behavior; the possibility that human resources, still puzzling over what, exactly, had precipitated Lara's sudden transfer to the Los Angeles office—what would normally be construed as suicidal, career-wrecking behavior—would reopen its investigation.

Gordon was likely at the bar, throwing back Tanqueray-and-tonics, making notes for his opening statement on a cocktail napkin. Or he was ensconced in his suite on the ninth floor, emptying out the mini-bar, lounging around in a loosely knotted bathrobe, entertaining Misty, a temporary legal assistant, who under Title VII, was arguably not an "employee" and therefore outside the purview of actionable complaint, or, God forbid, rekindling his ill-advised relationship with Amber, making it all the more difficult for Clark to convince her, the next morning, to drive all the way to the document warehouse in Ocean Township.

And all the while Clark fretted, and worried, and reordered witness exhibits, trying to anticipate every possible contingency, every convoluted turn Gordon, brilliant but hopelessly disorganized (incapable even of locating what had been flagged with a tape flag, or highlighted in medium yellow marker, oblivious to the obvious yet able to understand the complexities of state-of-the-art groundwater modeling, or the flaws in research allegedly establishing a statistically significant increase in acute lymphocytic leukemia among the five- to ten-year-old cohort), might take them, the following morning.

For while he spent most of his waking hours with Gordon, and sat next to him at the counsel table providing critical document support; for while the bulk of Clark's sexual partners were comprised of Gordon's former lovers and mistresses and cast-offs; for while he endeavored to see through Gordon's eyes, and to interpret the evidence, the carefully culled evidence, through Gordon's inimitable intelligence, he was most emphatically *not* Gordon, and he would never be Gordon, lacking, among other things, a law degree, or an office that was more than a document trailer or a windowless cubicle on the twenty-ninth floor or a room in the Marriott.

He turned the porn channel off. *Can I have an outside line?* he asked the hotel operator.

EXCERPT

Carlos Labbé
Navidad & Matanza

Translated from Spanish by Will Vanderhyden

All of this reminds me of the case of Navidad and Matanza, in the summer of 1999. At the time I was writing for a journal whose proprietor was a notorious business executive, and because of this we were tacitly forbidden to write about the most popular topic in the office: disappeared detainees. This was, of course, during Pinochet's judicial hearing in London. But even more important was the fact that, at the beginning of the year, Judge Guzman had identified the body of our secretary's father in an excavation in the Atacama Desert. Suddenly what had been a really worn-out subject took on an archaic and distant force that came to completely disrupt our work environment. And so I'm not sure if it was out of blind solidarity, or a desire to get out of the office, but during those two months we journalists felt oddly compelled to investigate, anywhere we could, news of abductions, disappearances, or reports of missing persons in the province. I began looking into the case of a brother and sister who disappeared in Navidad.

Navidad, a small town in Region VI, is the gateway to that obscure stretch of coastline between Santo Domingo and Pichilemu. A couple miles farther along is its twin village, the no less bucolic beach town, Matanza. The area enjoyed several months of touristic splendor when the secret VIP club of a famed international resort temporarily occupied the beach during the last summer of the past millennium. There are about ten thousand members in this club who, every five years via unknown channels, receive conceptual instructions and coordinates of latitude and longitude announcing the unfolding of a unique, unprecedented event. That year, the members received at their doors a young Australian man who handed them an

invitation and recited a supposedly unpublished poem by Edgar Lee Masters entitled "The Hotel Room," in whose final lines appeared the password: "Transensorial beyond seasons / the Spanish groom said / *matanza y natividad*, heaven and hell."

The business executive Jose Francisco Vivar recalls that his family received the Australian visitor in September of 1998. Vivar knew it was a representative of the VIP club and he was pleased the event was going to take place in Chile. Since the trip to Navidad wouldn't be that expensive, he'd be able to bring along his wife and their two children, Bruno (then nineteen) and Alicia (fourteen). "I have nothing else to add," he said, in a report in a daily newspaper from that time, "just that after twenty years of enjoying these events of infinite relaxation, alone or with my wife, I thought the experience would be even better with my whole family. But that was not the case." At that point, according to the report, Jose Francisco Vivar broke down. "We'd been in Navidad for two weeks. One afternoon, a Thursday, Teresa and I left the children, who wanted to stay at the beach a while longer. We went back to the hotel where we showered, changed clothes, and got something to eat. At seven we planned to meet the children in the Room of Shadows, a site the organization had set up to put on a variety of shows, a sort of Matanza bazaar. That night, Patrice Dounn, the Congolese thereminist was performing." But Jose Francisco and Teresa never saw their two children again. The image of the two youths shouting goodbye and running toward the waves is the last that they have. Alicia and Bruno officially disappeared the afternoon of January 18, 1999.

Public shock lasted two days. As so often happens, there was talk of political crisis, but no particular individual was implicated. Soon everything was forgotten.

10

To this day, police investigators have continued to add sightings of Bruno Vivar to the case file of the disappeared Navidad siblings. Every summer since the disappearance, a dozen witnesses from different areas of the central coast have reported seeing a young man fitting his description: striped tee-shirt in various combinations of primary colors; shorts or bathing trunks; leather sandals; extremely thin, hairless legs; disheveled, raggedly cut hair, sometimes brown, sometimes dyed red. As if the last image his parents had of him remained burned on the retinas of so

many people who never knew him (the press coverage was as intense as it was brief), they always see Bruno Vivar lying on the sand, face down on his towel, staring out to sea, looking disdainfully through some photographs, or swimming in silence. Of course, other accounts add specific and equally disturbing details: drinking in hotel bars, beer from cans or double shots of whiskey, which he pays for with a credit card issued in the United States, while with the other hand he caresses a die that he spins like a top on the lacquered surface of the bar; sitting on a terrace at noon, noisily eating French fries; reading, in the dining hall, a letter delivered to the hotel weeks before; rolling the die and then writing another letter never sent by local mail.

This information comes from diverse sources: guards, waiters, clerks, receptionists, and janitors, who, at the time, also hoped to put together the case's missing pieces, but who only succeeded in helping the police declare unverifiable the possibilities of homicide or kidnapping. It has been tacitly assumed that Bruno Vivar—a legal adult—simply abandoned his family without warning, which is not a crime in Chile.

The most perplexing question is why the name of Alicia Vivar, the fourteen-year-old girl, appears only twice in the case file. Especially after reviewing in detail the reports of repeated sightings of her brother, Bruno. Because Bruno has never once reappeared alone. The accounts agree that he arrives at hotel parking lots in a variety of expensive cars always driven by a man whose smile also appears in police archives, although in another section: Boris Real.

Boris Real became known in Chile in 1984 as the young Chilean executive who, representing a group of Swiss investors wanting to buy Petrohue Bank, ended up in the Capuchinos jail as a result of an antimonopoly suit filed by the Superintendent of Banks, when it was confirmed that the Swiss were linked to an Australian investment group that had acquired the Atacama Bank and also to a Spanish-Norwegian group that acquired De Los Lagos Bank and Antonio Varas Bank. He was tried as the representative of the inscrutable international consortium that attempted to acquire fifty-one percent of Chilean banks, a move that, it is noted, could have had consequences for our country beyond the strictly financial. The group in question immediately withdrew from the country, leaving no discernible trace. At least until the summer of 1999. Of course, Boris Real was not that man's actual name. It was the alias of Francisco Virditti, who admitted to having headed a group of six shareholders motivated by "nothing more than the legitimate game of the market," as he stated in the only interview he's ever given.

Seven years later, when the Chilean press scarcely recalled the business conspiracies that helped prevent analysis of the Pinochet recession, there came the

unfortunate death of Juan Ausencio Martínez Salas. February fifth, on the seventeenth hole of the Prince of Wales Golf Club, a heart attack ended the days of the Undersecretary of Education of Patricio Aylwin's administration. That afternoon, Martínez Salas was strolling the links of the capital's golf club in the company of two friends from his time as an MBA student at the University of Chicago: an executive in the board and video-game industry Jose Francisco Vivar, and Boris Real. A check of the witnesses in the Civil Register reveals that the given name of the executive who was present at the moment of death is Boris Real Yañez, and there is no request for a change of name associated with his identity. Perhaps it was another Boris Real; perhaps Francisco Virditti was the real pseudonym. Nevertheless, another newspaper photograph, which shows Real speaking about his dear friend, reveals the face of the same businessman who declared himself innocent in front of the Superintendent of Banks in 1984. In a press conference on the sixteenth of May 1995, congressman Nelson Avila denounced the possibility of a secret murder plot when the autopsy results for undersecretary Martínez Salas suggested traces of poison in his system. Public shock lasted two days. As so often happens, there was talk of political crisis, but no particular individual was implicated. Soon everything was forgotten. Boris Real was subpoenaed in his Vitacura residence before returning to anonymity. Various accounts report that he made a statement to Irma Sepulveda, the judge in charge of the trial investigating the death of Martínez Salas. Today it's almost impossible to find Boris Real; he has no known residence and his name doesn't appear in any public record. Approached by the press in the days following his children's disappearance, Jose Francisco Vivar stated that he was no longer in contact with his friend.

Even more disturbing, one evening in July of 1997, with my own eyes I saw Vivar, Boris Real, and congressman Nelson Avila walking on the beach in Cachagua. They were accompanied by their respective children. Of course I urged my companion to surreptitiously eavesdrop with me. The situation only became personally relevant after I started investigating the incidents in Navidad and Matanza: Boris Real was walking hand in hand with little Alicia Vivar, then a girl of twelve. They were walking a slight distance behind the rest of the group. She asked him to go with her to the rocks to look for seashells. She didn't address him formally or call him uncle, just Boris. Then they talked about the reddish color of the clouds at that time of day and she asked him how long it would be until the end of the world.

*

26

More than just a family, it doesn't seem presumptuous to state that the Vivars were a group of people bound together by an enduring perplexity, by having in common something more than possessive impulses. The magazine articles that appeared in the months following Bruno and Alicia's disappearance—the first of which I wrote myself (*Revista SEA*, nº 327, February 24, 1999)—had nothing to do with reality.

Photographs of the family smiling and embracing each other in the warmth of their home were only part of the media campaign orchestrated by Teresa Elena Virditti. It was no coincidence that, following the disappearance of his two children, Juan Francisco Vivar shut himself away in his mansion. I'm talking about pathological individuals; six twisted people taking part in an unpredictable game.

The article in *SEA*, contrary to what the date of publication indicates, wasn't written in response to the events in Navidad and Matanza, nor did the photograph depicting the Vivars necessarily come from the Vivar Family Archive, as the caption states. In the last days of December—less than a month before Bruno and Alicia disappeared—the journal's photographer and I received instructions to "write a human interest piece" on the family of renowned businessman Jose Francisco Vivar. As usual, with a roll of our eyes, we obeyed; in the end our salaries, like all the funds at the journal, came from these people, and they were committed to maintaining an image of homespun happiness. And really it wasn't at all surprising since the fastidious Teresa Elena Virditti (with her unforgettable opera-going hairstyle) was, at the time, on *SEA*'s editorial committee. Only after being in that house and hearing the news of the disappearance of those two children—which didn't surprise me—can I explain the shudder I experience when I read that the Chilean family is the moral foundation of our country's ruling class.

The interview was scheduled for a Friday at seven in the evening so the whole family could be there. We arrived—the photographer and I—a little early to their residence in Los Dominicos; we picked it out by the imposing gray wall that surrounded it. We buzzed the intercom and were received and asked to wait by the butler, a man of refined manners whose nose was so small that at first glance he appeared not to have one. This detail is not trivial. Soon the mistress of the house, Señora Teresa Elena, whom we'd met previously, arrived. She gave instructions to the butler; she called him Bonito. The first surprise was the noseless Bonito's response to her instructions; he let out a low laugh, murmuring: I don't believe you, you filthy sow, and off he went, disappearing down the stairs. In that moment, I expected a scene to unfold: the woman firing Bonito, bemoaning the lack of respect,

getting all flustered. But nothing happened. The man wasn't just a butler, as I found out later. Señora Terelenita, as her friends called her, was distracted for a moment. Then she shook our hands again and left us alone.

We should've waited, as they requested, in that hallway adorned with oil paintings of English hunting scenes and illustrations of bad golf jokes. But it just so happened that my coworker needed to use the bathroom. His situation was so urgent that, instead of calling the butler for assistance, he decided to go look for it on his own. Meanwhile, I stood looking out at the home's vast estate through the thick glass that served as a wall in the entrance hallway. The house dropped three stories, completely covering the eastern slope of the hill. I noted the care with which the trees had been planted along the other side of the hill to the north, bordering a grassy brown pathway that, from the height where I was standing, I saw intersect another pathway, defined by a variety of grasses in differing shades of green. In the middle of this lushness, I caught sight of two figures. A beautiful young woman, dressed in a bikini, walked out through the trees that concealed the swimming pool. She was short with long hair falling down her back. She held a striped towel in her right hand. In her other hand, she carried another towel (or a robe). It was very white. So white that the reddish, almost black stain on one corner stood out starkly. Every so often she stopped and rubbed her eyes. I thought she was crying. But I was mistaken. Later, in the living room, she would repeat this gesture, and her brother, holding her hand, would give her a light slap, saying: Stop it, to which she would respond, yawning: I'm sleepy. And then she would look at me maliciously so that I would stop staring at her. But there, standing in front of that large window, it looked like she was crying. I saw that the stain extended to her body, to her left leg, her left thigh. It must be blood, I thought. Her first period must have come unexpectedly and because of this she was in pain.

The other figure moved through the park from the southeast, along the brown grass pathway. It was difficult to tell who it was. At a glance it looked like a woman, judging by the dress, the jewelry, and the fashionable hairdo. But whoever it was walked in a distinct way, legs wide apart, which made me doubt, correctly, that it was Señora Terelenita. Then the figure took off the wig and threw it in the bushes, the dress too, stashing it behind a lavish Georgian dollhouse, another station on that pathway of playthings. The figure wasn't wearing a bra or panties. He lay down on the grass (it was clearly a man), naked, with a visible erection. It looked like he was carrying some sort of list in one hand. I imagined that it enumerated how many steps away the little girl was. After five steps she still hadn't reached him, no:

the garden's sprinklers came on. All at once. The man's naked body was soaked; he closed his eyes and pounded his fists on the grass like an impatient child. His erection shrunk. Soon the girl saw him. She wasn't surprised, nor did she stop; instead she walked over and sat down next to him. The man, dripping wet, sat up and pulled her small body against his. She in a bikini, he naked.

It was hot and the grass was sopping. The scene struck me as sordid, especially witnessed through sheets and sheets of water shooting from sprinklers, like iridescent specters in front of the light. I shut my eyes and turned around. I didn't know what to do: I'm not sure how I reacted, but suddenly I felt someone softly blowing on my eyelids. When I opened my eyes, scandalized, I saw that I was one step away from Bonito, the butler or whatever he was. He placed one hand on my shoulder and, with the other, offered me a glass of Coke. Calm down, he whispered. Alarmed, I stammered and pointed out the window, but he'd already disappeared. I brought the glass to my lips. There was no one outside. The girl's towels had been left in a tangle on the grass and a Great Dane was pushing them with her nose toward an area underneath a birch tree occupied by another dollhouse, this one of Mediterranean style.

The scene struck me as sordid, especially witnessed through sheets and sheets of water shooting from sprinklers, like iridescent specters in front of the light. I shut my eyes and turned around.

Soon my colleague, the photographer, came back, out of breath. He looked anxiously in all directions. You're pale, he said to me. So are you, I replied. It wasn't necessary to ask him anything; immediately he began his confused tale, which he described more than once as "a terrible error." Looking for the bathroom, he'd come across a room where a hairless boy, lying in bed, was observing a large aquarium, which occupied more than half of one wall. According to the photographer, the "terrible error" had nothing to do with his own impertinence, but with what was inside the aquarium. They weren't fish, though in a way they seemed to be: three little girls with long hair swam about without needing to come up for air. The three small sirens came together for a moment behind the glass, staring with curiosity at the unfamiliar man who'd just walked in. The photographer ran out into the hallway without being seen by the boy. Their faces, if you could've seen them. They were horrible. Expressionless, like all beings that live underwater, but they were little girls. Monsters, he'd just said, when the butler reappeared in a doorway and said that

the family was waiting in the living room. Unsettled as we were, we decided to finish the job as quickly as possible. I should add that I was more intrigued than afraid.

