

gulf coast

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS



gULF COAST

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 22, ISSUE 2

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The Second Annual
Donald Barthelme Prize
for Short Prose, 2009
Judged by Mary Robison

WINNER:

Matthew Yeager's "Property of Alvin Flower"

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

Tracy Guzeman's "Einstein"
Joseph Holt's "Your Nightmare"

For more information about this year's contest (deadline: August 31), including entry guidelines and judges, stay tuned to www.gulfcoastmag.org/contests.

Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!

1. It all began with the milk.
2. The milk belonged to my lover, Mr. Horowitz.
3. For a long time something beautiful was going to happen.
4. But this was not the beautiful thing.
5. Had the milk landed on my nose as my lover, Mr. Horowitz, swears he had intended we would've had a judderous laugh about it.
6. But Mr. Horowitz fucked up.
7. Just yesterday I accompanied my lover, Mr. Horowitz, to the forest.
8. How could he have forgotten so quickly?
9. I think there were thieves.
10. My lover, Mr. Horowitz, dipped his thumb and forefinger into his cereal bowl and flicked the milk (that once belonged to him) at me.
11. In the forest I was frightened.
12. In the forest there were thieves.
13. In the forest my lover, Mr. Horowitz, showed off his wilderness skills by reciting *Waiting for Godot*.
14. "Excuse me, Mister. The bones. You won't be needing the bones?"
15. But I did need the bones.
16. The milk landed not on my nose but on my newly bought, barely worn dream rush chemise.
17. My mother warned me without the bones no one, not even Mr. Horowitz, my lover, who loved me one hundred times a day would ever love me.
18. Could ever love me.
19. I needed the bones, but I could not admit to needing the bones.
20. The economy was failing and my dream rush chemise was ruined.
21. Forever?

22. Possibly forever.
23. Mr. Horowitz, my lover, was *just joking around*.
24. We were unemployed.
25. I heard a thud.
26. "Did you hear a thud?"
27. "It's your mother!" cheered my lover, Mr. Horowitz.
28. "She has come with the bones?"
29. "She has come to save us from our economic woes?"
30. "Very funny."
31. In literature a character's "fatal flaw" requires she take a metaphorical or literal plummet.
32. "Don't just do something," said my mother, "stand there!"
33. So I stood there.
34. A long time ago I wrote a book.
35. The main character's name was Beatrice.
36. Shortly after my mother had a baby and named her Beatrice.
37. Then she had another.
38. She named that baby Beatrice, too.
39. Then she had another.
40. She named that baby Beatrice, too.
41. Mr. Horowitz, my lover, is named Mr. Horowitz because you cannot name a baby Mr. Horowitz.
42. But I did need the bones.
43. My mother took the bones away while I just stood there in my ruined chemise.
44. Would never love me.
45. Could never love me.
46. This was not the beautiful thing.
47. I was groggy with milk, which is another way of saying I was ashamed at my inability to start yelling.
48. At my mother.
49. For taking the bones.

50. At Mr. Horowitz.
51. For flicking the milk.
52. At all the Beatrices.
53. For not being the real Beatrice, although my mother claimed each of them to be.
54. At my mother.
55. For claiming each of them to be.
56. The real Beatrice lives in the book I wrote a long time ago.
57. The real Beatrice is terrified of nests, and string, and cashews, and Poland, and carousels for good reason.
58. There are stains that happen suddenly, and can never be washed out.
59. "And if they could?"
60. "We would be saved."
61. "For god's sake," said my mother, "Mr. Horowitz, your lover, was *just joking around.*"
62. Speaking of jokes, let me tell you a joke I once heard at a funeral.
63. His wife had died young and he told the joke at the funeral because she loved the joke, every day she loved the joke, and now he had to live a life he couldn't bear to live without her so he told the joke.
64. "What's red, hangs from a wall, and whistles?"
65. "What?"
66. "A herring."
67. "A herring? But a herring isn't red."
68. "All right! So you paint the herring red!"
69. "But a herring doesn't hang from a wall."
70. "All right! So you take a hammer and you nail the herring to the wall!"
71. "But a herring doesn't whistle."
72. "All right! So it doesn't whistle!"
73. "I don't get it."
74. "And if we dropped him?" (*Pause*) "If we dropped him?"
75. "He'd punish us." (*Silence. He looks at the tree.*)
76. Just yesterday I accompanied my lover, Mr. Horowitz, to the forest.

77. Would never love me.
78. Could never love me.
79. In the forest there were trees.
80. "I thought you said thieves," said the Beatrices.
81. The economy was failing.
82. We were unemployed.
83. "Unemployed people, Mr. Horowitz," said my mother, "should not be flicking milk."
84. They started kissing.
85. "Who?" asked Mr. Horowitz. "Who started kissing?"
86. "You and my mother."
87. "All right!" said my mother. "So we started kissing!"
88. "I don't get it," said Mr. Horowitz.
89. "Don't just do something," said the Beatrices, "stand there!"
90. So I stood there in my ruined chemise while my lover, Mr. Horowitz, and my mother kissed and kissed and kissed.
91. "You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow you never saw me."
92. "Of course not," said the real Beatrice.
93. There are stains that happen suddenly, and can never be washed out.
94. For a long time something beautiful was going to happen.
95. But this was not the beautiful thing.
96. This was the beautiful thing.
97. "I saw you," said the real Beatrice.
98. The herring started to whistle.
99. "You saw me?"
100. "I saw you."

Arcadian

I could not stop my hands clapping. I clapped
And clapped. I clapped as in the dirt the bird collapsed,
As worms grew wings, I clapped.

A man stood in a river balancing
A grape on his lips. His tears fell in the current
Swept them away. He kept performing

His trick: grape hovering over the hole
Of his open mouth and never dropping in.
I clapped and I could not stop

My hands from wanting to cover my mouth
But they would not. They clapped
And I listened to them clap—a noise

That if there were woods would echo in
The woods. But there were no woods
I could see. Only a man. Twigs in his hair.

Bent over the water where the water stood
Most still. *A tree fell in the woods—*
He kept speaking to his own face—

*Is true if and only if a tree fell in the
Woods is true if and only if—*
He kept speaking to his face in the water

As I clapped, applauding the logic
That needed no belief. Like the shadows
Of bird's wings, the shadows of my hands

On the ground. If there were birds
I could believe in
the birds so I let myself look up.