The interview lasted forty-five minutes. My companion took half a roll of photographs before excusing himself, saying he felt ill. He left the house and waited for me in the car. The Vivars were arranged on the couch so that a chimney and chandelier were also in the shot. They were a very affectionate family: Juan Francisco Vivar sat with his wife on his lap; Bruno—his head shaved—placed his right arm on his father's back while holding his mother's hand; Alicia rested her head on Bruno's chest and he patted her lightly on the cheek. To my surprise, Bonito stayed, seated on the arm of the couch, twirling the girl's long locks between his fingers. He even spoke occasionally. Discounting the excessive displays of mutual affection that I'd witnessed, the interview answered many of my questions. Juan Francisco Vivar's hair was gelled, his hands well manicured. At one point, I noticed the sheen of moisture behind his ears: sprinkler water from the garden, I suspected. Although clearly Alicia seemed to be in another world (as adolescents generally are, I should add), she didn't seem particularly unhappy. They even laughed together recounting an anecdote about sledding near the hot springs in Chillán. There was a kind of excessive sincerity in that family: it provoked feelings of anxiety. The mistress of the house gave me a strange look, something like a smile, when she walked me to the door, and recited the names of everyone living in the house: besides her children and husband there was the foreign cook and Violeta, the Great Dane. Bonito, pardon, Boris, was also staying with them. The man with the strange nose was her brother.

27

(*Revista SEA*, nº 327, February 24, 1999)
"Vivar Virditti Family: Sequestered Happiness"

The kidnapping of Bruno and Alicia, the children of renowned businessman Juan Francisco Vivar and distinguished journalist Teresa Elena Virditti, has shaken the nation. Days before the heartbreaking event, SEA had the opportunity to sit down with the entire happy family.

He greeted us with his characteristic smile and courtesy in the living room of his Los Domincos residence. He stroked the back of his sweet Great Dane Violeta.

Four years ago, when Alicia, his little girl, started maturing, Juan Francisco Vivar realized they were going to need a bigger house. "When they were young the kids couldn't sit still. They ran and jumped around all day long, and it dawned on us that what we really needed was a park. The change of scenery has made life more enjoyable. The children have rediscovered nature, and I've always enjoyed golfing, open spaces, horseback riding, and afternoon walks."

Teresa Elena Virditti sat on the couch listening attentively to her husband. Earlier she had shown us the studio and library where she does her work for the magazine without neglecting the needs of the family. "For Juan Francisco, the park is the most important thing, but for me there is nothing like my desk," she comments with a smile. That's how the Vivar Virdittis are: an active family. "They were restless when they came out of me," jokes the owner of the board and video game company. Bruno, the eldest son, who is very close to his mother, wanted to major in journalism, but discovered that it was not for him. Now he has taken an interest in biology. "Since I was very young, my father has brought home chemistry sets for my entertainment," he says. Alicia, her parents say, "will be able to do whatever she wants because everything makes her happy." The little girl nods her head and pets the dog. "In this family, everyone has their own space," says Juan Francisco Vivar.

SEA: It must have been fun for your children to grow up surrounded by all the games your company produces.
Juan Francisco Vivar: In truth, yes. At one point I realized that the best way to test a product was to try it out at home. If Bruno and Alicia liked it, the game would be a success among the children of the nation. Although each one was tested in its own way *[Vivar and his daughter laugh]*. Bruno, for example, performed endurance tests on the materials. I'll never forget when I brought home the first video game, already quite some time ago. And he, accustomed to me bringing him stilts and skateboards, jumped on top of the machine [more laughter from the girl], hoping it would carry him away or something like that. Honestly I think my children are a great indicator of the tastes of Chilean children. They're as healthy and sharp as anyone, I'm glad they're like this. They're happy, they want for nothing, especially affection.

SEA: Your garden demonstrates that you are a family that enjoys outdoor activities.
JFV: Yes, it's odd, but at the same time it makes sense, I've filled the house with board games, but they'd rather go outside.

Teresa Elena Virditti: We have a great love for trees and all things green. My mother planted that oak when she was just a girl. This was part of my great-grandparents' estate. The park wasn't so well maintained then; it was a fairly dry garden with lots of wild grass, *de rulo*, as they say in the country. I remember clearly that there was a small forest, and there are still a few of those birch trees left. My sisters and I played hide and seek in that forest and pretended we were camping. I've always said that the children enjoy nature because on my side of the family there have been many great naturalists and botanists.

JFV: And from my side they get their manners, then. *[Everyone laughs happily.]* In any case, as a family, we're characterized by our taste for fine things. This includes board games, which are proof of the beauty of human ingenuity, of the human mind, which is a marvel, which we also see in video games. It's the same with nature. Every now and then, my wife, Terelenita, and I, we long for some landscape or climate we've not seen for some time. So we travel. For example, at the end of last year we were watching an American Christmas movie, as a family, everyone together in the projection room, when suddenly we were struck by a powerful nostalgia for snow. It'd been several months since we'd experienced that cold, white, exquisite substance; we missed that feeling of enormity. Except for Bruno, who is a skiing fanatic—when there isn't any snow in Santiago he'll go spend a weekend in Europe or Colorado. *[Bruno nods, closing his eyes.]* He took second place in the '91 season. So, we all went to Switzerland. Why not?, we said. We went for a few days. We still laugh when we recall how Bruno tried to teach Alicia how to ride a sled. He tried to show her how under a pine tree because it was starting to snow. It was really funny. All of a sudden they realized that the sled had disappeared. They thought someone had taken it without them noticing, but no. The sled went down the hill on its own! Even I was worried when I saw the empty sled show up at the chalet. Tell me that isn't funny. *[They all burst out laughing.]*

SEA: So you must already have a trip planned for this summer.
JFV: The children want to go to the beach. They love swimming in the sea, they look like fish, it's really quite a sight. Yes, we just want to get in the car, head to someplace nearby where the sea is calm, and get in the water. I love swimming in the sea,

when I was very young I even swam competitively, at university level. Besides, both Terelenita and Alicia enjoy the sun, they like to tan. That's why they're so beautiful. But the point is to be together. It'd be nice to take a little trip inside the country and find somewhere to relax. Our beaches are just as beautiful as the great Caribbean or Mediterranean resorts. You have to appreciate what you have, that's why we've already planned to go together as a family—like always—and enjoy the summer here on the central coast. We like to travel, to move, but the most important thing is to be together and to be grateful for the beautiful family we've created.

Milan Orlić
A Poem Floating in a Bottle, via Email

Translated from Serbian by Zdravka Gugleta

Every day, the sender of a message and I, stare
at the screen: at two
different ends of the world, like two alcoholics into
the same bottle.
At the bottom of which we don't find anything to
spare us:
the fact we're online together, doesn't make us
friends.
Ever since we've known each other, with all
the nastiness,
kindly exchanging presupposed dishonesties,
the only thing
that connects and selflessly binds us is the two ends
of the same loneliness.
I'm mulling this over, quite unexpectedly,
sitting serenely
in a dentist's chair as if precisely I were the message
in the last bottle
and my musings would supposedly save the world.

Metamorphosis

That's why the night has fallen: at day everything
makes sense, all too
explicably nuances slip away, passion perishes. In small,
city Disneyland,
olive groves are Arcadian indeed. But Logos, here, blooms
no more.
In treetops, virtual, instead of citrus fruits, microchips grow.
That's why
the city is enveloped in silence, of the eternal night. No one
but the poet:
the former boy, father's passionate cast. Wakes up, one
morning, metamorphosed
into a future youth. On a velocipede, whose front
wheel towers
over him: he's going to greet the city. But the city
—look!—grows faster
than, he, is pedaling. Through the fish-netted
sky: dirigibles
fly. At the end of the city, which he fails to reach:
prytanei barter.
Infinite is the new, brave city. Its former boy,
a free prisoner.

Conversation with a Taxi Driver

In front of a shopping center, in a passage, I saw the president
of an animal
protection society. Wearing an Astrakhan coat and muffs
of fox fur, she
spread the smell of a she-wolf. In front of a shop window, a granny
stood, the former
miss of the world: to the hum of the square and passage, what
attracts her, she
couldn't remember. In general: a sunny, summer day
a fabulous city flat.
Student-monks, scribes and archivists: at fashion
shows, in hat shops:
nurture, the milliner's disdain for the gods.
Everything is
as it used to be, only hats are new. In the city
mythopoeia, specters
reign over dreams. They are unreal, real
is only fear.
I was confiding, about this, to a taxi-driver on the way
to Vuk's monument.
Only there, in the vestibule of the station, among
underground men:

the first Christians in catacombs, did I feel relief. I bought
a ticket and, in my
compartment, calmed at last: abandoned myself to
the allure of tranquility.

Beginning of the Weekend

It is Friday afternoon, beginning of the weekend: I am
a timbre of the classical
yore. The lyrical color, of mine, in the deserted
city: scarcely
is discerned. As at the light, of an aquarium: I gaze at its
opaque gloom.
That light, sprinkles the silence of the hoar-frost, over
my existence.
Leaning against the doorpost, over her shoulder, Femina
is looking.
At the lines I am now writing. All these years, I breathe
with her presence.
I love, her sensible smile: our girl. Who believes
that, wrapped
in a poncho, she resembles a lass from the Andes
in the children's
encyclopedia. Nature has given you, Femina
smiles, the gift of
clumsiness: exceptional. I am lucky, I write:
because of Femina,
not the clumsiness. Why is the gloom, she points
with her finger, opaque?

Only now do I understand, I add, the artist's disdain
for the critic.
Oh, mama, the girl says, everything needs to be
explained to you. We move
next, to the balcony, into her near at hand laboratory.
When nature
fails Femina: with pipettes and retorts, antibiotics
and syringes: comes
to the rescue. Cages are full of kittens and birdlings.
It is Friday
afternoon, beginning of the weekend. I am a timbre
of the classical yore.

Joseph Modugno
Ham

AND NOAH AWOKE FROM HIS WINE, AND KNEW WHAT HIS YOUNGER SON HAD DONE UNTO HIM. AND HE SAID . . . —GENESIS

Pa came in drunk again tonight. First he tried to have at it with the woman whore, but he couldn't get it hard enough like usual, so he kicked and cursed her instead, and she screamed and cursed him back, and then he threw bottle but it must've been a bad throw because I heard smash off wall, and then she laughed and called him something, a name, and she gone out the door. I was under the house lying on my bed of dirt and dust, but I could hear it all through the floor, you see. Then I heard thud, thud, thud, and Pa came down and tried to have at it with me.

He screamed, "Boy!" *Boy*, he screamed, and said I don't tend the swine, but I tend them pigs, I tell you. I tend them pigs every day, and Pa knows it, too. But he come at me anyway, and I saw he already had a new bottle in his hand.

"Where you at, boy? Quit hiding in this dark like the devil!"

I heard smash off wall, and Pa broke bottle to make the end jagged like knife. Then he thrashed through the dark, hunting for me. But what Pa didn't know was I'd been in dark all night, so my eyes could see, but his eyes were still blind from the light, so I slipped from shadow to shadow within the room, and all he thrashed was the dark. Pa called my name. He panted and retched. He spit. Then he go thud on floor.

I stepped out of the dark into the lit blade of light from the doorway and revealed myself to him.

His face lifted and looked up at me. "Quit gawking and help me up."

I stood above and watched down at him.

"Well, why don't you already, boy!" His lip snarled, and he spit on floor.

For all the wrong Pa has done me, I still feel tender in my heart for him. So I stepped fully into the light and gave him my hand. He took it.

"But put some back into it, boy, or don't do nothing at all!"

I rooted my feet in the dirt and pulled up hard. Pa rose. He reached across the blade of light and seized a stone from the floor. Hand and stone rushed through the darkness. Light blinded my eyes, and a crushing sound shuddered through my ears.

I scuttled backwards into the shadows. I huddled, and felt in the darkness the warm and wet and bright of blood stream over my face. I licked my tongue along the serrated ends of my broke teeth and kneaded my crushed nose with the smooth heel of my hand. I heard the pant of human breath. I looked up.

Pa stood above and watched down at me. "It's for your own good, boy. Maybe next time you'll do like I tell you and tend them pigs like you're to do." He snarled and spit on floor. "You'll never become a man, won't never become nothing, if you keep at being a queer black boy like you do. You hear me?"

I gazed up at Pa's face. Light lit the left side and darkness swathed the right. The hollows of his eyes deepened, and his small hard white teeth bared in the dimly light. He grinned. Then he turned and gone out the door, and closed the door, and darkness deluged the room again.

Pa says I don't tend the swine, but it's not the truth. I tend them pigs every day. Them pigs are my kin and my blood. How wouldn't they be? I was raised up with them. In the heat of days, I slept with them beneath the shadows of stones far out on the salt earth plain. In the cold and dark raw of nights, I curled up between them and felt their warm bellies bulge and throb. Some nights, under the house or out in the yard, when it was so cold and black the wind howled in my bones, I opened my garments and nudged in closer, so to feel flesh against flesh, pulsing blood against pulsing blood. Once, I even uncovered their nakedness. And in those moments, I knew what I always wanted to know and hungered for, but never found in no father. But today my life changed. Today, I saw something that changed me. What I saw was—

Pa wasn't always like he is, you know. Once, he loved man, too. Maybe even loved too deeply, because after the flood something went off in his head. Not that Pa didn't drink and whore around before then, but now he does it like there's a sickness or hatred in his heart. And I believe there must be from all he's seen in his life, from starving hunger to war, pestilence, cities of men crumble, fire and brimstone pour, and then those high waters, when men drowned on the land, and even on the

mount top. And I wonder if that's why Pa cursed God. Though Pa scorns God, I know he still fears God because he took me up to the mountain to pray to Him and make slaughter before His temple. If I close my eyes in the silent, serene dark under the house, as the warm, bright wet blood streams over my teeth and face, I see that morning again.

Blackness soaked the cellar when my eyes opened. I'd been dreaming. Pa's flinted face contorted above me in the dark, and for a moment I thought my dream had come true. But Pa just tousled me. He told me to get up and light a light and go fetch a swine from the yard. I balled my hands and rubbed them into my eyes.

"How come, Pa?"

"Never mind how come, boy. Go and do like I tell you." Pa gazed down at me. Then he turned and gone back up the stairs and out the door.

Outside darkness swathed the earth. Wind seared the plain, and its cold bitter bite snapped at my nose and ears. I held my light high and bent against the dark to the yard. I shouldered the rope and heaved the heavy latch on the gate and opened the pen. Those pigs huddled together. Their bodies bristled in the dark and cold. I pushed in hard and waded in deep, up to my chest. A runt suckled at the sow's teat. I hauled it out by the tail. It kicked and squealed, but I got the rope around its neck. Pa came out of the house. He had his ragged coat wrapped to his cheekbones, and he walked out to the edge of the plain and stood silhouetted against the waste of sky and land.

Once, he loved man, too. Maybe even loved too deeply, because after the flood something went off in his head.

"Come, now, boy, and follow after me. The God is waiting."

Pa raised his hand. A glint of light rent the darkness. My heart leaped. Pa slipped his hand down his belly, and the long, bright blade of his knife vanished into the folds of his coat.

We crossed the salt plain. Pa trod ahead and bore the light. The cold dry air stung my face. Water welled my eyes and trickled my cheeks. It tasted salty like the earth. My feet tread the parched ground, and I led the runt by the rope over the stony and barren way, following after Pa, and neither of us said nothing. We reached the foot of the mountain. My eyes looked up. High above us, near the dim and distant summit, the sky burnished dark blue and blood red. Many days, tending the swine in the yard, in the callused light of dawn or dusk, I looked out across the

plain at the mountain in the distance. It seemed foreign and malevolent, like some other, semi-created world. I feared and yearned to go to it. But Pa had forbid it by the blade of his knife. One night, I remember, as I cowered with the pigs in the dark under the house, I dreamed of the mountain.

We climbed. The air grew sharper and colder, and wind scoured off the mount face. I breathed. Air burned my nose and teeth and singed my lungs. My feet slipped on the stones, and the runt squealed and stumbled backwards. Pa didn't look at us. He trundled ahead through the dark, his eyes fixed on the summit. I shortened the rope on the runt, and together we struggled on. Finally, when it seemed so cold and black and howling windy I wondered if I could go another step farther, I saw the light. It blinded my eyes, and I covered my face with my hand.

God, I thought. *It is the God waiting for us.* And if it's the God, I felt, God is the most beautiful being I have ever beheld.

My feet stepped higher. I lowered my hand from my brow to behold with radiant clear eyes. But as my vision returned, I saw it was not the God. I saw it was only the summit and the sun swelling before us, rising over the mount top in the east. I turned to Pa. He had covered his eyes with his hand, too, and for a moment he seemed struck by the same awe. I wanted to speak to Pa, to open my heart to him, to reveal to him the dark and bright wonders of my soul, but before I could shape the words with my lips, he turned on me.