One bird kept exploding in the sky.
One flower kept dying. *Isn't it happy?* a child asked,
Everything eating the sun? Isn't it

Happy? Isn't it—she asked, laying down
On her back in the grass—*happy?*
Everything eating the sun? Isn't it—

Survey

Another wind OD'd on distance.
The day sat vacant. We lived where the land
never did meet the sky, and what we wanted was limit.
You fed me tinned peas and I set out
to divine a rim. Daughter with a willowy switch.
Paper cup, hubcap, soup can. Facts and their disaster.
I grew unequal to the mapping:
What is a creek where
no thought stirs the chicory,
takes a dead miner's axe
to the lupine-bright gully?
Hum-de-bum, Mother: our home is scattered.
You scan the open pasture for a seed to pocket,
some green stain in the arid sea.
I'm on the transistor,
working the frequencies,
and you are patient fingers, trying every stem.
Certain bright hoverers pierce you
but my tongue strikes the roof of my mouth. Dry.
Like a coin spinning in my stomach
when I saw that locust nesting in your ear.
We found another bedding in a dead wife's diary:
Today I died by wild iris, facedown in a cistern.
Tomorrow I'll drub my sheets with a hymnal. Beat. Beat. Beat.
She sinks through the soil with her pulped, larval heart.
How's this for dowry? No petal, no pearl.
Just a fissure licked by moonlight.
A derelict sequence of bodies' borrowed radiance.

You said *Come, little soldier, let's sound another span.*
So we stitched a soft wing from air's thinnest parts.
To teach it a liquid patience, we salted it with our own spit,
then lay it to dry with the laundry.
Wind bore it away, tore strand from wedded strand,
left each to mother itself
in a fine sift of dust. Then it died.

My Yellowstone

I fall as if I were in the mountains
but I am not. The backdrop is, yes, inherent

flatness, glassy, layers of glassy, a sweep

of translucence adorning the metropolitan.
I miss breathing. I miss facsimile

when this city mirrors something symbolically.

Because the public is as strange as the private

is magnificent, I keep a supply of spare
resemblances: this is like that, in progressive

free fall. Sewer is geyser. Luminous is

the reappearance of the luminous, even

from an artificial cave in concrete. Wilder
miracles have had a weaker causal sequence.

Whether I see this sweep though delusion's cataracts

or whether I see cataracts depends

on the season of my vision
and a single-minded topography of glass shelves

for water to fall down. A lit screen

is the tame pool in which I miss the catalytic.

I miss the caldera that makes water as explicit
as a pulsing animal whose skin slides around

its breakable body like beads. To behold a breathing

circuit, incandescent, is to hold the animal I don't know

how to release. I pray to the glassmaker, *Glassmaker*,
divulge. Something molten dares me to be its author.

Speculatrix at the Mountaintop Observatory

I rehearse my rangy faith
in prospects
lying face down,
chin rocking on the lawn
& corner-eyeing the night.
From this vantage
the junegrass spikelets
serrate the sky as if
incision were the next
transaction & heavenspill
the next. The observatory
slathered in glue then silver
glitter. Carried away
by heretic astronomy,
my looking atomizes & flings
farther. The neglected
telescope rattles its moonfaced
lenses. Loves, the pathos
of the fixed point
is a derivative based on return
but I would rather fall
again. I would rather
a ceiling strung with pinfire,
caving in. The asthmatic
engine of wonder still turns
me over. I spin.

Pleiades

Anjali Sachdeva

Del

My parents were geneticists. They had a firm belief in the power of science to fix everything, to create everything. This belief was their religion, and they liked to proselytize as much as any born-again Christians. When they decided to have children they saw the opportunity to share their faith in science with the world. They wanted to make miracle babies so unbelievable that people would stop and stare, their own organic equivalent of a billboard for Jesus. Their original idea was to develop an *in vitro* procedure that would create identical twins. But they decided twins weren't spectacular enough, not enough of a challenge. They settled on septuplets. One fertilized egg split into seven pieces made seven sisters, all of us identical. Pleiades, my father used to call us, after the constellation of seven stars.

All the major networks were shooting footage at the hospital the day we were born. Protestors traveled from around the country to Los Angeles so they could picket outside, with signs that said "Seven Deadly Sins" and "Frankenstein's Children." Even the doctors who delivered us expected us to come out with birth defects; half a dozen neonatal specialists were standing by. But they weren't needed. We were small—about two pounds each—but other than that, my mother says, we were perfect. Our lungs, our hearts, our brain activity were measured and found to be normal. We all had a wisp of dark hair at the front of our foreheads, and eyes that would turn from blue to brown. My parents didn't want rhyming names or alliterative names but they liked to show off their knowledge of Greek, and so we were Leda, Io, Zoe, Helen, Cassandra, Vesta, and me, Adelpa (called Del).

My mother and father, in the magazine photographs, glow with a mixture of parental pride and professional elation. Without scientific interference identical twins account for one in every two hundred and fifty live births, identical triplets one in two million, fraternal septuplets one in every four million, and my sisters

and I just couldn't exist. But science made us and there we were, pink-skinned and button-nosed, each swaddled in our own colored blanket—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, purple—a wriggling, blinking rainbow.

The tabloids ran headlines like “Forced Septuplets Really Alien Babies!” and “Test Tube Septs Share One Brain!” After our first birthday the publicity died down, although reporters came around now and then hoping to do follow-up stories. In the scientific community our celebrity never waned. Throughout our childhood we took trips to visit scientists whom our parents referred to as our aunts and uncles. These people smiled at us and sometimes gave us hugs like real relatives, but they also liked to look at our skin cells under microscopes, or watch us play together through two-way mirrors. My mother and father ran experiments, too, and by the time we were six we thought no more of giving a blood sample than we did of making our beds, picking up our toys, or any other chore.

Our parents never told us which of us was born first because they thought it would affect our psychology. We reached the age of eleven considering each other separate in body but not in anything else. I have heard that twins, even identical twins with a particularly close relationship, like to emphasize that they are still individuals, but we did not. There's an old home video of us on the beach, eight or nine years old and wearing matching gold-spangled swimsuits. We move across the sand like a flock of birds in flight, wheeling with each others' movements, each head turned only a fraction of a second before the next so that it's impossible to say where one motion ends and another begins.

Perhaps it was the circumstances of our creation. Perhaps we were not truly separate people but parts of a whole, as a thicket of aspen trees all grow from the same network of roots. And even now maybe it is no different.

“You were so easy, really,” my mother said to me a few years ago in tearful nostalgia. “You all liked peas, you all hated carrots. No one would use the pink crayons.”

Who knows what would have happened if we had reached high school together, been forced to deal with romances and social intrigues and the possibility of attending different colleges. Perhaps we would have simply refused to be parted, clung together like a ball of ladybugs in winter. Or maybe we would have adjusted, moved apart and away from each other. But I doubt it.

We were eleven years old, doing a jigsaw puzzle on the living room floor of our beach house in Santa Cruz. Vesta set a corner piece in its place, put her hand to the side of her head and said she had a headache. We all looked at her and groaned; headaches had a way of catching between us, even though our mother tried to tell us that was impossible. A few minutes later Vesta shook her head and complained again, and then she fainted, we thought. But we had a horrible clenched feeling in our stomachs. Leda put her hands on Vesta's cheeks and Vesta didn't even flinch. We all went screaming for my mother.

At the hospital they said my sister had had a brain aneurysm, that she was dead. We wanted to argue but we knew it was true. We could feel it. That night we all slept piled on the floor of our bedroom, holding on to each other's wrists and calves and hair, terrified of losing one another. For months after that we felt sick, but we thought it was just sadness. We didn't know yet that for us there was no such thing as *just* sadness, that our grief had a life of its own, an invisible mouth like a black hole that drew us inexorably closer.

We were twelve when Leda got pneumonia. She never recovered. The doctors put her on every antibiotic they had, but she was dead in three weeks. Again my sisters and I felt that same tautness in our bodies, that surge of poison in our veins, but we kept quiet about it. We didn't need to discuss it with each other, and our parents didn't understand anything. They were depressed, guilty, frantic for the solution they felt sure must be out there just beyond their reach, but that didn't touch what we felt. We were all thinking, without ever saying so, that one death might be a freak accident but two was not. That we were all going to die.

Reporters followed us everywhere. There were internet betting pools about which of us would die next. We started exercising, eating organic food, taking vitamins as if that was going to help. Another year went by and we lost Io. Anti-genetics protestors swarmed her funeral, glowing with self-righteousness. One woman carried a sign that said "Science Giveth and The Lord Taketh Away." She wore a lime green sundress and stared at us through the wrought-iron fence of the churchyard during the entire service, never making a sound.

The remaining four of us began developing bruises in places we couldn't remember bumping. We were flown to specialists around the country, circulatory doctors, immunologists, gene therapists; we gave countless samples of blood and urine and tissue, were prodded and analyzed without receiving any conclusive results. They thought we had a new form of AIDS, or had somehow developed hemophilia, but none of the tests supported these theories.

Eventually our parents moved us to New York City so they could set up camp at Mount Sinai Hospital and put all their energy into trying to cure us. They weren't medical doctors and didn't really belong there, but I believe there was a bargain struck, something to do with donating our coveted tissue samples, the kind of utterly calculated and logical deal I didn't want to know too much about. I've always believed that the move had as much to do with getting away from their colleagues in California as it did with saving us; my parents were not so gracious in their defeat as they had been in their glory.

When Zoe got sick the rest of us began to consider desperate solutions. The three deaths we had suffered through were horribly painful, to be sure, but in a way the most difficult, the most shocking and surprising and worst thing was finding ourselves still alive the next day. We felt mocked, being forced to face, time and again, this brutal proof of our distinctness. We decided to bring it to a neat end, for all of us, if Zoe didn't improve.

By then we were sixteen, old enough to be crafty, to filch chemicals from our parents' lab that were sure to be fatal, keep them in little vials in our pockets as we stood around the hospital bed. But at the crucial moment—heart monitor flatlining, alarms sounding, frantic nurses attempting resuscitation—we failed to act. Not one of us so much as moved a hand toward the poison. We still wanted to live, in spite of it all.

The next time, we didn't consider the plan again. We just sat silently by Cassie's bedside, kissed her tears, and watched her go. Then it was me and Helen, and we were terrified and sick all the time. We kept wondering which one of us would die next, wondering whether it was worse to be dead or alive and alone.

We dreamed about the others. Sitting down to dinner or choosing our clothes for the day, we sometimes hesitated, waiting for them without realizing

what we were doing. Their breath filled the room, their fingertips were on our skin. Helen and I began to feel stretched, overfilled, oversensitive to everything. Loud noises frightened us beyond reason. The sound of our parents yelling or crying, both of which they did frequently, made us dizzy.

Helen started having trouble breathing. We were eighteen and it would have been the year of our high school graduation, but we'd long since quit school. For the next five years she was battered by a drawn-out illness, waves of health and sickness lifting her up and throwing her down again. My parents whisked in and out of our house like ghosts in their fluttering white lab coats, going back and forth to the hospital to examine cultures under the microscope, visit Helen, or meet with another doctor promising a cure. By then I could have told them exactly what was wrong: the emotion and sensation of seven people condensed into two bodies was too much for the bodies to bear. But that was an explanation that wouldn't satisfy the rigors of science, so I knew it wouldn't satisfy them. There was nothing they could do about it anyway.

Helen kept saying to me, "What will we do?" Her skin looked like it had shrunk, tight and shiny across her bones. There was nothing to say because we both knew the answer: "We" would not do anything. She would die, and I would stand in the damp grass of the cemetery with no one to squeeze my hand at the graveside. My parents were around of course, but I'd grown up without having to speak my mind, and I never knew what to say to them. Besides, I was finding them increasingly hard to love. I kept thinking about that protestor at the churchyard, years ago now, and an idea began tormenting me: Maybe there was only meant to be one of us. Maybe all that splitting had been a bad idea. I missed my sisters, but it was more than that. I could feel enough for seven people, as if my sisters wanted me to live for them. I wondered if Nature, once she had pared us down to one body, would let me survive, or if it would just be worse for me in the end.

My parents were desperate by now. They began planning ways to cure me, clone me, freeze me if I died, plotting it in their bedroom at night, never thinking I might be listening from the hallway. Despite their collusion they hated each other. They both wanted me to love them, to forgive them for whatever mistake

in their calculations had brought this on us, to forgive them on behalf of my sisters, too. Surely I could. Surely I was all of us in one.

But I couldn't, or maybe I just didn't want to. I felt my sisters in me and around me and I knew that whatever pain awaited me, letting my parents decide my fate was the worst choice I could make.

"Go," said Helen. "Maybe you can outrun it. If one of us is left, that's enough."

Rob

A car comes down the road, an old blue hatchback covered in dust, and it slows down just when I've decided it's not going to stop. To my mind that always tells you the driver is struggling with himself, should he pick you up or shouldn't he.

I'm pretty good at choosing cars by now; I can almost tell by the way they roll down the window whether to trust the driver or not. But when I bend down to look inside it seems to me I judged wrong this time. The girl behind the wheel looks like a zombie, skin falling off her, patches of hair missing. She could be twenty, thirty, I don't know; she's so messed up it's hard to tell.

"Where are you going?" she says.

"L.A."

"I'll be passing near there."

It's something about the way she looks at me, not threatening but not afraid, that makes me get in. Besides, it's not often you find a ride that'll take you through ten states, and I'm in no position to be picky.