"Now, you shut up and do like I tell you, and don't you speak a word, boy."

Like that, my eyes descended, and the moment passed.

Pa doused the light. He walked out upon the summit. The wind wailed and thrashed around him. It screeched, and ripped the rock face. Pa raked his foot through the shingles and cleared a patch of bare earth. He found two long, flat, smooth stones and laid them across each other. He kneeled, bowed his head, and stretched his open arms to the sky. I watched Pa. A light lit in me. This was the picture I saw in my dream.

"Bear the runt forth, boy!"

The wind and sky and bare rock face filled me with terror. But I did as Pa commanded. I wrapped the rope around my fist and bent to the wind and led the runt to Pa. He took hold of the head, and I the feet, and we flipped it. The runt squealed and kicked its legs in the air. Pa told me to sit on its belly. I did what he said. The runt squealed louder and kicked harder. Pa seized its snout and pushed down hard. The runt's tender, black neck exposed clear. Pa reached into the folds of his coat. He withdrew his knife and raised it into the air. The blade flashed in the light. Pa

bent his face to the sky. He incanted. I heard Pa's words, but I could not understand them. They sounded strange and ancient as the mount top itself. They sounded profane and unholy, like primal language.

Pa made the cross sign. Then he brought his face and the knife back down together as one and slit the runt's throat. The bright, hot wet blood pooled forth like a flood water and gushed over the stones. It hissed in the air. The runt squealed and twitched and shuddered. I felt its belly slowly sink beneath me, the air going out. Its body went limp, and it did nothing. For a moment the air was oddly quiet. Then the wind whipped and lashed the air and screamed away off the mount face, and in the silence that ensued I understood this thing we had done.

I remember that morning on the mountain with Pa. But that morning is not what I am remembering tonight as I squat in the darkness and feel the warm, bright wet blood stream over my face and teeth. What I am remembering tonight is what I saw today. Today, I saw something that changed me. What I saw was a dead runt on the side of the road. This runt didn't have its throat slit in terror of the God. It just lay dead there, black, emaciated, and lonely, like it'd been thrown out with the garbage. Something gone off in my head, then. I picture the dead runt on the side of the road. Then, in the darkness, a light kindles in me. Light kindles, and I see now, lucid as the face of the God on the mount top, what I must do.

I rise in the dark and glide up the stairs like a shadow. I open the door. Light blades off the walls and blinds my eyes. I press on. I steal through the stark and empty house until I come to Pa's door. A beam of yellow light issues from the keyhole. It lights a colossal cross figure on the wall. I crouch and peer in. Pa sprawls dead drunk on the bed under his tattered blanket. His bare, white leg with the coarse, black hair hangs exposed over the side. I fondle the door open and lope into the room and stalk to Pa's bedside. I stand above Pa and gaze down at the ghastly white flesh of leg. The candlelight sputters. I grasp the frayed end of the blanket and draw it from Pa's body. I blow the candle out. Darkness swathes the room. I slip my clothes to the floor and open my heart. I open my heart to Pa. Then, in the rapturous dark, I uncover my father's nakedness.

At dawn, I wake to a cry. My eyes snap open. The cry sounds again, a horrid, unholy cry, a squeal, really, and I hear the hard *breathe breathe breathe* of man breath through the floor. Feet scurry over the floor, and the cellar door bursts open. Light knifes the walls. Pa stands silhouetted above in the doorway. His hairy, matted chest

heaves, and his breath *pants, pants, pants.* A wrath like none I have ever seen in my life lights his eyes.

"*Ham! Ham!*" his voice cries. "Oh, Ham, my son. What have you done?"

He stares down at his naked, sweat-soaked flesh in the dimly light. I rise from my bed of dust and dirt. He staggers back from the doorway. I start up the stairs.

"Don't you, boy! Don't you come near me, now!"

His voice sounds hard like stone, but beneath it I hear the tender and trembling. The fear and longing. Pa is a sad and lonely man with a heart full of pained, broken love and forlorn yearning.

"I said, don't you, boy! Don't you, now, you hear?"

I hear, but I do not heed. I stalk toward Pa along the blade of light. I speak the name aloud. The name the woman whore spoke. "*Noah*. *Noah*." But the words come out as, "*Father. Father.*"

I wanted to speak to Pa, to open my heart to him, to reveal to him the dark and bright wonders of my soul, but before I could shape the words with my lips, he turned on me.

Pa glares and grits his teeth. His hand springs across the blade of light. A glint rents the darkness. I shield my eyes with my hand. When I look back, Pa has got his knife in hand.

I gaze at the long, bright blade. It shines aloft like a holy terror in Pa's hand, terrible as the God on the mount top, and my stomach sinks. The panging fear trembles my heart, and I want to slouch back into the darkness under the house. But a light blooms in me. A light inseminates my body. It courses my veins and inundates my heart and flows through me like a flood. Like a flood to end the world and drown all men on earth. Light flows through me like revelation.

I stare at Pa. My eyes gleam, and a smile steals my face. I step forward. Pa starts back. He shouts and brandishes the knife. The blade flashes fiercely in the light. But I have no fear, now, and Pa sees this. Pa sees this, I know, because the light in his eyes trembles. I watch Pa's eyes. Then I stride out of the shadows, fully into the light, grit my teeth, thumb my nose up into a snout, and squeal like a pig.

Pa cries and stumbles over his feet. He falls, and his elbow hits hard off the floor. The knife flies from his hand. But Pa does not go for it. He crawls away backwards on his hands and feet like a crab. He cowers and cloisters in the corner. Anguish drenches his eyes.

"Cursed, boy!" he cries. "Cursed be you and your seed all your days. A race of niggers and a nation of slaves, you'll be. Queer boy, and black. God curse you!"

Pa gapes and crosses his arms at the wrist and makes the sign at me. But I pay Pa no heed. I smile and withdraw along the blade of light back under the house. I close the door, and darkness deluges the room again. I lie down, shut my eyes to the dawn, and I see now for the first time in my life the truth of things. That black is bright, dark full of light, and light illuminating darkness. And if I am to be a nigger and a slave and a queer boy like Pa says, then I will sin and slave and whore with such beauty and grace to blind the eyes of men and God alike, and swine shall be my only brethren upon this earth.

David Moolten
Trash

Goddamn piece of trash, garbage, that's what you are,
Rises above pocked fire ladder window screens,
Rust iron sun, fenced littered lots and evening rush,
Spindrift of soiled paper. Thus one voice extols
The American dream, brazen excess
To tire of, cast aside, another life
Always at one's disposal. It's a Brazilian
And Haitian dream too, the sifted dumps, the child
Stabbed over a cracked watch, precious for shining
More than what lies about it. Things take time
To decompose, Styrofoam, a thousand years,
Such ruthless hope, maybe never, and now
Waste has become grist, compost, the Bud can's fate
Not a line but a circle and someday I want
To be repurposed like trash, which starts hard
And ends soft, ends like crushed wax cups, ends
With cops driving out to find no distance
Between salvation and salvage. He's right,
You must be clever as cardboard, miraculous
As plastic, though beneath the skulls and gum wrappers
In Ketou's god-infested midden hides
The charm, the African dream, like a memory

Of song. What could you be but sacred refuse
And isn't being unwanted our last secret want?
Isn't it freedom, a chance to be better yet
Degraded, replaced by April? Here he's made you
My green tailed warbler, my lucky onion.

Zishe Breitbart Impersonates Atlas Beside Flexing Schoolboys

Once Jews could fly. Once they boiled soup with their eyes,
Or one could, or so bragged the street urchins
And circus impresarios, because, yes, the real
Superman blew them away like a spike driver
Though he could also wax spiritual as he was
Born in Lodz, and he bit chains in half, though not
Saturdays when he ate the leftover Challah,
And he'd only skim-read the five books
Despite his bearded blacksmith father,
More self-realized in the deltoids and triceps.
So what meant these tracts Brownshirts handed out
In the streets, and who could better pass
For Nietzschean doing the two-arm curl as I did
With cheap weights made of plastic and sand?
I've been a dumbbell, a brainy brawn-less victim
Of that old cartoon faith in discipline
Though he upheld his end with quarter ton stone balls
And movie star looks Vienna couldn't resist.
Women spoke his unchanged name. Men vowed away
Their foreskin when told his secret potency.
Then a mere girl claimed the act staged, that she could
As much. But her rocks proved hollow and the mob loyal,

Though soon the even tamer would back her up,
Inherit the earth, so slight they'd snap
In a strong breeze yet bear loaded train cars,
Whole towns complete with mud and crows, a million
Half burnt scrolls like instructions for what to do
With the millions of empty words that once went
Each to a body, and each a stone,
And each an infinitely ponderous shell,
And my flabby muscles believing like his
A faster bullet, a stronger locomotive might help.

Christ and Village Under the Snow

AFTER CHAGALL

The faithless lie in ice like a "straw in glass,"
Dante thinks, chaff the solid lake suspends
While he and his friend look on, unmoved
In the lowest circle's last ring, *La Giudecca*,
What they called the old Jewish neighborhood
In any average town. There's a moment
Before you freeze when the skin turns rosy
And you feel you're on fire, tear off your clothes.
This is Liozno, with its dark buried woods
Where the war grew up while a boy doodled
In his grandfather's store. His Jesus wears nothing,
A tallit on his loins, and in the barn
Instead of the ox and sheep, they've padlocked
Twenty people. Some nights take years while a neighbor
Pauses by the door. They posture, wait preserved,
Though they must have banged first and begged,
Filled the air, every shriek a curse, every prayer.

Christopher Buckley
Bread & Circuses

TWO THINGS ONLY IT [THE PUBLIC] ANXIOUSLY DESIRES—BREAD AND CIRCUS GAMES.
—JUVENAL, *SATIRES*

I DON'T KNOW WHY WE ARE HERE, BUT I'M PRETTY SURE THAT IT IS NOT IN ORDER TO ENJOY OURSELVES. —LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

Tonight, waking at 3 AM, and
instead of the usual sub-cyber
feedback loop re installments,
savings, reduced retirement funds,
or, some insight into my short-term
investment in time and space—
that side-arm celestial curve ball
coming at me high and tight these days—
I can come up with no excuse for
my brain's subconscious Muzak,
gray cell default track, selecting
1962's *Al di là*, no. 3 on the easy-
listening hit list that year—*Al di là,*
del mare piú profondo, Ci sei tu—
a confection of lyrics and melody spun
into the night, where chalk dust, a rising
powder of light lost in the classrooms
of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in the '50s,
still drifts across the blackboard
of space. . . .

There's no explanation
for these flashes and synaptic clusters,

though I limit myself to a glass and a half
of affordable Australian Shiraz.
Nevertheless, Troy Donahue goes on chasing
Suzanne Pleshette through my cerebral video archives,
through the scenic Roman countryside
of a Warner Brothers production
as Emilio Pericoli, in sport coat
and skinny tie, croons *Al di là,*
confident of love and his paycheck
arriving on time.
I'm not so sure
now I really want to know what's coming—
for what if everything we get, we deserve,
all we do not receive, the same?
If so, doesn't this posit an organized system
of kickbacks, Karmic payback structure,
or at least someone staying late
to work it all out, design a marketing
campaign, a metaphysical CEO
with spread sheets and a flow chart
as opposed to the slapdash chaos
of some cosmic molecular committee

responsible for a comet showering down
H_2O and a little mitochondrial DNA—
someone who consistently pulls the levers and cranks
so that everyone stands back from the flames
and smoke and does not inquire beyond
the curtain, and goes off to organize
into fiscally responsible groups supporting
dairy subsidies, defense spending,
and decrying socialism.
Here then are
your Dow Jones Industrial Averages,
guides by Standard & Poor's; here are
the Warren Commission's 26 Volumes
and a bridge in Brooklyn; here's 15%
of the oil from the *Exxon Valdez*
cleaned up after 23 years, the promises
and promotional campaign from BP.
Here's a sure thing in the fourth race
at Santa Anita—bet the ranch. . . .
Roll the bones and see
if your pension isn't served up
alongside crudités and croquembouche

on Bernie Madoff's boat, gutted
by leveraged buyouts and
"private equity restructuring"—
one corporate raider after another
with a haircut and religion
selling off the work of others, maintaining
Marx was making it all up. Take a Libertarian
to lunch and be sure not to leave one stale
cake crumb for the poor, who are with us
always. Your consolation prize is
American Idol, Fox Reactionary News
as pre-scripted and massaged as
the 25 TV reality shows, prescribed
for everyone who can't tell
the difference.
I close my eyes, lie back
in the blurry gray and yellow light
of the past . . . where I am happy
walking arm in arm with the dark

down State Street when it had four lanes,
and the wide lit windows of Woolworth's

and Montgomery Ward, Pelch and Sons
News Stand & Tobacconist, Otts Department Store,
and the Blue Onion Drive-In where
we backed in next to each other
in our old Chevys, where we owed each other
something for our lives together there,
where the faint smoke of our dreams
did not rise from TV talk shows
and the chance at a new SUV
or Princess Cruise to the Caribbean—
when we were certain we had souls
and had not, to save ourselves a little
trouble, swept every last bit of rage
into the broom closet of the heart.

STORY

Jack Garrett
Happiness

It began with the smell of burning. Daily, before my eyes even opened, dream narratives, swept up into *Suddenly the sky turned black* climaxes, collapsed, undermined by the identification, all too familiar, of the acrid scent nearly universally recognized as burnt toast.

My lodger, William D.—half-bald, darting, breakfast eater—had been in place just less than a year. The hall smoke alarm had long since been disabled. Its round face, dry milk colored, hung open from its hinge, like a reprobate at the altar rail.

Then one morning, roused again by the stink of scorched gluten, I watched a cinder, ragged and black, come floating through my open bedroom doorway, and something inside me snapped. I flung aside the covers and rose. Over the years I'd learned not to make a habit of conversation with those who paid me rent. With William D., the lesson had hardened to dictum. When my bare feet touched the tile that morning, we hadn't spoken in months.

"*Toast*—?" I began.

My subtenant shot a look back over his shoulder, eyes very round. He was bent over an oval platter fanned with wedge-cut shards the color of charcoal, in his bony hand what looked like a potter's pallet of orange marmalade. Outside snow fell. "Toast," he said.

"Are you going to eat that?"

He looked at it, blinked.

"I see," I said with a glance at the counter where the unplugged appliance hunkered in a field of dead embers, adding, "I notice the setting is always on Darkest."

"I like it dark," he allowed.

"But not—"

"No," he conceded.

"Ever try Medium?"

"Too light."

"Really."

"What can I say?" he said. But when I soberly lowered my eyes he added, "There's no cancel button."

"Excuse me?"

"No cancel, see?" he said, head cocked, urging, "to make it pop."

"Pull up the lever!" I blurted.

"I did. I do. It sticks."

"You must be joking."

"Never. Try it."

Dismissively I sputtered, "It's an old toaster, granted, but for God's sake, it's a *GE*, the largest, if I'm not mistaken, corporation in the world. You think they can't make an adequate toaster?"

"I wouldn't know."

I glared at him, then took a step to one side as if to summon patience. I was feeling unjustly ridiculous. The facts in play? My lodger made toast; the toast always burned; my lodger had his wits: ergo, the toaster was defective. Why could I not accept what followed? "Look, a new toaster is a—a *superfluity,*" I said finally, "the technology is settled: a toaster of forty years ago is virtually indistinguishable from a toaster of today."

"Today's have cancel buttons," he said, "and crumb trays."

Let me be clear. I don't make toast. Like anyone, of course, I have from time to time put a couple of pieces beside a plate of eggs and bacon, buttered. I don't do that anymore. That I possessed a toaster, however, was a matter of fact. Furthermore, it was a feature of my unit, a preexisting amenity as the lawyers say, and who knows, its continuing malfunction might be construed a breach of agreement—though there was just the oral one, and nothing in it about a toaster, that I recall. Notwithstanding, my lodger made toast. Every day of our lives. What could I say to the man? No? No. Not really. He'd lived up to his end, whatever besides instilling a reasonable belief he'd one day leave his room "broom-clean" that was.

Retreating under the pretext of daily grooming, I closed my door and reclined, waiting for the smoke, figurative and otherwise, to clear. I shut my eyes and attempted

to count breaths. Soon I drifted off into a recurring dream of going on vacation with the mayor, during which while dining I make ingratiating small talk about his policies until he impatiently changes the subject. But this time was different. This time the mayor summarily ordered me into the kitchen to see what was delaying breakfast. Without a word I complied. The hotel kitchen—vast, white, industrial—was eerily empty save for a solitary chef hunched over a counter in a far corner. Irritated I called out, "Here now!" and clapping once, "The mayor's waiting." The man whipped about, his chef's hat buckling, eyes round and fierce: William D., enraged. From the counter he lifted the object of his frustration—my toaster, its steel flanks singed—and hurled it at me. End over end in slo-mo it tumbled across the empty space, until its business end struck me in the left temple, opening a fountain of hot blood which sluicing over the gleaming surfaces ignited into liquid fire, consuming the hotel and everyone in it, effectively ending the mayor's administration and the people's hopes for a sort of better tomorrow.