Two hours down the road we blow a tire and the spare's no good. We wait for a tow truck, eat supper at a diner in town while the tire gets patched. I order chicken fried steak and she eats a fruit salad. She saves all the grapes for last and slides each one over her tongue like a marble. "I can taste the sunshine," she says.

When she opens her wallet to pay the waitress it's stuffed thick with cash. She plucks off a hundred dollar bill to pay a twelve dollar tab, and there's another hundred underneath. It's enough to tempt even an honest man.

"You always carry money like that?" I say. "It's not safe."

She smiles a little, her lips full of cracks like old rubber ready to split. "Neither is picking up hitchhikers, but that didn't seem to bother you."

"Still."

She waves a hand at her blistered face. "Look at this," she says. "I'm past the point where I worry about something bad happening to me."

We pick up the car but it's late to be starting out, so we get a motel room for the night, two beds, cable TV. She falls asleep right away, and her breathing gets so quiet I worry a couple of times that she's dead, and lean over her bed to check. In the middle of the night, though, she begins to moan. She's still asleep, her eyes skittering back and forth underneath the lids, tears slipping between the lashes. I turn the bedside lamp on but it doesn't wake her, and I'm afraid to touch her now. I sit on my bed with my hands in my pockets, edge of the headboard cutting into the back of my neck along the sunburn, wondering how long is the walk to the next bit of civilization. Wondering whether you can really leave a girl to die alone in a motel room, or what do you do if you stay.

She wakes up just after sunrise looking worse than ever, which I wouldn't have thought was possible. She sits on the edge of the bed with her face in her hands.

"I don't know if I can do this by myself," she says.

"Let me drive for a while," I say.

When we get on the road we talk a little, but I can tell she doesn't like conversation much. She starts peeling the dead skin off her arms, piece by piece like she's stripping wallpaper, absent-minded the way that some people chew their fingernails.

"Stop that," I say, and she looks up and kind of smiles, sheepish, and folds her hands in her lap. "What's wrong with you, anyhow?"

"I'm sick," she says, like that's all there is to it. "Don't worry, you can't catch it."

"Does it hurt?"

"Usually."

"Don't you have a doctor or something?"

"Dozens of them," she says.

I look her up and down. "Well I guess they aren't worth a damn, are they?"

We both laugh. She looks different when she laughs, like there's a

brightness spreading through her face, like the sound fills her whole self and not just her mouth.

"You should have flown, though. It would've been easier on you."

"It wouldn't," she says. "It makes me vomit these days. Besides, this was a last-minute decision, and now I get to see what's between New York and California."

"I guess I don't like flying much myself. What are you aiming to do when you get there?"

"Go to the beach," she says, as if she was just another sand bunny in a string bikini, a bored college girl on spring break with nothing else to do.

We drive and talk about the music on the radio, movies, the weather. She sleeps a lot, her head resting against the window, hands balled together in her lap, a pained look on her face the whole time. I wonder if her body hurts even in her sleep, if she's healthy or ravaged in her dreams.

Partway through Illinois we hit a nasty snarl of traffic, somebody sure enough dead up ahead judging by the number of cop cars and ambulances that go screaming past us along the berm. We're near an exit, though, so we escape after a few minutes, get ourselves onto 66 and stop for lunch at a roadside burger joint, one of those chains that used to cover the country but now only exist in a few God-forsaken outposts. They have a picnic table to the side, wood gone grey and full of splinters, on a patch of dead scrub grass and hard-packed red clay. We take our food out there. Del licks the salt off her fries but doesn't eat them, just watches me with my hamburger.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't eat meat anymore," she says.

"Maybe that's your problem."

She shakes her head, chews on the end of one fry while she stares at the ground between her feet.

"You can have these," she says, pushing the paper sleeve of french fries at me. She gets down on the ground and starts scratching at the dirt with her fingernails, and at first I think she's looking for something but then I see she's just making a pile of red dust. She scrapes some more, picks up a stone to do a better job, working with all her strength.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Instead of answering she takes her waxed paper cup from the table, dumps half the soda out of it and scoops the dirt in. She sits down again and I watch her stir the whole mess together with her straw until it's like pudding, and then she starts spooning that slop into her mouth.

“Stop it or you're gonna be sick for sure,” I say, but she keeps going. I grab her arm and let it go again. Her skin is too hot. Her bones feel like they could crumble in my hand. The more time I spend with her the clearer it is to me that she should die, that dying would be good for her. When she can't eat any more she wipes her mouth on her sleeve and leans her elbows on the table.

“Sometimes I feel like I'm just going to fly apart. Like nothing in me is solid,” she says. “Who's to say what fixes that?”

I throw the rest of my food away and help her back to the car, but I drive too slow, still picturing her in the hard prairie light with a mouthful of mud.

Del spins the radio dial, finds a rock song with a heavy bassline, and she taps her fingers on her thigh in time. Her eyes tick around in her face like they're trying to see everything at once, until she closes them. She rests the back of her hand on my knee and I can feel the heat right through my jeans. Her palm is unnaturally smooth, without the normal lines that hands always have, and I wonder if it's hard for her to hold things, if they slip off that skin like it was vinyl. Looking at her makes it hard to think. Death is in her and through her and all around her but she moves and breathes regardless.

By eight o'clock it's dark out. Del is asleep, and with no conversation and nothing but dark highway to look at I get tired quick. I find a motel and pull off. Del stirs, lifts her head and leans it down again.

“Why are we stopping?” she says.

“It's late. I'm too tired to drive anymore.”

“I'm in a hurry.”

“A few hours won't make a difference.”

She doesn't answer but closes her eyes. I check in, park the car near our room and help her inside.

“Do you want to take the first shower?” I ask her.

"No," she says, but then she looks down at her clothes, smeared with mud.

She goes into the bathroom and closes the door. I stand outside in the dark and listen to the sound of the water against the bathtub, against her body. She showers for a long time, half an hour maybe, so that I start to wonder if something's happened to her. At last the water stops, and I sit at the foot of one of the beds and pretend to watch television in the darkness. Del opens the door to the bathroom and steam and yellow light pour out around her like a magician's cloud of smoke. She is naked, standing up straight, and I see that she's taller than I thought, taller than I am. I look down at my feet and close my eyes to stop myself staring.

"It doesn't matter," she says. "I rinsed my clothes, and I wanted to let them dry."

She steps closer and I can smell her, mud and heat lightning, black pepper and rain, apples fermenting in the high grass, all of it compressed together. She pulls the covers off the other bed and crawls between the sheets. The darkness is filled with the smell of her.

Turning on her bedside lamp she says, "You can sleep here if you want."

She says it the way you might offer to lend someone five dollars, and somehow that makes it crueler to say no. I want her to keep that pride. Besides, I don't know anyone who wouldn't want a hand to hold on their way out of this world, myself included. It doesn't seem like the kind of thing you should have to beg for.