"A new toaster is a—a *superfluity,*" I said finally, "the technology is settled: a toaster of forty years ago is virtually indistinguishable from a toaster of today."

Twisted in my damp bundled bedding I sat up in horror, nostrils snuffling up the residue of that killing scent. And that's when it hit me. This was no dream. This was my life. And this was how one's home burned. In the unlikeliest of likely ways. Or the likeliest of unlikely ways. Like toasters.

Resigned, I placed a call to my friend Irwin, a usually reassuring man who knew my situation.

"Don't buy a toaster," he said.

"Not a *new* one," I countered.

"Don't buy a used toaster," said Irwin.

"Why not?"

"I can't tell you right now."

And with that we talked about other things—household matters, his gal Gloria's advancement at HoneyBaked Ham—and I forgot his advice. To be frank, I forgot it even was advice. I hung up and went on Craigslist. There were a lot of toasters out there.

Deep February. Although I like the symmetry—four square weeks without throw-in days kept the budget on track (with leap years affording a pause to reconfigure)—the

absence of calendar incident, aside from the bitter rebuke of Valentine's, make it a ghostly time, a month of nothing. Turn-of-the-year holidays with friends and relations, feasting and swilling, cheery if obligatory, are a vague memory as one shuffles down streets of black-dappled snow beneath skies of ash. Spring seems a pipe dream, summer grainy pornography. You are cold and alone.

Friends—who were they anyway? Did they call you? Rarely. Did you call them? Oh yes, and why was that? Because when you did call why did they invariably say, "So what's up?" or "What's going on?" as in "Why are you calling?" as in "Hurry up and remind me who you are to me that I might want to talk to you." Well, maybe you don't know who. And why was that?

There were toasters all right: in the area, inexpensive and available now. Good toasters, unwanted. Two-slice, four-slice, wide-mouth, bagel and frozen waffle functions, nearly all with easy-clean crumb trays. And cancel buttons. Everything I'd want. More than everything I'd want. This wasn't for me, remember?

As it happened, my lodger left that Friday evening for one of those lockdown singles retreats in the Poconos. I had the entire weekend in a great world metropolis in which to find, retrieve, and have installed on the counter when the man emerged Monday morning, a working toaster.

Mr. Arthur Ng lived in Sheepshead Bay. Mr. Ng had a Sunbeam Two-Slice that had been out of the box, he insisted, exactly once. A wedding present from kin of his bride's, this simple gift conferred a duty to confirm its utility before sending a thank-you. One perfect piece of toast, Ng inferred, and it was back in the box, sheathed, he made me understand, in the same protective wrap in which it came. The Ng's already had a toaster, considerably nicer (though Sunbeam is a solid name) than this one.

Did I need to know this? No. Who needs a story about a toaster? Who needs a story about anything for that matter, but everybody has one. And a toaster with a story beats a metal box that makes bread crunchy any day. That's just salesmanship. At the end of the day it was still a Sunbeam, like new. Ng wanted $15, I offered twelve. He said fourteen, but I'd best shake a leg. And the deal was done.

Arrangements were made for Sunday; on Saturday night I prepared. The year before I'd obtained a new subway map. Sick to death of oft-refolded paper splitting crease by crease, I'd ironed and polycoated the map when fresh, a fairly simple process if you have a well-ventilated area. I did the job in early autumn suffering only mild light-headedness. Magneted to the side of the fridge, the map could be consulted at will. This I did now.

According to Ng, his home was a ten-block walk east from Gravesend Neck on the *Q* line. Simple enough, except Ng didn't give me his address. Alluding to certain risks he declined to take, he instructed me to meet him at the corner of Avenue X and Bedford, a location near his home, but not so near that I could determine, except in a ballpark way, where he lived. He'd bring the toaster with him then? No, he would not. Observing from an undisclosed distance, he'd assess whether I was a legitimate buyer, then reveal himself and lead me to his home. Besides, I'd want to plug it in and toast something, *wouldn't* I?

Sunday dawned clear and bitter. A steady gale from the north frosted my kitchen window, diffusing the winter sunlight and blinding me to the world at large. I was eager to dress and head for Ng's, but it was early yet. While spooning out a bowl of hot farina I answered the phone. Irwin.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"Couple of things," I said.

"What are you doing after that?"

I hesitated, but only a heartbeat. "I found a toaster," I said, "in Sheepshead Bay."

"Don't buy a toaster," Irwin said.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't do it."

"But I need a toaster," I said, remembering my dream, my lodger bent over the counter, harbinger of conflagration.

"Do me a favor," Irwin said. "Put it off for a week."

"But why?"

"I'll tell you later."

"I have an appointment with the man."

"Postpone it," he said. "He'll understand."

"He'll sell it to someone else. And I need it. It's a good toaster, at a fair price."

"It's a toaster," said Irwin. "What's the rush?"

I began to explain but realized it was pointless. And did it matter? This was obviously one of Irwin's tics and good luck trying to talk him out of it. I changed the subject. "How's Gloria?" I asked and Irwin told me, warming to it, how her path at HoneyBaked had begun to assume a certain trajectory after years of chaotic languishing, at least to strangers' eyes.

"That's just great," I said, noticing the steam had ceased to rise from my cereal; soon it would harden. "Irwin," I said, "can I call you later?"

"Okay," he said, "but do me a favor."

"What's that?"

"Don't buy a toaster."

Good-naturedly I snorted, as if he'd told a joke we both knew I didn't get. Frankly, I was embarrassed by his persistence, something perverse in it—but then, Irwin had that knack. I had to remember that replacing my toaster was simply a small but necessary act, the sooner done the better. Like today. And today I would do it. I would go and get it. Was that so hard to understand? "Sure," I said and after a few graceless words in closing hung up.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority has responsibility for maintaining 468 stations and 842 miles of track in the city's 100-year-old subway system. A massive job, a never-ending job, which is performed deliberately, painstakingly, late at night and on weekends. Sundays, in particular, with an already reduced train schedule, can render journeys quixotic at best. I take this into account, and take my own extra pains to arrive on time. My appointment with Ng was for noon sharp; I bolted my door behind me at 9:23.

Some five trains (the *F* to the *R* to the rerouted *Q* to the *B* and back to the *Q* again) later, I stepped off onto the elevated platform of Gravesend Neck. Down the stairs and up the sidewalk I speed-strolled—gingerly, ice adhered here and there—until I heard the laughter of children, at which point I began to run. Reaching the meeting place early I simply kept going, maintaining my pace to stay warm, taking four random right turns to reckon ending up more or less where I must. It was bracing and I lost track of time, as well as place.

By 12:03 I'd found my way back to the corner of X and Bedford and stood conspicuously, hands on knees, panting. Late, but not flagrantly. Ng was watching me, I presumed, from a rooftop, the window of that van, behind a fire plug—wherever. Here I was, let him look. I even got my wallet out to count my cash, but my fingers were too stiff.

Sadly, in my excitement that morning I'd remembered to layer, but in cottons not synthetics; now, damp from exertion, I began to chill. I trembled, and yes, tears fell—from exposure, not emotion, okay? The point being that I wasn't sad, all right? Not at that point. Not really. Though why not, you have to wonder: the world as heartbreaking a place as it is, and here you are, in it again, cold and alone.

After a moment I for no reason turned to my left. There a man stood as if he'd

stood there forever, my arm's length away. He was shorter than me but broader, younger but sharper, wearing a gray woolen box-like garment with multiple pockets and thick cuffs—perhaps an East Asian hunting ensemble. A rabbity hood framed his troubled gaze. Embarrassed, I wiped away my tears and shrugged.

He stared at my proffered hand, admittedly now moist, said something like, "Toast?" whereupon I dropped my hand, snuffled and affirmed, "Toast." Ng, apparently satisfied, turned and with a gesture of direction began walking. I followed.

Let me here enlarge upon the rudimentary character of our exchange. As I'd gleaned from our emails, Ng and I, interestingly, had no tongue in common; at the keyboard, desktop translation widgets pulled us through. Our oral communication on the other hand was by means of a few simple phrases, artful charades, and guttural affirmations. For the sake of clarity I have transposed our dialogue into an efficiently transparent mid-Pacific English.

"I live over there, on the opposite side of the street," Ng implied.

"I'll follow you across," I denoted.

Indeed, Ng led me a bare half-block to the ground floor flat of a two-story four-plex which he shared with his comely wife and dog. The door opened into the kitchen which was small, steamy and fragrant: a large pot boiled lid-rattlingly on the stove. Both wife and dog greeted me warmly, one holding the other back.

"That is a very large dog," I signified.

"He is an Irish Wolfhound," gestured Mrs. Ng with her free hand, "a breed largely unknown in our native province." The dog sniffed me thoroughly, whimpering, straining against the choke collar curled in his mistress's fingers. I asked his name and the answer, which sounded like "O'Hara," felt right.

"We like him very much," intimated Ng, "and here is the toaster." Stepping aside, he revealed a small corrugated manufacturer's box bearing the appropriate colors and graphic design of the Sunbeam brand around an image of the very toaster Ng vouched lay within. I smiled, thawing rapidly.

"Get out," said Mrs. Ng in English, frowning but in an openly insistent way, by which I understood she was speaking to me. Nodding, I sank to the edge of a castered ottoman, taking care to keep the bulk of it swiveled between myself and the hound. I opened the box, extracted the white foam cushioning blocks, unpeeled the frosted polywrap—which caught briefly though disconcertingly on a gelatinous red speck on the otherwise immaculate white body of the appliance—and placed the Sunbeam in my lap.

"You're jelly people," I accused, raising a wry eyebrow at the speck.

"No," said Ng humorlessly, and as I lifted the toaster to show him, O'Hara, straining against his collar, jerked forward and gave it a jowly lick on its blemished face. Astonishingly, Ng burst out laughing, followed quickly by Mrs. Ng—though she seemed tentative, watching my face for assurances that I'd join them, and so I obligingly did, with a small chuckle. This made them laugh all the more and, culturally sensitive, I tried to keep up. Our laughter crested in waves upon ripples until the dog's ears lay flat and he dropped his head, mortified. I hadn't laughed so hard in a very long time.

Coincidentally, I began not feeling very well. Since arriving at the Ng's, the close quarters, delicate dynamic, and pungent cooking smells had combined to disturb my self-possession. The laughter subsiding I took the risk of treading where unbidden. "What's that cooking?" I insinuated.

Ng and his wife regarded each other meaningfully before making known to me, tag-team fashion, what I'll roughly translate, "It is not a Western foodstuff we are preparing and to be informed of its substance would not be congenial. Here, try some." And before I could graciously decline, a small steaming bowl was in my hands. I lifted it and let the murky brown froth touch my lips. I nodded. The Ng's nodded. O'Hara sulkily withdrew to his enormous bed in the corner.

And quite unexpectedly, something like joy stole over me. Invited into this couple's home to carry out a small act of commerce, I'd been allowed to share, if briefly, in these strange lives, in this alien culture, and even the dog had been welcoming. An overblown emotion clearly, with a telling progression: a little leap in the heart which rapidly tumbled further south. This had happened to me before. An intestinal disturbance brought on by exotic smells or tastes concurrent with a fit of shallow sentimentality, in this event exacerbated by a 3-days-running bout of constipation, a symptom of anxiety related to the matter that brought me there that day.

"May I go to the bathroom?" I conveyed as politely as gesture would permit.

For a moment, with the exception of the big pot continuing to rattle on the range, everything stopped. Ng gaped at me with a sort of incredulous grief; Mrs. Ng's mouth too hung wide, though more sensually. It was unnerving. "We had a deal," the contention.

"We did! We do!" I yelped, springing off the ottoman, Sunbeam pressed to my belly, wondering if they suspected I'd flee through the bathroom window. I wondered only now if there were one.

"You will purchase the toaster," indicated Ng.

"*Yes*, but—"

"First."

I appealed to my hosts with a sinking movement of eager humility. They looked so disappointed in me. A bead of sweat trickled down my back, eased beneath my waistband. I really had to go. "Fine," I said, taking out my wallet—but this, apparently, was not the thing either. Both Ngs actually cringed, hands to their mouths, much as when I showed my hernia keloid to friends last fall.

"Make toast," the demand. "Determine that it is suitable."

"Are you kidding?!" I cried, grinning. "It's perfect! See? Wide slots, cancel button, crumb tray—it's all there, just what I need! Never mind the thoughtless remark about the jelly—I'll take it!"

Again Ng and his wife sadly shook their heads, and I sat. And as a three-day's smorgasbord roiled within me, Mrs. Ng turned to the breadbox abutting the backsplash and opened it. Meanwhile, Ng placed the Sunbeam on the counter and plugged it in. A slice of white bread was passed from hand to hand and dropped into the slot nearest my vantage. Peering down at me Ng asked, "How do you like?"

"Dark," then remembering, "but not too dark."

Ng turned the dial and lowered the bread. The toaster hummed to life, the reassuring orange glow conspicuous around its twin mouths. And we waited.

Time passed. The pot rattled, *rat-a-tat.* Ng scratched his neck, *crich crich.* The dog yawned, *hawwwwwczh.* A distant siren sang, *wah-wah wah-wah.* Mrs. Ng took up her knitting, *clickety click.* Still—no toast. The hum . . . the glow . . . tick . . . tock . . . no . . . toast. *Holy Mother Help Me Hold On.* It was the longest appliance cycle I had ever endured.

Finally, humiliation imminent, I bolted from the ottoman. There was only one way to go: down the narrow hallway off the kitchen. O'Hara at my heels, I was at the end of it in a trice, across another room, around an unmade bed, and through the promised doorway.

Release was entire, a swift unfurling, the freest in recent memory, the very gauge of good health. I looked up. No window. No matter. O'Hara, who stood ogling me, panting expectantly, licked my bare knee, then circling twice settled at my feet. Trembling, though still huddled in my parka, I bent to scratch his ears. And tears fell. Here we go again, I murmured. What was wrong with me? Why so desperately unhappy? An old story, but continuing. A story with people and places and things. I did have a kind of life. There were things that would happen, things I would do. Now that I could breathe again, I thought about that and felt

better. "Good boy," I whispered, scratching the dog. "Yes you are," I said and surely meant it.

A wise man once said, "Stop. Look around. Ask yourself where you are and why." Well, I'd made a decision, trivial perhaps but correct, and soon would possess a nearly-new toaster. When I got home I'd soak a q-tip in alcohol, remove the speck, call Irwin, and start fresh. Little things, but most are that happen next in a life. I would get up from here and return to Ng: a solid, careful man buttoned up in his hunting outfit—and indeed, hadn't he been hunting, crouched in the cold in his man-blind, scoping out his quarry? And didn't I fall meekly into the trap, a trap I was eager for, the purchase? And why? In the end it was only toast. Toast I didn't even want. What *did* I want?

And then I thought of Mrs. Ng, sweetly deferential in her silky wraparound whatnot that did little to conceal her womanly function, making the mid-day meal in that monstrous kettle. Newlyweds, an arranged union perhaps, but loveless? Not from the looks of that bed. No, they had relations, probably often, probably that very morning; while I now counted years since such occasion. No, these were real lives, this was a home, here was happiness.

Would I ever find my own? Where? Someplace like this? Not likely. But then, why not? I mean, of course, I couldn't live *here* but—wait, what was I thinking? Was I actually wondering if they'd let me? Please. But—*no*, this was insane but . . . might they consider it? I could pay half the rent—more than half possibly—walk and groom O'Hara and do other chores, but—*what on earth*?

With the Ngs' laments at last reaching the door, my reverie concluded. What now? Had I given such offense, inadvertently violated some age-old taboo, peculiar perhaps to the Ngs' home province? Kung Pao came to mind, which of course is not a province but a chicken dish, and sitting there I realized I hadn't eaten since breakfast and my blood sugar was crashing. God, for some good dim sum. There was probably take-out nearby. The world wasn't such a grim place.

O'Hara had risen and was sniffing under the door. He now resumed whimpering, his huge unclipped nails clawing at the sill. I reached down and stroked the velvety spaces between them. He growled. Quickly, I tore paper, finished, flushed, washed my hands. Gazing in the mirror, I waited for the tank to fill and, feeling it prudent, flushed again. The dog kept scratching, growling, then came gentle knocks at the door. "*No*!" I snapped unthinkingly.