I sit beside her on her bed and she pulls my hand onto her forehead and closes her eyes. On her chest, over her heart, is a fist-sized bruise, dark purple. The flesh there looks like it would be soft and wet to the touch, like pulp. Her body is marked with blisters, scratches, bruises, veins that look like they're trying to come through the skin. The wholeness of my own body, even with all its wrinkles and scars, suddenly seems unfair; she's just a girl after all.

She slips a hand between the buttons of my shirt and moves her burning fingers across my chest. I stretch out on the bed, the two of us shoulder to shoulder, and we lie there for hours. Her body where it touches me is a razor. The hours of the night stretch and blend. I wake up next to her and find that I'm crying, that I'm clinging to her wasted body. She smoothes her palms along my

back and whispers to me, and all it does is make everything hurt more. I want to chase the darkness out from under her eyes, breathe life back into her, fill her up with mud if that's what'll make it work. I've never known a woman more painful, but I want to touch her all the same.

I say, "Look, let me take you home. You're too sick to be doing this. We'll go together."

She shakes her head.

"Take a good rest then," I say, "how do you expect to get better moving around all the time? Stay in bed a couple of days, why don't you."

"I don't want to rest. Let's drive the whole way tomorrow."

"It's got to be another eighteen hours."

"Please. I'll pay you if you want, let's just go."

"For Christ's sake, don't get insulting."

She wakes me up at dawn, trailing her fingers along my cheeks, and I'd wager she didn't sleep the whole night. As soon as I'm dressed she walks outside and gets in the car, and I don't argue.

By dusk my eyes feel like they're made of glass, but we're near the coast. I shake Del awake and ask her where she wants to go. She presses her hands against the window and squints into the darkness. "It all looks different than I remember it."

Whenever we pass someone on the street she calls out to ask for directions, and the people point and wave us along, if they answer at all. We turn onto a bigger road with cars buzzing past, and as soon as we do I can smell the ocean. Del shivers in the seat beside me and grips my knee so hard it aches. It's dusk, and against the skyline you can see the lights of a carnival turning on, first the ferris wheel, then the booths, sending up a blaze of bulbs and neon to replace the fading sunset.

"This the place?"

"I don't know," she says. "I think so. It was just an empty boardwalk last time I was here."

She leans against me as we walk down the midway, our arms looped together. Del looks all around her, gawking as if she never saw a carnival before, like she fell asleep in her bed at home and woke up here and can't figure out what the hell

happened in between. We come to an amusement stand and the barker starts in on me, *Win a prize for the pretty lady!* He's got to notice how she looks, but I guess carnies have seen just about everything. He smiles at her like she was Miss America, and I give him five dollars for a stack of baseballs to pitch at the milk bottles. I hate this game—they weight the bottles so that it's almost impossible to win—but I do all right, two bottles down.

"Anything in the bottom row," says the barker.

"Pick what you want," I say to Del.

She gets one of those glow necklaces and puts it on her head like a crown. The strange light makes her look almost normal. We buy an ice cream and a funnel cake and eat them next to the roller coaster.

"This is almost like a date," she says.

"I learned better than to date young girls like you; it's always trouble."

"Do you date dead girls? I bet that's even worse." She smiles, but it's not a real smile, and she starts crying.

"Come on, now," I say, and I put my arms around her and hold her head against my chest, green light from her glowing crown climbing up into my eyes. The roller coaster swoops over us, the people scream. The merry-go-round stops and a bunch of kids climb off and run past, laughing as they go. Del looks up and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Sorry," she says.

"Nothing to be sorry for."

"I thought I was going to make it."

"Who says you aren't?"

"I want to go down to the beach."

We find the stairs that lead us to the sand, and as soon as we take five steps the light and the noise from the carnival start to fade. I put my hand around her waist to help her walk. The sand is white and fine and cool as Christmas, and it'll turn your ankles if you're not careful. We go down to the water's edge where the footing is better, where the waves sweep against our toes. Del takes her shoes off and throws them into the ocean before I can stop her.

She takes my hand and guides it in between the buttons of her shirt, over her breast, presses it against the bruised spot on her chest. The flesh is even softer

than I'd imagined; my fingers sink into it until I can feel her bones through her skin, and below them the shuddering of her heart.

"This is what I feel all the time," she says, "only it's the whole world beating." She pushes my hand closer until I'm afraid my fingers will go right through the skin, and that heart sounds like it could devour me.

Del

For a moment, with Rob's hand against my chest, I can almost imagine a life all my own, almost understand how that could be fulfilling. He holds me to him and I am alive wherever his body touches mine. But ghosts with my face surround me, six other hearts beat in time with mine. There is nothing I can give him because nothing I have is mine.

I step away from him, across the sand. A moist breeze skims my shoulders and I feel myself dissolve, as if the salt air could unravel my genetic code like a piece of knitting. Nature won't have me, won't let me buy my life with their deaths. Aberrations, abominations, Nature wants us gone. Who knew the world was so unforgiving, so eager to cull?

There are shells, says Helen, *don't cut your feet,* and every shell touches the sole of my foot seven times. There is nothing strange in this anymore, that she can choke to death on her own blood while I sleep in a roadside motel, yet still be with me days later, whispering in my ear. *Walk into the surf,* my sisters say. The ground pulls out from underneath our toes; the waves are sevenfold in their coldness, the salt air seven times as pungent.

The water sings between my fingers, surges around my knees and shins as they press into the sand. *Drink deep,* my sisters say. This is where things crumble irrevocably, where there is nowhere left to go. We'll become salt. We'll become storm clouds on the water. And then emptiness, one to seven to one to zero in the space of twenty-three years. Science will have nothing to do with us anymore, nor we with it. We will be just a void in the cosmos, a dark place in the sky where there was once starlight.

All Those Fathers That Night

Lee Martin

1.

The barber works with wood. In a room behind his shop, he cuts and planes, sands and stains, fits tenon to mortise. He knows words like “bevel,” “dado,” “rabbet.” He uses a router jig, a dovetail jig, a biscuit joiner. He powers up his saws: miter, scroll, table, trim. On slow days like this one in this itty-bitty town—it’s the mid-sixties and the kids are starting to wear their hair long, sometimes going a month or more without coming in for a trim—he makes dining tables, end tables, coffee tables, rocking chairs, chests, dressers, armoires. The room smells of the raw wood, freshly cut: the oak and maple and cedar and pine. It smells of stain and varnish. Sawdust coats his eyebrows, the toes of his cowboy boots. He passes the time between giving haircuts and shaves, making furniture for his four daughters, who will one day marry and set up housekeeping of their own. With each cut, each joint, he assembles their futures.