Abruptly the knocks became insistent, the knob jiggled, the dog snarled viciously. Despite the commotion I waited again for the tank to fill and flushed a

third time. "Please," said my face in the mirror, "I'm harmless, truly," and though noting that the bowl remained cloudy, I closed the lid and opened the door.

The Ng's shrank back from the doorway, as if suddenly humbled. O'Hara bounded away and I never saw him again. Between two fingers Ng held before me a piece of deeply golden toast. I took and bit of it. "Perfect," I said softly and put it in my pocket. "Thank you." From behind Ng Mrs. Ng rubbed thumb to fingers. "Of course," I said and pulled out my wallet. "Change for a twenty?" Silence. Stillness. "No matter," I said. "Keep the change. It's worth the additional cost for the trouble of making the trip out here—which, actually being *my* trouble, I should say rather in thanks for opening your home to me so that I could *take* the trouble, no?"

"No," in English said the Ngs.

Taking mincing steps and bowing repeatedly I lay the money on the marriage bed and retreated down the hall to the kitchen. There, I picked up the toaster, tucked it under my arm, and with one last low bow withdrew into the cold. I never heard the door close behind me.

When I got home there was a message on my machine. Irwin. He and Gloria inviting me over for dinner that night. Last minute, he said, and nothing fancy, but they'd really like me to come. Really. Won't take no. Please come.

I half-smiled. Sounded like he was trying to make up for being disagreeable about the toaster. My first instinct was to beg off; I had some thawed pork shoulder I needed to eat up, but—oh well, it could wait one more day. Besides, Irwin and Gloria were good people at bottom. It would be a nice gesture on my part. They loved to cook, and I could tell them my story about the toaster.

When I arrived Irwin was busy in the kitchen. A great feast appeared to be in the works. Gloria poured me an apéritif and sat talking about her HoneyBaked options, but they both seemed distracted, casting jittery glances back and forth.

Finally, Irwin wiped his hands on his apron and smiling slyly said, "Need to use the facilities?"

I hesitated, assessing. "Not especially," I said, "thanks."

"Wash your hands?" he suggested gently.

Reluctant but resigned—another of Irwin's tics presumably—I assented. The moment I entered the bathroom, naturally, my mind went back to earlier that day which, as you can imagine, raised a few goosebumps. It already seemed a dream. Impulsively, I undid my pants and sat, with no apparent purpose but to take a moment to reflect.

With a panicked flourish of scraping metal, the shower curtain whipped aside to reveal a half dozen people in cone hats standing in the tub. "Surprise!" they shouted, then discreetly turning away began to sing "Happy Birthday." Stunned, I slowly rose, gazing at the backs of their heads. Six or so of my dearest acquaintances, singing to me. I pulled up my pants.

Irwin and Gloria appeared in the doorway with a largish box wrapped in colorful ribbons and bows. "We know it's a week early," he said, "but we figured we had to catch you before you went and did something crazy."

In a daze, I slit open the card. "Happy Birthday To You," it read, "Fondly, Irwin and Gloria, Stan and Sheba, Deb and Carlos" and so on: all these actual people having signed their names, *Fondly*.

Sniffling by the crowded tub, I tore open the gift. Everyone quietly watched my face, a face that must have betrayed a kind of wonder as I uncovered the perfectly beautiful thing within: a gleaming, silver, brushed aluminum—like a miniature Airstream trailer parked in a bright American desert, all rounded corners, not a right angle on it (thrown at someone's head it would bruise but not break skin)—state-of-the-art Cuisinator Artisanal Crumb-Expelling, Burn-Aborting 6-slice Suprema Deluxe.

A week later, on my actual birthday, alone in my room, I thought back to that night and that day and had to smile, wiping an eye. My lodger—I could hear him in his room powdering his feet—had been happy with the toaster, but not demonstrably so, which was as it should have been. It belonged to me. The Ng Sunbeam I'd put on Craigslist. Someone was coming to see it tomorrow.

March the First, Happy Birthday to Me. Yes, March came in like a lion and I'd come out of Mother like a—what do you call it? A baby sheep. Which reminds me. Something Ng asked me as he led me through the cold to his home. "Do you know why it's called Sheepshead Bay?" I didn't. "Look at a map." Later I did. Where the blue began I followed the curve of the bay out to sea, and at the last chunk of land before open ocean, I saw what he meant.

Maggie MK Hess
Ballast

The orchestra has committed
suicide.

I never wanted love. I never wanted

love. I want fuchsia, frying pans, the sea,
my name seeks atonement,

I'm sinking to the floor,
a red skillet, duck fat,

that's my back, cracking the night
like a wishbone.

Lab Work

Be prepared to give up your body.
You don't have to answer all the questions.

When the machine starts, don't panic:
it's a small space,

you are used to that, having only
that one fleshy world to move around in.

You will be asked to touch your heart,
spleen, two kidneys.

If you don't know when you last believed
in healing, don't worry—if you ever

did, it's in your cartilage. Most
have no trouble

pointing to their first love, apple- or
pear-shaped, the color of worn stone. The death

of your first pet roams like a slow
escalator.

Death of your parents—past or future—
shoebox shoved to the back of a closet.

The lid never quite fits, nor does
it ever lift.

Fault Line

The half-rabbit comes with one kidney, half
a liver, precise division of flesh,
the marketplace in the rising day's heat.
Across the way in the neighbor's window
little horses gallop nowhere, children
ride them heedlessly. Bodies move until
they don't. We think we know what life nearby
feels like, how it propels the heart-full thrill

of fidgeting. On the back porch, the moon
fattens. My rivercheeks, my rise and fall
of claws, teeth—we eat to fill the need,
joyous open sky. Oh, the half-rabbit
runs toward death. If you chase it, I cannot
follow. Don't you dare say that I sent you.

Bruce Bond
Wanderlust

And when I wandered far enough, asleep,
unsure if this was one of those visions
that cuts the deepest tissues as it speaks
or one more cry of want and compulsion,
I thought, what does a dream care anyway.
To believe all things is to believe
in nothing. Stars fall in ruins to the day.
Heaven has no creed. And so God lives
chalked in whispers against the shoreline.
My cat turns, because he has a choice.
By design then, he cannot be explained.
Deep in the blue well of his eye, a voice
says, you embody what you marvel at,
the you that is not you. I love that cat.

Open

After they lowered his mother's brick
of ash, a soft wind knelt down and asked,
if God is all powerful, can He make
a weight so heavy He cannot lift it.
Just like the wind. To lighten things a bit
with a child's question. What is more
heavy than black fathoms none can lift
save the open air. A boy's mind wanders
because it must, because it is a god,
small beneath the monoliths of strangers.
If loss becomes the center of his world,
what does he see of either world or center.
I am asking you, my mother, my mirror,
my question laid in the grave of answers.

Becky Adnot-Haynes
How To Become the Longest-Tenured Female Funeral Director in Longbend, Ohio

Grow up country and fearless. Wear your hair long and straight and for fun ramp the hills off of Pywell road in somebody's jeep, savoring the reckless joy of groundlessness. Put whiskey in a Lipton Iced Tea bottle and drink it at dusk next to boys with Skoal rings on their back pockets. Trade kisses for cigarettes.

When you are sixteen go with your twenty-two-year-old boyfriend to his father's funeral home in the middle of the night, when you should be asleep. Giggle and say, *Are you sure we should be in here*? Let him kiss you. Let him touch your hair. Listen as he explains that embalming is an art, old as the Egyptians, that the make-up of chemicals put into veins is a unique combination, mixed just for you, like a cocktail. Hear him say that if it was you on that table, a girl with fresh pink skin, that he'd make sure they got it right.

Look at the body of a dead man, stony and still as something made of wax. Memorize the calm on his face. When your math teacher writes out chalkboard directions on how to solve word problems—*1. Translate the wording into a numeric equation that combines smaller expressions 2. Solve the equation!*—think only of that night, that man, his face.

The morning of your high-school graduation ceremony, find out from your older sister that your parents are getting a divorce. Feel naïve and young when she says, *Didn't you know? They fight all the time.* Watch your mother weep when you tell her you're taking a year off before college.

Take a year off before college. Take another. Work at a grocery store, an auto repair shop, a hair salon. In the evenings drink whiskey—now from a flask. Smoke a lot of pot. Go into town, occasionally, to see a movie, or for *flautas* from the only Mexican restaurant in sixty miles.

Hear from Tracy Orfield that your boyfriend has been going around with Berma Jameson, a thirty-year-old unwed mother who lives by herself in a trailer past the quarry. Wait until your boyfriend leaves you one evening and then follow him. See the two of them together through shabby curtains, sitting cross-legged on her narrow bed, having cigarettes and conversation. Throw eggs—which you bought just in case, a sort of caution—at the flaking siding of her trailer. Breathe in the sulfur fumes of them and peel out in your sister's car.

Enroll at the community college. Declare your major: mortuary science. Move to a small apartment in town, one with water stains on the bathroom ceiling and your own washer and dryer. Buy pencils and pads of graphing paper for school; line them up in neat rows and think that maybe they will be your salvation.

Watch your first embalming. Pay attention as your instructor locates the carotid artery, slippery as a noodle, and begins the flow of formaldehyde coursing through the body's veins, open like channels. See the care he takes, hands delicate and practiced as a pianist's as they pick up instruments from his steel doctor's tray. Follow his movements back and forth, like watching tennis.

Speak carefully when you describe your course of studies to family and friends, especially your mother. Keep the excitement from your voice as you describe how you have learned how to use a trocar, how to drain a kidney and a spleen.

Learn to rub peppermint salve under your nose to cover the scent of formaldehyde. Embalm your first body, a woman who arrives at the mortuary school wearing a cardigan and heels, like she's going to brunch. Get a job at a funeral home. Learn to sleep shallow, ear to the phone, waiting to come take away the bodies of the recently dead.

As an apology to your mother, start dating a responsible boy, the son of a family friend, who steps in front of you to open doors and notices when you wear your hair half-up and who on your third date buys you a watch you don't like, too clunky and mannish for your small wrist.

When the responsible boy asks you to marry him, say yes. When he asks if you will give up your work once you start trying for children, hesitate and then say yes.

Get married in a chapel on a lake. Be lovely in your dove-white gown. Move to a house in the suburbs, with a *media room* and kitchen drawers that click themselves shut when you tap them.

Try to get pregnant. Fail.

Against your husband's wishes, get your job back. Feel those familiar movements come back to your hands, the muscle memory of embalming engraved, forever, now, on your DNA. Don't speak too often about your work, and always be home in time to make dinner.

Have an affair of the heart with a man you meet in a small Indiana town, where you travel to attend an industry conference. Save his letters: They are carefully written, the date marked in the top right corner. Think of him when you are at home, mostly, washing dishes or cleaning the baseboards: He is shy and handsome, with ginger hair and a clipped, neat way of speaking.

Have an actual affair with the man you met in a small Indiana town. Afterward, lie on the bed and tell him about Tan, the epileptic patient whose famous brain helped nineteenth-century scientists understand that language was controlled by a part of the brain and not something gifted, like a box of pears, by God. Tell them that nobody knew who Tan really was, that he wasted away in a Paris hospital, unable to speak, until he died. Tell him that some said he was a poor, illiterate laborer, others that he had gone mad from syphilis.

Tell your lover that Tan's real name was Louis Leborgne, and that they didn't know that until this year. Let your lover kiss you. Let him touch your hair.

Leave your correspondences, accidentally/on purpose, where your husband can find them. Watch him turn from you, the angry slope of his back, the tension in his shoulders like pent-up rage. Let him go. (But keep the watch: He'd want you to.)

Discover you are pregnant with your lover's child. It is a girl; she has ginger hair and his lovely earlobes. Name her Penelope.

Marry your lover and have more children: two boys. Name them Liam and Michael. Learn the art of motherhood: which of your children get dry skin and earaches, which of them like stone fruits more than apples and watermelon. Go to the pound to adopt a puppy and fall in love with a mange-riddled six-year-old dog instead. Kiss your new husband when he says *okay*.

Treasure the small ecstasies of parenthood. When your youngest son, Michael, gives you the exoskeleton of a beetle, put it in your top drawer next to your three pieces of nice jewelry. Be unreasonably happy.

At the funeral home, work hard. Touch each body with care, the skin of the dead as delicate and papery as tissue. Learn to work slowly, evenly, thoroughly. Get promoted. Welcome new, eager mortuary-school graduates on staff. Be lauded for your restorative work. Feel pride when your clients are pleased with the results, shaking your hand with real gratefulness, even in their sorrow.

Embalm mothers.

Embalm fathers.

Embalm husbands.

Embalm wives.

Embalm brothers, sisters, grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Embalm best friends, nannies, kindergarten teachers, supermarket clerks, doctors, post-office workers, plumbers, swimming-lesson instructors, drug dealers, after-school tutors, social workers, land surveyors, X-ray technicians, racquetball partners, librarians, lawyers and judges, secretaries, therapists, butchers, electricians, and church deacons. Embalm sons and daughters.

Grow older. Bury your dog under the crabapple tree by the property line. Hear your children tell you that they are moving to Guatemala, Singapore, and Texas. Have grandchildren: Lucas, Hadley, Sophia. Lynley, Elijah, Tyler. Speak to them when their parents put them on the phone, their toddlers' voices happy and gurgling, clear as the natural springs you swam in as a girl.

Hear your husband tell you, in echoes that move in rings away from your body, that he is going to die.

Watch your husband die. Wash his body tenderly, like a lover. Remember how he spoke kindly to other people's children and that his hands were always warm.

Embalm your husband.

Retire from your job. Be recognized, at an annual gathering of the state funeral directors' association, for your forty years of service. Accept a bouquet of pink carnations and a certificate of achievement. At the reception eat slices of rare roast beef and drink pink sherbet punch from a plastic cup.

Grow older still. Take your children's calls, hear of their busy lives, their gluten allergies and their newfound passion for geocaching and their children who, at some point, have grown up.

Become a great-grandmother.

Be diagnosed with a disease that makes your hands tremble, the stiff plastic packaging of food and other household things now a new challenge, something to consider on your slow trips through the grocery store. Thank your oldest grandson, Lucas, grown up now and home for a rare visit, when he cleans years of leaves from your rain gutters. See him hold up the dead, decayed body of a sparrow: *Found this in there*. Nod your head: *Thank you*.

Feel your mind grow older, unclenching around things it used to know so easily: the city that your sister moved to so many years ago; the type of greens, fragrant and peppery, that your neighbor brings to you in leafy bundles each summer. The name of your great-granddaughter.

Take the fragile exoskeleton of a beetle from your dresser drawer and hold it up to your eyes, the memory of it a wisp, filmy and gossamer, something just out of reach.

Wonder who will miss you.

Mark Svenvold

Lines Composed an Hour and Ten Minutes by Interstate from South Orange, New Jersey, from a Title Written by a Student and Drawn at Random from a Hat, in Late August, 2011

—BLOW OUT THE BLACK SKY

if it's not too much trouble,
if it's not too much to ask,
when you're done with it, I mean,
and the moon, you know, that billiard cue
with the sign that says: "Sponsored By"?
blow that out, too.
Blow out the black sky,
if you would, and bring in the blue.
The Party Members from Chengdu
have most of all the money in the world.
They tour the museum of Europe,
kicking the tires. But the museum of Europe
is closed for lunch. What to do
but wait for the 13th Century to return,
where "the markets" arrive as
zucchini flowers, flour-dusted and fried.
You eat them with your hands, amid the smell
of sweet smoke and cheese,
the sun warm on your arm.

Sometimes nostalgia
sits down next to you on a bench and doesn't speak,
lights a cigarette, blows out the match, and looks

at the view of fields across an Etruscan valley
thick with gurgling agriculture, and waits for you to make
a smart remark. And sometimes there's nothing to say.
Then maybe a small moment of arbitrage
whence something-out-of-nothing comes.
The 13th Century depicts this as a dove,
because you have to put something up there,
I guess, and called it many things, Holy Ghost,
the slender reed that becomes the hand of God,
depending on the artist and the period.
I may have misread the sign the girl left
but when she returns all the Chinese bankers rise
to the sweet thing who takes tickets untroubled by the fall
from her Vespa. The joke in heaven
is about a clock dial recording sins committed—
it spins like a ceiling fan, or a church turnstile clicking.
The confessionals—empty—are booths
for kids to play secrets in: nuns shoo them out.
Even a scolding in Italian is lovely. Light a candle
for a dead pet, or the national debt, flicking too fast
for the eye to track. It's all symbolic,
and someone comes at night to blow it out.