2.

I’m ten years old that day, a country kid, so I won’t know anything about the drunk man until later. His story will come to me the way these stories do. Something out of the ordinary happens in a small town and gets told again and again as the years go on until you feel like you were there—right there—when it took place.

Maybe it starts when the drunk man marries, and he and his wife have two daughters and a son. Then, miracle of miracles, his wife delivers triplets, three boys. Just like that, the drunk man doubles his brood.

I wonder how long he basked in his fame—the father of triplets! He must have taken some ribbing, the kind that could lift up a man like him, a man throwing his money at liquor and scraping by on odd jobs and public assistance. Jokes about the lead in his pencil, the pop in his pistol, the twang in his twanger. I wonder how long he got a kick out of that before he started to feel the burden of all those extra mouths to feed.

3.

The state trooper has three beautiful girls. I'll make the youngest my girlfriend one day.

4.

My father only has me, and I was never meant to come along. My parents married late. My father was thirty-eight, my mother forty-one. When he found out she was pregnant, he asked the doctor, "Can you get rid of it?"

5.

Today is my birthday. I sleep late to the sound of rain beating against the windows. The autumn has been cool and damp. My fifty-fourth birthday. I run on the treadmill. I eat a light breakfast. This evening my wife and I will go out for dinner with our next-door neighbors. We have no family of our own. My wife's choice, not mine.

6.

In my dream, my father is telling me that there was a time when he nearly left my mother for another woman he swore he loved.

7.

The state trooper, Arky Cessna, comes into the barber shop, mid-afternoon. He's looking for the drunk man, but he doesn't say why.

"Haven't seen him," the barber says.

The barber will always remind me of the television star, Andy Griffith. Thick head of wavy hair, disarming grin, good-natured, dependable, upright.

Whenever the barber cuts the state trooper's hair, he jokes with him. "Ark, you better get busy on the fourth if you want to keep up with me," the barber says. "Or maybe these days, you're just shooting blanks?"

Ark just nods his head, an agreeable man who doesn't mind a little joke at his expense. By the time I become his youngest daughter's boyfriend, he'll be gone, dead from a heart attack.

I have to admit that I don't even know if he was the state trooper who came looking for the drunk man that afternoon. I just know that it was a trooper, and whenever I go over the story in my head, as I'm prone to do—it won't let loose of me—I always imagine Ark in that role. I never knew him, never knew the drunk man. They're mysterious figures to me, characters who are just barely out of my reach, disappearing, as they did, right before I came upon the scene. Two men I can't get out of my head, and for that reason alone, I set their paths together on this summer day. Ark and the drunk man, one of them looking for the other for some reason I've never known.

So in my imagination, it's Ark Cessna who steps into the barber shop that afternoon, and before he leaves, he says to the barber, "Sure is hot."

"I guess it shouldn't surprise us any," the barber says.

Ark laughs and steps out into the afternoon heat.

8.

Summertime. More traffic come evening when folks are off work at the oil refinery, the grain elevator, the gravel pit. Outside, the air smells of hot asphalt, cut grass, the fried foods at the cafe down the street. Inside the barber shop, the ceiling fan turns its broad blades in a slow circle, stirring the muggy air. A radio on the counter behind the barber chair plays faint music, the volume turned down so the barber can make small talk with the man in his chair, a man named Red who works for Marathon Oil. It's after supper, and he has two boys at home, and he's eager to get the haircut done so he can go back to his house and spend some time with his sons.

"Red," the barber says. He hasn't had a soul to tell this to, and he's not even sure he should, but he's been turning it over and over in his head while he worked in the back room cutting lap joints for the drawers of a jewelry chest, and now something makes it a thing he has to say. "Ark Cessna came in this afternoon."

The song the disc jockey on WAKO is playing is Roger Miller's "Chug-a-Lug," a toe-tapper about the liquor that makes *you wanna holler hi-dee-ho*. Red's eyeglasses are folded and tucked inside his shirt pocket. He squints to see who's outside on the sidewalk, a man passing under the candy cane barber pole screwed into the side of the building. "Who broke the law?"

Someone taps on the glass. The drunk man. He's drinking a Pepsi. He raises the bottle, as if to say, *look here what I'm drinkin'*; and the barber waves at him to come inside. The drunk man just smiles—a goofy, what-the-fuck grin. Then he moves on down the sidewalk toward the post office.

"Who was that?" Red says, and the barber tells him the rest of the story.

9.

My father likes to loaf. He likes to sit in the pool hall, the grain elevator, the barber shop, and shoot the breeze. It could have easily been him in the shop that evening instead of Red because it was summer and we were living on our farm ten miles outside of town as we did each summer, the school year spent in Oak Forest, Illinois, a southern suburb of Chicago, where my mother taught school for six years until she retired and we moved back downstate to this small town for my high school years.

When I'm a small boy, I have to go with my father to the barber shop to get my hair cut. I can never get comfortable with the way he gets loud in the company of the other men, all of them jazzed up and talking big. They're away from their homes—out of earshot from their wives, and they've got the world on a string. They say things I'm certain they'd never say anywhere but this barber shop, which is a place where they puff out their chests, crack jokes, get rowdy. Sometimes the phone rings and it's someone's wife looking for them, and, oh what a howl that sets off, the other men ragging the caller's husband because mama needs him at home.

I'm a timid boy, more my mother's son, and all the give and take between the men in that shop makes me uncomfortable. I try to keep quiet and make myself small. I'm afraid that one of the men might say something to me, might even ask me a question, and then everyone will look at me while I fumble for an answer.

A row of fold-down seats stretches along the wall, and that's where the barber's customers wait, or the loafers who've come just to shoot the breeze. They smoke cigarettes and flick their ashes into the silver trays of smoking stands. They drink Pepsis and RC's and 7-Ups from the pop cooler along the front window. They leaf through worn copies of *Police Gazette*. Farmers, mechanics, oil field roughnecks. They roll their short-sleeve shirts tight on their biceps. They

keep a cigarette behind an ear, or roll a pack in the sleeve of a tee shirt. They handle a Zippo with ease, a casual one-handed operation: a flick of a thumb to open the hinged top; a spin of the thumbwheel against the flint; the flame from the wick touched to the end of a Chesterfield, a Winston, a Marlboro, a Kool; a twist of the wrist to let the hinged top snap shut.

The men tell dirty jokes. They cuss. They argue. They goad each other in a game of one-upmanship. They look for the soft spots, the sores, the sensitive places they know will hurt. They tell each other they're pantywaists, they're pussy-whipped, they're pissing up a rope. From time to time, one of them gets another in a headlock and gives him a Dutch rub. They come close to fisticuffs. I know this is the world my father would have me join—a world of cocksure men, a world on the brink of eruption—and even as a boy, though I can't articulate as much, I must know it's not a world where I'll ever feel at home. I don't even know how to be alone with my father. I always feel uneasy with his gruffness, his quick temper. I never know what might set him off, so I do my best to be quiet even though I eventually figure out that my silence disappoints him. I'm sure he'd prefer a more spirited boy.

It could have been him instead of Red in the barber's chair that afternoon. I could have been waiting my turn.

10.

On our way to the restaurant, we drop off our neighbors' thirteen-year-old daughter at her mother's house. Our neighbors, K. and B., married after each of their first marriages ended in divorce. The thirteen-year-old and another daughter, age twelve, are K.'s. My wife says they're our girls, too, because we spend so much time looking after them when K. and B. need us to. It's true. They feel like family. I have no siblings, and my wife only has a brother from whom she's estranged. These girls delight me, and at the same time, they make me sad because they remind me of all I never had the chance to experience. They're the ghosts of the children I'll never have.

In the van, the conversation is about birthdays. The thirteen-year-old has one coming up in less than a month. "I'll be fourteen," she says, "and then I can date."

She's becoming, B. has told us, boy-crazy.

"Not a chance, missy," B says. "You're not dating until you're sixteen."

I'm sitting up front with K. He says to me in a low voice, "Well, I guess I've got another couple of years to keep her away from Roman Polanski."

It's a joke about the film director who's been brought back to the United States to face charges of having sex with a thirteen year-old girl in 1977. I know K. is making light as a way of avoiding the uncomfortable truth: His daughter is becoming a young woman, and all sorts of possible dangers await her.

At her mother's, she gets out of the van and stands outside the passenger side door, waving at me. "Happy birthday," she mouths in an exaggerated way. I can't hear the words inside the van. "Happy birthday," she says, and then she runs up the drive to her mother's house.

11.

My father always told me to marry late in life like he did. "Forty," he said. "That's the best time to settle down."

I married when I was nineteen. My wife was a week away from her eighteenth birthday. We'd only known each other four months. Love-drunk kids. No sense at all of what lay ahead. Did we talk about having children? Guess not. Guess I assumed too much. Stupid me.

12.

Inside the shop, Red and the barber hear glass breaking against the outside wall. "Kids in the alley making a mess, most likely," the barber says. "I'll jerk a knot in their tails. Be right back."

13.

The triplets are fourteen the evening their father steps into the alley between the post office and barber shop. Does he know Ark Cessna has been looking for him? Does he carry something inside him that makes him crazy-scared on this summer night? By this time, his three older children are grown and gone from home. Just a handful of years and the triplets will be, too. They'll marry good women, have families, hold down jobs, be upright and honorable men. Flawed as he is, and as often as he's disappointed his family, the drunk man still has

this ahead of him: the satisfaction of seeing his darling boys become good men. It's right there, just a few years out ahead of him, the chance to see his own youth reflected back to him, only the way it should have been all along without the liquor—a decent life, nothing to give him shame, and maybe that's what's too much for him to stand, the unavoidable comparison, the accusation, the reminder he gets each time he looks at those boys that time and time again he fell short of being the father his children deserved.

14.

My father never intended to have a child in his middle age, but, as we all know, our nevers sometimes turn into exactly what we swore was impossible.

Once upon a time, maybe ten years back, my wife decided she wanted to have a baby. I would have taken that miracle, a child in the middle of my life. I like to tell myself it wouldn't have thrown me for a loop. Then, she said, she came to her senses, and that maternal feeling, much to her relief, went away.

15.

Fifty-four. My life more than half done.

16.

The barber finds the drunk man in the alley, the jagged end of the Pepsi bottle near where his body thrashes about on the ground.

He's slashed his throat, cut his jugular, and now blood spurts from the wound, more blood than the barber knows how to stop with his hands, those hands that work with wood.

Inside the shop, Red hears the shouts for help. He runs out of the shop, the cloth, white with thin blue stripes like pillow ticking, still snapped around his throat. The long cloth fills with air and billows around him as he runs.

His older son is ten, and at that moment he's in the back yard, tossing one of those toy parachute men up into the sky. At the zenith, the handkerchief-sized parachute unwinds, and the plastic parachute man drifts gracefully to earth.

Just four years from this night, my family will move into a small frame house in this town, and Red's son will be one of my friends. I'll hear the story of

the drunk man. I'll go to high school for one year with his triplets before they graduate. Three blond-haired, blue-eyed, rugged looking boys with charming smiles. Darlings in this town.

I have my father's 1930 yearbook, *The Pyramid*, and in the grade school photos, there's a picture of the drunk man, who is, I'd say, about ten years old at the time. He looks older, more world-wise than his peers. He has a jaunty cock to his head, a weary look in his eyes. Maybe he's starting to think, even then, *the bell with it all*.

17.

The barber calls Charlie Sivert at the funeral home. Who else do you call in a town where there's no doctor, no hospital, no ambulance service? You call the man who presides over the dead.

And that's what the drunk man is by the time Charlie arrives. Dead in the alley. Dead despite anything Red or the barber can do to save him. Dead by his own hand. Dead with six children left behind. Dead with those triplets yet to grow into men

Later, Red's son tosses his parachute man into the sky again, and while he watches its descent, one of those three boys—it's so hard to know which one—runs beneath it, cutting across the yard to his uncle's house. And like that the news of what happened in that alley begins to be known.

18.

"If *ifs* and *buts* were wishes and nuts," my father always said, "we'd all have a merry Christmas."

19.

The barber has to go home. Red has to go home. They have families waiting. The barber's four girls; Red's son.

The girls wait for their father and the familiar scents he carries with him: Lucky Tiger hair tonic, Butch Wax, Mennen talcum powder—that and the sweet smells of cut wood and varnish. How long will it be before he'll be able to

power up a saw, watch the blade slice through wood, without thinking of how he found the drunk man in the alley and how he tried to staunch the blood with his hands?

Red's son holds his parachute man and wonders why that boy has just run across the yard.

I imagine everyone moving now as evening turns to dusk: Charlie Sivert and the barber and Red loading the drunk man's body onto the gurney and into the hearse; the barber and Red washing blood from their hands, the best they can, in the barber's sink. What do they say to each other? How do they step back into their regular lives? When they come into their homes that evening, do they try to tell the story to their wives outside their children's hearing, not wanting them to know the way a misery can fester until a man can give someone a silly grin and a wave and then step into an alley and cut his throat?

The drunk man's brother gets the news and doesn't know what to do with it. Ark Cessna hears the news and doesn't know what to do with it. The drunk man's wife, his children, those triplets. They don't know what to do with it.