Lucky 12 (Odegaard, and What Happened to Him in What Otherwise Would Have Been Another Lost Evening in Suburban New Jersey), an Overture

The lumberjack falls backwards
and away—and quickly,
as one surprised and set upon by dogs,
—not graceful
or cute but mighty fast, an earnest
crablike scramble through salal and two-stroke smoke from the Stehl—
The whiplash from the trunk can crush a man.
The deafening crash carries to the water.
These trunks, eight feet wide, are lashed together by a rigger
in 1955—and soon a fish camp floats on Prince William Sound.

*

And the company folds, the last fisherman
drinks himself to death in front of a television.
Sons grow up, and their kids, or neighbors,
a handful, anyway, are part of a salvage crew,
with cables and cranes, to lift, dripping kelp and goo
from beneath dark water, the selfsame logs,
dragged onto gravel, slick and smelling of oysters,
black as a turbid burbot. They've been submerged fifty years.
A dozen are loaded on a truck, taken to a mill. In time,

the word is out on the luthier grapevine
about the "Lucky 12."

*

Cut and quartered, hand split into blocks or billets,
redolent wedges, their ends waxed with sealant.
A third is dross, tossed into the burn pile
as smoke, another third lost in the trimming.

What's left gets recut the rough size
of the instruments they will become—
arch top, double bass, mandolin—
stacked in drying houses,
guarded as if they were ingots,
and indeed, rarer than bullion.

Most of the stock, as it's now called,
is rated AAA, the best tonewood money can buy.
But some are true master-grade pieces
that few have actually touched with their own hands—
quarter-sawn, straight-grain wood with fine, even annual spacing.

"I've seen luthiers hold this, cradle it, really,
shake their heads, say, 'No way
am I going to fuck with this'."

The craftsman raps the wood with his knuckle.
It almost rings like a bell.
It dries and seasons for years
until someone shapes it
to sing in Pythagorean octaves.

*

Then along comes some other one,
some Odegaard, minding his own business,
arriving for dinner at the house of his wife Amey's
old high school friend. ("McDownton
McAbbey," Odegaard mutters)
the wheels of their car crackling under gravel,
the house set back a furlong, the drive lined
with poplars, full grown, transplanted from Spain—

"Jeezus," Odegaard, again.
"Honey, please," says Amey,
"Behave. Promise?"

All smiles from Odegaard the Wise.
He meets the Fabros,
of the home and garden franchise.

Later, with Fabros putting kiddies to bed,
Odegaard, on the prowl, finds the music room:
six acoustics on their stands—
a full drum kit, a keyboard, Daddy's little play land.
Then, like the scene in *West Side Story*,
when Tony sees Maria from across the room,
Odegaard spots the handmade Gordon Smith Lucky 12.
Bill Fabro walks in, all smiles.
Odegaard (extra extra polite) asks if he can pick it up,
and when he plucks the strings, he feels
something that's been spinning around the sun
waiting to get out for longer than he's been alive.

The unexpected sonority and ease of each chord,
makes Odegaard sit up straight in his chair,
and bend his head close to the sound hole.
He has started *Copper Kettle*, but, whereas
with his own instrument he might canoodle a bit,
this guitar demands, like a rare and exotic woman,
to be played all the way through, in time.
When he's finished, Odegaard's head
feels like an old tube amplifier, warm to the touch.

As If to a Partial Catalogue of First Glances

At the time, of course, you think, if you think at all, *Jesus,*
look at her. Not really a thought, of course,
you now see, as it was an habitual mode
of internal combustion—blast the details:

She was "with" another woman, for instance.

*

She loved, of all things, "dusty rose" wallpaper.

*

And she, at a time when you were smitten

by The Pixies, clung to a certain inexplicable,
retrograde penchant for Three Dog Night, etc.

O but when she called (as she does now),
you knew what it was for,
her hair the color of hills blackened by fire,

& her name: Eurydice

& Her Name—It Wasn't "Euridyce," of Course, Though It May Have Rhymed Aslant with That, Though for the Life of Me I Can't

(O, let's forget
for a moment, shall we,
as if there's a choice in the matter?
For a moment waits, always,
does it not? Just ask a monk, or a drunk
or a junkie

—isn't that why the Orpheus in us looks across a room
from the particulars
with deadlines and Post-it notes
taped everywhere,
so many balls in the air!

—isn't this his backward glance, again,
the one we've heard so much about—
"It's like living with a celebrity,"
his—one imagines—third wife said
before she fled—

trailing in her wake, "After all these years,
you're just as much an ass."

Later, against inner avowals to the contrary,
—now alone—isn't this what he feels,
the bewildering telemetry?)

Uncharted (Apology)

Did I say *the* bewildering telemetry? My bad.
I was just test-driving a coffin
(see poem above). And it was, well, a tad snug.
And so quiet my ears began to ring.
So my song, such as it is,
is less about meaning, anymore, one sees, finally,
whistling in the dark.
Still, an old habit upon me, I feel compelled to clarify:

I meant *a* bewildering telemetry,
meaning, only, one's own dodgy course
across the wide ocean of the world.
That's me, bent over a double set of log books,
one of which keeps a true position
and says what happened & when,
but can't say why. It also has
late nights up watching UFC guys
knock the snot out of each other.

The second? I'm looking around, frantically,
for that one. I seem to have misplaced it
but know its color: white brick of paper,
a bed made of helium, the shape of an afternoon
snowstorm, the length of your last nap,

& what we thought about together, and knew
without speaking, while we were there.

Okla Elliott

"That the Soul Discharges Her Passions upon False Objects"

THE AMOROUS PART THAT IS IN US, FOR WANT OF A LEGITIMATE OBJECT, RATHER THAN LIE IDLE, DOES AFTER THAT MANNER FORGE AND CREATE ONE FALSE AND FRIVOLOUS.
—MONTAIGNE, FROM HIS ESSAY WITH MORE OR LESS THE SAME TITLE AS THIS POEM

Montaigne tells us, *Man (in good earnest) is a marvelously vain,*
    fickle, and unstable subject, and that seems about right,
though I don't know why I should be thinking of Montaigne
    just now, as I search for movies on Netflix,
where I am deciding between a foreign film or a cartoon,
    but an adult one, like *Fritz the Cat,* with its cartoon magpies
playing jazz—and by the blackness of their feathers
    and the blackness of their music we're meant
to know that these are black men, not magpies,
    or not really magpies but metaphorical magpies,
and that the segregation of species is wrong,
    that these magpies are real cool cats (ha, get it?),
but there's a problem with this, the idea
    that different species can represent different human races
because we're all one species, and so, as someone
    like Judith Butler or Slavoj Žižek might say, the act
of critiquing race relations actually reinforces
    the racist ideological assumptions about the differences
between the races, and they'd be right to say that,
    but when I was twelve and living in Argyle, Kentucky,
watching *Fritz the Cat* with Trace Reams I thought I was seeing
    something (and therefore being someone) very profound.

I thought about human equality and freedom
    and about whether I could sneak back into the movie room
later to watch the R-rated cartoon *Heavy Metal*
    to which I had masturbated once, which was only maybe
the second or third time I'd ever done that,
    and so like a boy who grows attached to his first lover,
I felt the heroine of this cartoon was necessary
    for me, never mind that she had purple hair and flew
a reptilian creature and chopped people to bits
    with a massive sword—none of that mattered since she wore
leather lingerie while she did all her flying and killing,
    and she had matching purple nipples
which were shown several times. And so I make my Netflix decision.
    I'll watch *Heavy Metal* and see what twenty years have done
to it and me. I half-wonder if I'll end up jerking off to a cartoon,
    which was forgivable twenty years ago but would be a mixture
of pathetic, deviant, and just plain sad now,
    especially with me thinking of Montaigne for no good reason
and unable to find a way to bring all this back around to his point
    so that my poem can have a satisfying end—an end that closes
the hermeneutic circle like we expect from poems.

STORY

Ben Bush
><

Cole was cradling his busted-zipper duffle bag so that his socks wouldn't spill out. I held a pair of his cardboard boxes, stacked on top of each other. Even though we hadn't spoken in months, my older brother had called me up to help him move out of the collective farm where he'd spent the last three-and-a-half years of his life. As we stepped outside, the screen door to the kitchen slammed behind us and a cluster of chickens scattered into a row of mustard greens. The collective's white-haired founder—Mathieu or Mateo, I couldn't remember—who had donated his family's land back in the 1970s, was repairing something and cursing inside the rear shed. Its plank walls muffled the sound of his clanking tools and AM radio. Chiara, who'd ditched a softball scholarship to join the farm, was chopping firewood near the driveway. As Cole and I walked past, she only grunted with effort. Even Cole's closest friend Oliver wasn't around. We loaded the bag and the boxes into the trunk. No one said goodbye to him.

I looked in the rearview mirror and then over at my brother. Viewed in profile with his mouth hanging slack, Cole looked like he was devouring the passing pine trees and mile markers from the window behind him. Since I'd last seen him, he'd grown a beatnik soul patch on his lower lip and a Hitler mustache on the upper: inversion of each other.

"You know you're going to have to shave that off," I said.

"What am I going to be doing at this job?" he asked, annoyed.

"It's easy. You just answer phones. It's for some furniture importer."

"Why did I have to lie about having a college degree to answer phones?"

The temp agency didn't hire anyone without a college degree. "I mean, ideally," I said, looking at his shaggy, unevenly cut brown hair, "you'd probably get a haircut, too."

He groaned, kicked his shoes up onto the dashboard. Pebbles and granules of chicken feed popped free of the tread on the bottom of his Pumas and rolled across the dash.

"You never used to hate haircuts," I said, and that got a reluctant smile out of him. Our mom used to take us to SuperCuts and, at one point, he confessed to me that he touched himself under the big white apron they drape over you. The next time we went, I watched Sylvia, who always cut our hair, smile into the mirror at the subtle rhythmic motion in his lap. I got up the nerve to try it myself. She cringingly gave me a lopsided crew cut.

"You know I hooked up with her during junior college?" he said, smiling. "I had an anthro lecture class with her. It turned out she'd been taking night classes there all along. She totally blew me in parking lot C." Cole had been born with swollen adenoids, which had given him sibilant S's until mom signed him up for speech therapy in second grade. Just then I'd heard the smallest hint of it.

As Cole and I took exit 169, the off-ramp shunted us under the I-5 and I found myself slowing beneath the underpass: for me, a landmark. Through repeated exposure, it had become familiar: the apartment I shared with my girlfriend, M, was walking distance from the QFC supermarket and the direct route went beneath this elevated section of the freeway. Its graffiti had been defaced. Crass sections had been crossed out and replaced with positive messages. "Clayton Bennett is a cock-bitch-junkie" became "Clayton Bennett is ~~a cock-bitch-junkie~~ a child of God." Likewise, "Shit don't sleep" was now "The human soul ~~Shit~~ don't sleep." "Pussy has no face" had been replaced with "~~Pussy has no face~~ All of us are repositories of deep humanity and feeling beyond our greatest expectations." The changes were obviously well intentioned and yet there was almost something violent about the erasure: replacing a multitude of viewpoints with a single benign one.

"They're wearing skin-tight jeans and nothing else," M continued. Her work schedule was erratic and, instead of helping with the move, she'd worked a ten-hour day—a Sunday—doing makeup for a photo shoot. She, Cole, and I were seated

around the small circular table in her and my living room, which would soon become Cole's bedroom. "But what's funny is not only do they all have huge eyes, which for teen modeling is more or less the industry standard, but—"

Cole coughed up a little piece of mizuna lettuce that dangled wetly beside his soul patch until he slurped it back down. He cleared his throat. "In Denmark they say every time you cough, it means someone is Googling you."

"Cole," I said flatly, "no one is Googling you."

M smiled a little while she chewed and squinted at him. "Maybe someone in Denmark is."

I struck grit in my bite of field greens.

"So what brings you to stay with us?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. I'd been wanting to ask. "It seemed like you were in a hurry to get out of there."

Cole contemplatively salted his spaghetti until a little white pile sat unabsorbed on top of the sauce. "Have you heard the one about two guys peeing off a bridge?"

I nodded. M looked unsure.

"Two men are standing on a bridge peeing into a river. The first guy says, 'That water sure is cold.' The second guy says, 'Yeah, and it's deep, too.'" Cole squinted suspiciously at a group photo of M's and my mutual friends tacked to the wall. "That river that their dicks are dangling in," Cole said, "could be named 'Human Cruelty' because it, too, runs deep and cold. *That's* why I had to leave," he said, as if that ought to resolve the situation.

My confused laugh sounded like "huh."

M did the dishes. Cole and I opened the fold-out couch, then stretched the fitted sheet's corners over the mattress. A rerun of the sitcom *Friends with Benefits* was on. It's about a woman in her early thirties whose thyroid cancer has gone into remission and she's, like, completely healthy but, because of her pre-existing condition, she's uninsurable at any cost. She marries her drinking buddy from college, who has partner benefits on his Cadillac health insurance plan: low deductibles, great coverage. In the early episodes, a lot of the comedy comes from their marriage being a total sham—like their awkward kiss under the mistletoe at the company Christmas party. They're mismatched in all kinds of ways: he's uptight and career-driven, whereas her brush with cancer has taught her to savor life. The romantic tension builds until the season two finale, which ends with them sleeping together. But instead of letting the narrative propulsion dissipate, a routine exam in the fall premiere indicates her cancer has returned and spread. The show had gone from

pilot to mega-hit to two back-to-back syndicated reruns per night all during the time Cole had spent living in the TV-less farmhouse. Cole was transfixed by it. I slid open the closet door and got out my sleeping bag. Until I'd moved in with M, that sleeping bag had served as my comforter. Cole would have to similarly make do. With the sofa bed unfolded, I jealously noted that its dimensions exceeded M's and my mattress. Finished with the dishes, M had to skirt around the mattress's yawning expanse to move from the kitchen through the small living room to our bedroom.

With the door to our room closed, the TV's drone was still audible. Cole would be able to hear anything M and I said, which made a discussion of his arrival impossible. M flipped through her box of caseless cassettes—R. Kelly, Wu-Tang, Blonde Redhead—and I loaded a burned disc of Brazilian tropicália into a portable CD player I kept on the bedside table next to her birth control pills' pink case. I put on my large black headphones; she slipped in her earbuds. Three tracks into Caetano Veloso's 1969 self-titled album, I was going down on her. M's always been a little paunchy but I barely notice when she's on her back. The soft part above her vaj pouts out just a little bit. She keeps it totally waxed—no landing strip, no nothing. As I licked it, I had an uncomfortable association with the topless teenage models she'd mentioned at dinner and was trying to push them out of my mind. As she tilted her leg in order to direct my efforts toward the appropriate regions, her knee pushed my headphones loose. The black speaker cups were dangling around my neck and Veloso's gentle guitar was suddenly tinny and accompanied by somber dialogue from the television in the next room. Sitting up to adjust, I accidentally reached the end of the headphones' cord and tugged the CD player off the night-stand onto the floor with a loud *wham*, unheard by M with her earbuds in. She looked up at my startled face curiously, expectantly, her spread legs forming two halves of an isosceles triangle. I took off my headphones, slid two fingers inside her, and returned to what I'd been doing.

She pantomimed a moan, conscious of my brother in the next room. Even as a practical consideration, his entry into her mind during orgasm immediately bothered me. She rubbed the head of my cock for a few minutes then I rubbed it against her thigh and blew my wad on her stomach. The CD player was still whirling upside-down on top of a pile of our clothes beside the bed. I reached over to press stop and heard its little motor wind down. When I looked up, M was smiling at me and had plucked out one of her headphones, still emitting the coos of Blonde Redhead, from her right ear. "If we adopt, can I still be a MILF?" she asked.

"Of course, baby," I said, reassuringly, "because I'll still want to fuck you." After I said it, I took a moment to think about whether or not it was true and, while I wasn't sure, I at least hoped it would be, which counted for something. I'd been fending off her concerns about her upcoming fertility decline and her desire to have children with a concerted campaign in favor of adoption—more a placeholder than an actual possibility—which conveniently allowed us all the time in the world.

I got up to go pee and had to pass through the living room. Lit only by the TV, my brother looked up, surprised. He had sections of the sheets wadded up in his fists and was wiping his nose and eyes. My path around the mattress routed me toward the TV screen. It was the episode where they find out her cancer is terminal. I hadn't seen Cole cry since Dad yelled at him for getting suspended from Cascadia Community College.

On a typical morning, I shower first then eat breakfast, but when I woke, Cole was inside the bathroom. Cole had been fired in the past for being late so I was glad to see his early start and felt I should be supportive, but twenty minutes later, my toast and coffee consumed and Cole still inside, I pounded on the door. When he opened it, his Hitler mustache and soul patch were gone, his face was scraped partially free of shaving cream, and he had one of M's disposable pink leg razors in his hand. The towel around his waist showcased the odd physique farm life had given him: a tummy so big that his innie belly button had become an outie, juxtaposed by his impressively muscular arms. "Oh sorry," he said. "Come on in." I showered while he finished up.

During his first eight-hour shift, the phone—his only responsibility—rang just four times. The office window offered a view of the waterfront and he was completely unsupervised for long chunks of the day. The assignment suited him so perfectly that it didn't even bother me that he never thanked me for lining it up.

For a while our lives found a rhythm. Between ads funded by the region's expanding tech industry and the city's introduction of a tax break for TV shows shooting on location, M's talents had been in heavy demand, but even at that, her schedule remained unpredictable—sometimes working weekends but then with strings of days off during the week. I'd been temping at Basetti-Hoffman for a few months and they'd recently hired me as their permanent office manager, paying the $600 finder's fee to the agency: a high honor and a rarity. The 9-5s passed quickly in a blur of spreadsheets and electronic calendars as I coordinated meetings between every permutation of the design team, architects, sales, and the company's construction arm. Because Cole was assigned to an import company, he often had

to stay late in case of phone calls from distant time zones, so occasionally M and I had an hour together at the apartment before he returned.

Each night when I'd come home, I'd see my tan sleeping bag unzipped and spread-eagle on the unmade fold-out bed. Four years earlier, when Cole and I hiked up Mt. Pilchuck, that sleeping bag was the sleeping bag I'd brought. We camped out there overnight on Election Day. The precipitating event: I'd asked Cole a question about the odds of Slade Gorton's re-election to the senate and he'd shrugged it off. In response, I griped about voter turnout—lowest of the G8 countries, 138 out of 172 worldwide—and his own complicity in this and found myself locked into arguing that Election Day ought to be a no-work holiday, as it already was in fifteen countries, and claiming if it were, voter turnout would, accordingly, skyrocket. Cole, who adamantly believed that voting was pointless due to—I don't know, the bogusness of the two-party system, the lesser of two very bad evils, or some other bullshit—countered that if Election Day were a holiday, everyone would just pack up their coolers and fishing rods and spend the first Tuesday of November up at Wynoochee Lake. To sort of settle it, we both agreed to take Election Day off from work and backpack into the mountains. I cast an absentee ballot a week before. Cole didn't. The Kachess Ridge Trail was one we'd already hiked close to a dozen times on different family vacations. Our dad, a real outdoorsman, worked for Search & Rescue and liked nothing better than to backpack into a remote area for the night. But when Cole and I got to the campground, the one we'd always stayed at with our family, high on the mountainside, it was weirdly flooded. The picnic tables were just barely visible above the water's surface—rectangular monoliths in the middle of this new lake that reflected the peaks above us. As we swam out to the campsite, I stubbed my toe on a submerged rock that formed one of the fire pits. Lying on the tabletops, the sky pinked overhead while the engaged citizenry watched the election returns on TV and polling locations gradually closed in different time zones. For me, huddled in the tan sleeping bag, that night became an extended space in which both candidates and no candidates had won, but I think for my brother this time extended even further and came to envelop much of the time that came after.

My keys clanked in the knob as I shoved the front door open. The narrow front hallway formed Cole's voice and M's laugh into a tube of sound. Cole was home early. "—about 250 points from my previous high score," I heard Cole say.

To the right of the entrance was the scuff mark from where one of Cole's moving boxes had scraped against the wall. I stood and listened. "I'd been on the Atari emulator website every day since I'd started the job so my personal high score is actually some pretty serious business." Cole was in full-on anecdote-recitation mode. "It's an hour after lunch break. Mr. Kindree's been in his office the whole time and then—*BAM!*—manila folders are suddenly rubbing against each other just behind my right ear. It's Kindree and he's pissed." Cole shifted into a low authoritative boss voice. "'I don't pay you to do this,' Kindree says."

Stepping inside, I closed our swollen, or possibly sagging, front door, which takes a lot of force and the gust of air sent the little clots of dust that'd accumulated in the corners jetting down the hallway toward Cole's voice.

"Kindree sticks his finger into my line of sight, between me and the monitor, and I turn to give him a look that I hope communicates something like, *C'mon, your office phone hasn't even rang* once *since I came back from my 10:15 smoke break*, like, *You're wasting* my *time not vice/versa*. Peripherally, I see pixelated chunks of space rocks strike the border of the sidebar ad and then I hear the sound effect that tells me that my triangular spaceship just got creamed by a meteorite. I'm livid."

"Wait!" This was M speaking. "You had the sound effects on this whole time? *That's* gutsy."

Cole and M were still hidden around the corner, inside the kitchen as I shuffled quietly into the living room.

"So, this shit just got personal," he continued, "like, I don't pester Kindree about my timesheet when he's invoicing some furniture store in Kennewick or filling out a bill of lading for some balsa wood futon rack. Why's he gotta fuck up my scene? 'Why are you wasting time?' he asks and, well, that's just ignorant. I tell him. I tell him real slow-like so the dullard'll get it. I tell him, look, video games aren't wastes of time. I tell Kindree that video games are windows into our post-literate future, that I'm participating in a nascent cultural dialogue—a dialogue, which *he* has shut himself off to. I tell him three words: Shlain. Goddess. Alphabet. My main man, Dr. Leonard Shlain, is a neurosurgeon and, you know, expert who believes that the future of communication is interactive, visual—a return to the type of communication that pervaded human life before written language. I offer to let Kindree borrow my copy of Shlain's *The Goddess vs. The Alphabet* but he's not having it. At this point, the phone starts ringing for the first time in, what?—close to five hours?" Tacked into the wall above the television was a group photo of the shared social circle that M and I met through: Severin, who'd worked at the climbing gym, Jillian,

who'd gone to Ballard with M. People I'd known from college had combined with her friends from growing up in the city. Even M's childhood friend Ashleigh was there—which was, at the time of the picture, particularly rare. When was the last time we'd seen any of those people?

"So, the phone's ringing—" Cole made a sound *Bring!*, which communicated the ring of a telephone. The sound was a holdover from when telephones had physical bells in them. "But now I'm fired up and I don't want to lose my train of thought. Teaching tool, I tell him. The Asteroids emulator site might not look like much, but I tell him this is the medium—*Bring! Bring!*—which will inform future executive decisions at the highest levels of government and business. This is the medium which will inform his worthless children."

M's giggle hid the clunk as I knocked over Cole's metal canteen, its fall cushioned by the soft turquoise fabric of his fanny pack. I stepped aside M's makeup case that she took with her to each freelance assignment and then unceremoniously deposited on the living room floor when she returned each evening.

"*Bring! Bring!*—so I tell Kindree about my idea for an educational video game. It won't teach them U.S. history or fundamentals of physics or entrepreneurial capitalism—it's about how to go down on a girl. It's for all those teenage boys—*Bring!*—who are at home with their Playstation instead of talking trash and screwing in the woods like normal kids. It gives them skills they can really use, maybe even need. Instead of the usual handheld controller, it's this thing you have to put in your mouth. It's like a retainer or headgear, something this demographic is all too familiar with. You have to lick the controller in certain flat-tongued patterns that correlate to the labia and the clit and so I demonstrate for him—" I stepped into the kitchen just in time to see Cole pulsating the meat of his tongue while M laughed into her hand. Then Cole looked over and acknowledged me. "Hey Brian," he said, "maybe you'd like this game." That got M roaring with laughter until she sent me a look of guilty embarrassment but even that didn't keep her from busting up again. Winded, M gasped in enough air to exhale words. "So Kindree wasn't so into the concept?"

"The call went to voicemail," he said. "It was just some bullshit job."

"You got fired?" I asked. Cole shrugged affirmatively. I looked at M leaning against the plastic laminate countertop and Cole with his arms crossed in front of the silver rim of the sink. I seemed to be the only one in the room who was disappointed.

*

Naked long-haired children crawled on all fours across a rocky slab of waterfront on Cole's wall in high school: a poster for Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy*. Headphones on, he would shout the lyrics to "Good Times, Bad Times" over the motor thrum as he mowed the lawn. Older than me, Cole indoctrinated me with his musical tastes from an early age. Not until he packed up his box of cassettes and transported them to his new room in a shared apartment near Cascadia Community College did I begin to listen with my own ears: Desmond Dekker, Dave Brubeck, Elastica. Noticing the rapport M and Cole seemed to have, it was as if Cole, the ultimate Led Zeppelin fan, had suddenly noted the odd syncopation, captivating chord changes, and cross-cultural eccentricities of Gilberto Gil's tropicália. I felt not threatened by his interest in M but strangely vindicated: for once my taste had been upheld.

Cole was unemployed following his confrontation with Kindree and then M wrapped up a billboard shoot for PEMCO insurance Saturday afternoon, which was earlier than expected, freeing up the first half of the week that followed:

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY
Cole's & my frank discussion about his finances. C offers to take on chores: clean the bathroom, mop, and launder our clothing.	M & C visit the humane society, feign interest in adopting a cat or dog so that they're permitted to pet and play with each of the various breeds.	M & C sunbathe in Marymoor Park. Watch divorce trials at the municipal courthouse. Visit the central library, laugh at nude photography books.	M works a 14-hour shift on a commercial for Cutter & Buck golf apparel. C finally gets around to the laundry. Other tasks remain incomplete.

On that Wednesday, I'd been proofing our company's responses—a combined effort between a variety of departments—to a spate of recent RFPs from the city's planning and development office and when I got home, M was still working, but Cole was sorting laundry in the living room. With his typical disregard for individuals' personal boundaries, Cole had washed all of our clothes together, including lights and colors. "Are these your tiger-striped undies?" Cole asked. I looked over puzzled. "Or at least there's one brown stripe on the inside." He turned them unpleasantly inside out then grinned at me. "How are things going with you and M?" he asked, sounding, I thought, genuinely interested.

"Oh, they're good," I said, "really good."

Cole idly moved a bra, crumpled from being tumble-dried, into M's pile. "They say 'bedroom' and 'boredom' are anagrams."

What was that supposed to mean? "Do they?" I asked. "I thought you and what's his name—your hero—didn't like the alphabet."

"No," he said with a chuckle. "That would be oversimplifying it. On the farm, Oliver and I used to play Hangman all the time." Two adult men playing Hangman for hours on end on a farm in the middle of nowhere: embarrassing, really. I'd met Oliver once. His scrawny frame was topped with his brown bangs that were balding into a cloven forelock. Cole smiled. "It was Shlain's book—*Goddess vs. The Alphabet*—that helped me to see the game's epistemological value. In Hangman the more mistakes we make about language, the more we learn about the body." I recalled my most recent view of my face. I'd been washing my hands in the bathroom after my post-work piss. I'd looked older than I'd expected—pale and thin. My cheekbones were visible but not in an attractive way. "If a player's mastery and intuition about language is perfect," Cole continued, "the body remains wholly invisible. The game teaches us that only by forgetting language can we—"

"*Wait*," I said. What had he meant by his bedroom-boredom comment?

"—see the body. Only through mistakes—"

What had M told him about our sex life?

"—can we truly understand our corporeal selves. But *complete* knowledge of the body—"

"Shut *up* for a second."

"—of the self, can only be achieved—"

"Cole, *wait*," I said.

"—through death," and, for a moment, Cole's face looked hard and stricken. The constant movement that typically animated him had moved somewhere deep inside. One of the upstairs neighbors emptied her recycling into one of the street-side cans and its clatter filtered in through the wire screen in the open window.

"Cole," I said. I just wanted him to admit it. "You're living in my apartment that I pay for. You're not working and you're trying to screw my girlfriend."

He put aside whatever internal process had been going on earlier. Cole looked totally calm for the first time since he'd arrived. He shook his head slowly back and forth. "It's sad how obsessed with sex you are. It's like the only thing you can think about."

"*I'm* obsessed with sex?" I was totally incredulous. "You're *insane*."

He spoke to me with a condescension that indicated that he—and only he—

saw the big picture. "In contemporary life, there's so little physicality: no planting bulbs in rich loamy soil, no releasing a well-aimed arrow into the chest of a doe, no nailing together two sturdy planks of just-sawn wood. The only remaining outlet for that physicality is sex and so people line up in droves to devote far too much mental space to it." My unemployed brother punctuated this with a look of unregulated pity. In my mind: Cole, forced out of my apartment, reclined on a synthetic flannel blanket surrounded by other cots in the men's homeless shelter near Harbor Island. The thought filled me with joy.

"If you like doing physical work so much—" I said.

"Late capitalism has duped *you* into an obsession with sex, seeing it in every interpersonal connection."

"—why don't you do some of it then?"

He splayed his fingers wide, waggled all ten of them at me then exaggeratedly mated a pair of my thin navy office socks together. "Doing it right now, bro," he said, lobbing the socks into my pile.

Just below the thumbtack that pins the photo of M's and my shared social circle to the wall opposite the unfolded couch, stands Ashleigh. In it, she has on a mustard-colored stretchy sweater that clings to her tits. On the lower half of her face is a smear of lip gloss that reflects the red and white neon from the Budweiser light in the bar's window. She's the only girl tall enough to stand in the back row with the boys—she's in between me and Severin—while M, Jillian, and the others crouch in the front. Taken two and a half years earlier, during a time when Ash was in constant transit to New York or Milan, her rare presence must have electrified the otherwise standard night out at the Owl N' Thistle. In the photo, M glances back at her with a mix of gratitude and fear.

After our laundry-sorting disagreement, Cole and I didn't speak much during the days that followed. Saturday I reluctantly invited him to join M, her old friend Ashleigh, and me for brunch. A new breakfast place, offering bottomless mimosa pitchers, had recently opened inside a renovated firehouse that had been closed in last year's round of budget cuts.

"If the calf comes out ass-first," Cole continued the anecdote he'd begun in line, "about half the time it either dies, kills the mom, or both." While we'd been waiting for a table, Ash had towered over M but, seated at the booth—Cole and Ash on one slab of vinyl cushioning, M and I on the opposite one—the two women

became the same height: Ash was all leg. "So I'm elbow-deep in the heifer's pussy, reaching into its uterus, trying to—" I browsed the menu, tuning out Cole.

It sounded like late-era Billy Joel on the sound system and, at a frequency below it, the bass line from banda music bled through the swinging doors from the line cooks' work station. "I saw Hector," M said, looking over at Ash. "He was set-dressing a Cinnabon billboard shoot I was working on. He wanted me to tell you hi." Ash winced. Having been unwillingly ejected from it, she wasn't pleased to hear from those still inside the industry. Ash's lack of verbal response reimmersed us in the hush of decision-making, staring at the specials chalked on the blackboard.

"How'd your date go last week?" M asked Ash.

Ash closed her menu. She was wearing a thin white shirt and black bra. Ouch. Before answering, she stared longingly at a framed photo of Ladder Crew 17 from 1978, all of them sporting Burt Reynolds mustaches and posing proudly in front of the extinguished but smoldering remains of a family home. "It was okay," she said and went into a play-by-play of several medium-grade dates and flirtations. M and I listened with rapt vicarious attention from within the confines of our relationship while Cole, wobbling the surfaces of our coffees, knuckled the song's rhythm against the table. Cole's familiarity with it cued me to the truth: It wasn't Billy Joel on the sound system, I realized. It was Led Zeppelin's "Fool in the Rain," their most Billy Joel-esque song.

"You gotta use the Laugh-and-Touch," M counseled, looking proud of her practical contribution. "It's an essential technique for twenty-first-century dating."

"Duh," Ash said, dismissively.

Ash's foot brushed against my ankle, difficult to construe as flirtation: Her perfectly sculpted legs were so long that they would inevitably graze others beneath any table.

The upper- and mid-range frequencies of the banda music became audible as the doors to the kitchen swung open, emitting a waiter holding several plates, the tallest of which was a stack of pancakes, dripping with syrup. A plate of hash browns, sunnyside-ups, and sausage appeared in front of Cole. The food reawakened Cole to the presence of others around him. "What's this *thing*?" he asked, saturating his hash browns with hot sauce. "What's this Laugh-and-Touch?"

M explained: A girl laughs at a guy's joke—forcing the laugh if necessary—then casually touches him on the knee or thigh. M offered her testimonial: "Never fails," and glanced at me meaningfully over the top of her mimosa glass. I recalled the night at the Owl N' Thistle when we'd first met and how her laughter had vali-

dated me. Uncomfortable at the thought, I refilled my glass with the pitcher's sickly yellowish liquid.

Ash's fork brought a chunk of melon from her fruit plate to her full lips. Swallowing, she interjected her disagreement on the specifics of the technique, favoring a variation known as the Laugh-Touch-and-Squeeze, in which a gentle squeeze is added to the end of the sequence. Sassy.

M shot her a skeptical look. "That's total overkill."

Noting my inherent bias as M's live-in boyfriend, M and Ash turned to Cole as an impartial judge of their respective methods. He was encouraged to continue the breech-birth calf story he'd been telling earlier as a test case while first M, then Ash, demoed their preferred approach. Cole's story was more odd than funny, but M managed to laugh then reached awkwardly under and across the table to touch Cole's thigh. Ash, sitting beside him, had an easier time of it. Agitated, I wiped orange pulp from the edges of my mouth as I emptied a fourth mimosa.

Cole glanced thoughtfully at some of the restaurant's brass fixtures. M and Ash waited expectantly for his verdict. "I think on a bad night it might take the squeeze to get my attention," he determined, siding with Ash, who appeared radiantly vindicated even beneath the somewhat geometric layer of blush she'd applied to her cheeks—its inexpert application a testament to M's profession. M polished off our third pitcher with an injured look. Until that morning, M had a monopoly on Cole's attention and flirtation. "I just felt so *alive*," Cole concluded, "I mean, there I was covered in afterbirth, holding a healthy baby cow. *Life*, man. So crazy." Ash's victory smile widened at the thought of rural masculine labor and M's eyes lit up with thwarted desire, for a child, for Cole, for both: Oh *god*, she *was* into him.

"The commune sounds twice as interesting as M and Brian's place in Wallingford," said Ash—a comment I tried not to take personally. "Why'd you leave it?" she asked.

Cole cleared his throat. "P.D. Ouspensky perfectly summarized my reasons with a story in his 1973 volume *Self and the Other.* In it, scientists receive a series of video transmissions from a distant planet." Wishing the worst for Cole, I was pleased his flirtation had deteriorated with a jerky misstep into monologue. "Even though the videos are from light years away, there's *people* in the video. Just like *you* and *me*," Cole said, bending and unbending his index finger, pointing first at himself, then Ash, then back again at a moment when Ash seemed acutely aware of the difference between the "*you*" and the "*me*" that Cole was collectively indicating.

"No," she said, "what I was trying to ask about was why—"

"At first, scientists are skeptical of the video," Cole continued. "Is it a fake? They—the scientists—double-check the coordinates of the video's transmission origins. There is no doubt. A manned expedition is planned. However, at this time—perhaps, let's say, only fifty years from now—the speed of space travel has increased only slightly from our current capacities. Eight people—four couples—are packed into a spaceship with enough food to get them there. The astronauts who sign up for the journey won't live to see their destination. Neither will their children. In fact, neither will their grandchildren's grandchildren. The module won't arrive on the planet for another ten generations so the travelers live lives of boredom, procreation, and death. Their children curse their ancestors for signing up for such a worthless existence. They are filled with doubt." Cole paused dramatically. "So, ten generations later, the ship enters the atmosphere of this distant planet and as the dust settles from the landing, the doors open and the ship's occupants are greeted by—"

I gestured for the check.

"—humans—male and female, fleshy, brown and pink people: *humans*, blessed, wonderful humans, who are *very* eager to meet their visitors. *But* the occupants of the ship have changed. They are not like us. Ten generations later, the descendants of the original travelers are intensely inbred: web-toed with double-jointed limbs and a mono-nostril like serious cokeheads have. They have become something different." He then concluded thoughtfully and a little sadly, "The journey always changes us."

Ash stared blankly at him. "I don't get it. So why'd you leave the farm?"

Cole nervously looked down at his yolk-smeared plate until the waiter removed it from him and he was forced to again look at his perplexed questioner. "I just wanted some more—what the fuck do you call that shit?" He paused. It came to him. "—*quality time*—with my brother."

Ash peered at the bill and I obscured her view with a debit card. As long as I was paying for Cole and M, I may as well cover hers as well.

Buzzed, we piled into my car. Leaning against the divide between front and back seats, Ash's flat-champagne breath gave me directions to drop her off at her parents' house. Beside Ash in the backseat, M clutched her enlarged post-brunch stomach as it strained against her Herchcovitch t-shirt with its printed image of Mickey Mouse with one of his eyeballs gouged out, dangling down, and a pointed tongue extending from Mickey's grinning mouth to lick it.

M groaned, "Oh my God, my food baby is *totally* going to have fetal alcohol syndrome."

Ash gave a masculine chuckle and then, delighted by her friend's reaction to the joke, M laughed the realest and most robust version of her laugh—a laugh I always thought of as The Jammed Pistol: M's mouth opened wide—but silently—and then, a moment later, a loud throaty *HA!* shot out—and, at that, the two women folded in toward each other from the waist up, anchored only by their seatbelts, collapsing into a pile with a laughter far more intense than had been deployed for the purpose of male attention. This was a laughter that gave men unease instead of affirmation; almost unconsciously, I ran my tongue across the surface of my teeth in search of leftover breakfast spinach blotting out an incisor. Their laughter was full of terrifying beauty and a feeling of profound ignorance washed over me. When we reached Ash's parents' place, the giggling of the two women was just beginning to wind down and the two had to separate.

About a month before Cole had called to say he needed to leave the cooperative farm, M and I'd dozed off after she'd experienced a manually stimulated double orgasm listening to NWA's *Straight Outta Compton* while my penis, stoic, had remained unhard listening to The Police's *Ghost in the Machine*. In the dream that followed, an unseen hand filmed me fucking two girls at once in two different time signatures: a curvy redhead in 4/4 and a slender blonde in 6/4. In the dream, I or—to give credit where credit is due, we—created a polyrhythm. Awakened by my moistened underwear, my rationalism disassembled the fantasy. Was it possible to fuck in 6/4? To fuck two girls at once required two dicks and two pelvises, not at all how it was in the dream. To actually create a film festival-quality porn video revolving around polyrhythms would necessitate two couples working in tandem: another guy fucking the second girl right beside me. Sleepless, I was unable to determine whether that idea was hot or creepy until I recalled that in *Hammer of the Gods,* author Stephen Davis claims that, during the 1975 U.S. tour, John Bonham was always putting the band up to doing shit like that when they fucked groupies.

Back at M's and my apartment, post-brunch, M, coming down from the champagne, slunk off to the shower. Cole was stooped over, blocking the narrow path around his mattress, gaping at the low-hung photo of Ash posed with the rest of our social circle. Parched from salted potatoes I'd washed down with hot brown and cold yellow diuretics, I opened my mouth and felt the sticky gel between its roof and my tongue. Cole was obstructing my route to a cold glass of water. "Thanks for introducing me to Ash," Cole said. "She seems great."

I scanned my brother's hunched form and felt a certain kind of pity for him. Given breakfast's flirtation, Ash's penchant for troubled souls and her stated dissatisfaction with the current overview of her dating life, I opted to take an encouraging tack. "Who knows?" I said, sensing the onset of a dehydration headache. "You might have a chance with her."

Cole perked up with something like confidence, abruptly upright and facing me. "Oh yeah?" he said. "She's easy, huh? A real town bicycle," implying the slur's continuation: everyone's had a ride on her. It seems illustrative that Cole perceived any woman who would be attracted to him as, to use a problematic term, a "slut." I shot him a look that I hoped communicated: crass-adolescent-inaccurate.

He pivoted to the defensive. "Oh, *come* on," he said, wheedling. "Do you have a problem with that term? I mean, it's *so* Norman Rockwell." I struggled to recall a *Saturday Evening Post* cover image in which Brylcreem-haired police officers, gap-toothed Eagle Scouts, yellow-rain-gear-clad fishermen, and clean-cut freshly returned naval midshipmen upbraid a wayward—i.e. sexually empowered—girl. "Think about it: *town bicycle*." Cole said. "The term is an artifact of nostalgic fantasy. Even deep in the Eisenhower-era Midwest, was there ever a township trustful enough that everyone—from the malt shop clerk to the postman—shared a single Sears-and-Roebuck three-speed?"

In an expansive gesture, Cole extended his arms on either side, taking up even more of the area I needed to pass through. I pictured the rushing water of the sink. "It's heartwarming," he smirked. "Just the thought of it makes me want to set that girl Ash atop the handlebars of that small trusting bicycle, pedal down Main Street, showing her the sights—the steady spiral of the barber pole, the sweatily confounded local dog catcher—then bring her back to my modest but well maintained apartment, just upstairs from the five and dime, and fuck the ever-living shit out of her."

I chuckled hoarsely at the impossibility of that apartment being well-maintained. "Do you need me to co-sign for that apartment," I asked, crouching to pick up one of his dirty undershirts from the floor and tossing it on top of his mattress, where he might be more aware of it, "or have you, um, thought about getting a job so you'll be able to pay rent on your quaint little middle-American fuck-pad?"

"I *get* it," Cole said, indignant, and, as he swiveled away from me and stormed into the kitchen, alleged over his shoulder, "*You'd* like *me* to get a job." Following after him, my foot sent a stray tube of chapstick that he'd left on the living room floor scudding into the kitchen, where—horizontal—it spun clockwise in the

center of the tile floor. Seeing that I had followed him, he did something similar: As if to mimic the chapstick, Cole rotated in the center of the room looking for where to go next in order to avoid me. M's shower hissed through the bathroom's closed door. Cole glanced anxiously, first at it, then, less optimistically, at the open window. Short of jumping out the window and falling two stories or barging into the bathroom and enlisting naked wet M in his defense, it seemed he was stuck sharing space with me. The chapstick's rotation slowed until it came to rest, its lid pointing toward him. "I don't know how you can care about that shit—" he said, leaning against the short section of the L-shaped kitchen counter, "—careers, marble countertops, moving up in the company, sealing contracts."

"Marble countertops?" I rasped in disbelief through my dry throat, looking at the sticky wood laminate surface Cole was propped against. He was blocking the cupboard with the drinking glasses in it.

"You know why I don't care about that shit?" Cole went on. "Because it *doesn't* matter. Because that *shit* doesn't matter. Melting polar ice caps, irradiated war zones—"

"Cole—" My voice was coming only from my throat. "Why'd you leave the farm?"

Cole smiled patiently. "In P.D. Ouspensky's 1968 treatise on community—"

"No," I said. His evasive answers hid something. "*You*. Not P.D. Ouspensky. Not Leonard Shlain. Not the guy with his dick in the river. You. Let me rephrase my question: Why did *they* kick *you* out?" He'd never told me that was what had happened but instinctively I knew it was true.

His mouth opened then closed then opened again. I'd once had a goldfish that used to make the same gesture. Cole had scooped it out of its tank and pressed it against the nodes of a 9-volt. "Why would anyone trust me?" Cole asked and let it hang there. He had a point. "I planned a hike." *A hike?* It seemed a lesser sin than I'd expected. "It was going to be a real paradigm-melter. No trail. No compass. As P.D. Ouspensky says—"

My eye roll and exasperated hand flick asked if this was relevant. Cole nodded that it was.

"P.D. Ouspensky says, 'When trapped in the prison of heaven, we can only escape by following our own darkest aspects'." He ruminated on it but winced at the arrival of an unpleasant thought and so continued his own story to distract himself from it. "The plan for the hike was this: Oliver and I would begin at dawn and trek

in whichever direction our shadows pointed and keep doing this for the entire day. As the sun rose, our shadows pointed west, leading us to trample our rows of mustard greens, which we'd been tending since we planted them in late July. After that, the shadows of our heads touched the base of the tool shed and we knew we had to climb it. Loose shingles rained down as Oliver and I spilled over the other side."

Meanly amused at the idiocy of it, I jetted air through my nostrils. Through the bathroom door, I heard the clatter of a dropped shampoo bottle and remembered the first time M and I showered together: Her curled fingers—in a gesture that recalled a harpist—had combed through her eternally wet-looking hair, momentarily truly wet, while I shower-gelled the undersides of her breasts.

"Then, hopping the neighbor's barbed wire," Cole continued. "I snagged the crotch of my pants and tore a hole. We forded a trash-filled ravine and an eight-lane highway." I pictured them: Cole's turquoise fanny-pack practically Heimliching him, the forked tongue of Oliver's bangs lapping his forehead. "By noon, our shadows had shrunk until they hid beneath us and we stopped for lunch. The idea was that as the sun passed its midpoint our shadows would reverse direction and point us back home, but instead, during what was supposed to be our return, the landscape was entirely unfamiliar: a dry lake bed and a radio tower jutting up from a flat field of grass. As the sun sank low, I realized our mistake: late fall, northern hemisphere. The sun had pointed us first west, then east, but because of its angle at that time of year, it had been sending us somewhat north the entire time as well.

"Oliver was leading as it grew dark," Cole said, hesitating. Standing there in my kitchen, Cole wanted to turn back. He didn't want that story to be about him anymore.

"And?" I asked. I wanted him to continue forward. "What happened next?" My throat was so dry it hurt to speak.

"No, I remember I was in front. I know it because Oliver groaned and told me my fanny pack was glowing. I'd brought a flashlight with us. We'd tested the batteries at the start of the trip. I must have forgotten to turn it off. We hadn't noticed while the sun was up but the flashlight had been on all day inside the bag. The batteries were almost gone and we were totally lost. Oliver was furious. He took it with him and stomped off into the tall grasses to take a piss." Cole lifted his hand from where it cupped his face and lightly hit himself on the side of his forehead with the butt of his palm. "Then I heard him yell.

"The flashlight was lying beside him—a little dim light on the grass—and

I could see Oliver sprawled on the ground, blood all over his penis. A snake had bitten him on the head of his dick and he'd peed all over himself. Oliver's dick had always been smaller than mine—you just know these things after three years on a communal farm—but suddenly it was girthier. It was like watching a fruit ripen before my eyes and then rot. It swelled up until the skin couldn't stretch anymore—even that most elastic piece of skin has its limits—and it began to turn first red, then purple. The two points where the fangs had pierced the skin were stretched open as it expanded, changing from dots into oblong gashes. He begged me to suck the poison out but, by that time, it had grown so large that I wasn't sure if I could fit it in my mouth. I didn't help him. Didn't know how. But I didn't leave him. With only one flashlight, I worried if I left I wouldn't be able to find him again. By the time its beam went out, Oliver wasn't moving."

Cole's head slumped forward and his hands formed two little fists on either side of his groin, just below the bend in him caused by leaning against the countertop. "Oliver trusted me. I can't think of anyone else who trusts me."

Was Cole asking me to contradict him? Was I supposed to say, *Me. Me, Cole. I trust you*, through my parched throat even though I'd heard the story he'd just told, even though to all appearances he seemed to be trying to father my girlfriend's much-desired child.

Instead of addressing me directly, Cole said the rest of this to the dried slick of vegetable oil spilled on the northeast section of the linoleum floor. "In the morning as the sky grew light," Cole said, "I saw we'd been less than a mile from the farm." I heard M shut off the shower. "Oliver hadn't talked to his family in years. The police contacted them. Chiara, Mateo, and the other residents went to the service. I didn't think I'd be welcomed. I felt guilty. I acted guilty. I guess it was effective. The others soon agreed: I *was* guilty. I had caused his death. His mistake was to trust me. I isolated myself. I should have been at the household meeting—it was about how to memorialize Oliver—but instead I sulked in my room. By the end of it, they'd reached a consensus that the best way to honor him was to ask me to move out. And the worst part is they were probably right. I lost my closest friend but, more than that, I lost my community—my family, really."

I wondered, not for the first time, why Cole's actual family—our family—had never been enough for him. His eyes were red, his cheeks slack. To me, Cole's self-hate was just another performance of his self-absorption, a way to get out of the blame. I felt like I should reach over and comfort him but I wasn't at all sure that I

actually wanted to. I couldn't help but remember all the times I'd felt the thinness of his loyalty and it seemed I wasn't the only one who'd felt it. I thought of all the times he'd undercut my dignity when he'd had something to gain from it.

The bathroom door clicked open. Vapor particles in the air wafted behind her as she stepped into the kitchen. M's left elbow secured the towel she'd wrapped around her. She looked pink and vital. Hot water had brought the blood to the surface of her skin. I don't think M had heard Cole's story. She took a look at him. Her right hand lifted to cover her mouth, slightly open in surprise and compassion, and the taper of her fingers combined with the bend of her wrist to form a diamond over that dark open space. Cole was obviously upset. She put a reassuring hand on his shoulder and, seeing her touch him, I felt how badly every part of me wanted her. *My brother is a cock bitch junkie. My brother is a child of God.*

Contributors

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