Neither do I. I don't know why the law was looking for the drunk man. I don't know whether that was the reason he cut his throat. I could ask questions. The barber is still alive. The triplets still live in that town. I could be forward. I could say, "Was your dad in trouble with the law?"

But it's everything I don't know that keeps me telling the story. As long as I don't know why the drunk man did what he did, I can fit the story to my own—the story of an only child, who has no children, an only child born to a father, who may have come to love me, but at first was willing to let me go.

The story of the drunk man comes to me year after year, and attached to it is the story of Ark Cessna and the daughters he left to mourn him once he was gone. Neither story is mine to tell, outside of the fact that each is a story of fathers and their children.

So here I am, on my fifty-fourth birthday, past any chance I ever had of being a father. I think of how my father asked the doctor if he could "get rid of it." I think of Ark Cessna's beautiful girls, and the barber's, too. I think of Red and his son, who's still my friend and willing to ask his mother, for my benefit,

everything she remembers about the night the drunk man smashed that Pepsi bottle and worked the jagged end into his throat.

All those fathers that night. They must have been afraid, scared to death, for once the drunk man killed himself and those triplets became the town's to see to, the world, and everything they thought they knew about it, surely seemed flimsy, about to come apart with the slightest breath or step.

And yet there were all those children, and someone had to look over them. Someone had to keep telling them, *Love, love, love*—until, finally, they believed they were safe.

I can't let the story go because there are times like this, another year older, when I wish my father back to me—when I imagine the children I never had, the grandchildren he never had.

All of us come together. All of us with all our lives to live—lives of plenty, with nothing to long for and nothing to regret.

Renaissance Coffee & Tea Company, Throwing Knives after Lunch

Don hands me a beer and shows me how to grip
a paring knife by the blade,
flings it at the back wall of the restaurant,
and it's past three, still no rain,

but my knee hurts, the Florida birds hush, and the air
is thick. I take my shirt off,
and we wait for tomorrow's coffee to roast,
taking turns with the knife,

until Becky brings out more beer and more knives,
and Jeff comes outside, says,
The dishes are done! and we cheer
and drink to Jeff, and Becky

throws a bread knife at the ground and Don helicopters
one at the wall and Paula
comes over with a new scarf, says,
It's cold somewhere!

and we all agree and she pours a glass of white wine,
picks up a butter knife, and I say,
Give me the big knife! then throw it
like a spear. Don lights

a cigarette and the girl with the boots walks by and waves,
yells, *I'm moving to San Francisco!*

Paula says, *Have a beer—it's hot out,*
but she's already gone, and Jeff

comes out, says, *The dishes are done!* and we say, *We know!*
Clean knives! I get more beer
and some train comes tearing by, and the windows
shake, a dog barks and Don

screams until the whistle stops, then launches a steak knife
at a freight car, lights a cigarette,
and Becky smokes too, and the coffee
roasts and the heat and the smoke

and the beer and the gnats hit the honeysuckle on the fence
and no one can see anything
in this four o'clock sun except that
red knife-wall, and I say,

Give me a bigger knife! as the guy with the mohawk
rides by on his bike, screams,
War is the destruction of restaurants!
and we all laugh

and the rain clouds lift over the oak and I throw the bigger knife
as hard as I can and it hits
a soft spot, goes three inches deep
and it rains and this

old restaurant and the pines, oaks, and picnic tables
all cool down, and we drink,
wait for the moon and whistle,
and nothing gets easier and we know it.

Fortune

You have much skill in expressing yourself to be effective. And also: Someday you will write a book. And also: Look no further happiness is sitting beside you, which is the fortune my husband got the day we met in the Vietnamese restaurant. Happiness sits beside me like a ghost. A dim halo. A piece of paper says I am my husband's happiness, which is a lot to live up to. The fortune teller on Jefferson Road can see the key that unlocks my chest and finds a thousand moths and one succulent caterpillar that is wrapping a cocoon. This caterpillar is a pharaoh. He is reborn into the world of the gods, which is this world, but he doesn't know it. Flying erases everything. Pollination a sexual miracle done in public parks and watered lawns. A dog is barking into suburbia and the sound grows exponentially by night. Crickets are symbols of courage and summer. I hear their cocky serenade from the bedroom. I also hear my mother-in-law talking to her beloved dog, feeding her liver pudding because feeding prepares us for other worlds. Even the caterpillar eats himself into slumber. Then, at a Chinese restaurant, a waiter asked me and my husband if we felt confident with chopsticks, and we answered Yes, which now seems like the wrong answer to a trick question. I hold the remote control like a saber across my chest because I must protect even the hollow world inside the television which speaks to me alone and late at night.

Nevermind the Lightning

That's a waltz in your mouth,
said the dentist. Don't you light that
in here—we can't all keep time
with our tongues like that. It isn't fair.
The tooth said, So what should I do?
And the mouth said,
Stay here. And the bridge
on the eastern shore creaked
as it shook a bit in the wind.

•

The dentist said, I built a bridge.
Don't eat anything
larger than a tooth for a week.
The mouth asked, Which tooth?
You can choose, the dentist said.
Out east, said the mouth,
they have lobsters as small as molars.
So you can eat lobster, the dentist said.
If I choose to, said the mouth.

•

Said the tooth to the wind—
I'm not without my sympathies
for your loneliness.
In the mouth, my only
company is the tongue,
which constantly wanders. I said
wonders, the wind said—

the sky is a mouth
where the hawk-tongue wonders.

•

When the dentist introduced
the drill to the tooth,
he allowed a small wind
to settle in, burrowing into
the molar like a mole.
Everything must have a home,
the dentist said. Yes, said the mouth.
I understand. Especially the wind,
which is hollow like a tooth.

•

The wind, the mouth said, is
a sort of waltz. It loses a step
every third season.
But a waltz takes a step back
every second season. So
a waltz is a sort of tongue,
licking back over itself
when it's done. I can't
see that, the wind said. I can

•

see what you're saying,
the mouth said. It frightens me.
I'm not always clear,
said the wind. I'm sorry.
You're saying I hold my hands

gingerly around the world
like a waist. No, not at all,
the mouth said. I'm saying
I don't think you're gentle at all.

▪

The dentist said, Here is a tooth.
Look how smart you are,
the bridge said, patting his head.
Sometimes a tooth spends
its whole life inside
the mouth. I'm not so smart,
the dentist said. The mouth is
a field full of holes. Oh,
said the wind—no. No, it's not.

WILD ON THE FIELD



*a selection of poems by Josiah Bancroft, Michael Cherry,
Heather Christle, Patrick Lucy, Austin Tremblay,
Angela Vogel, Miles Waggener, and David Welch*

Study for Two Swans

1.

The necks and heads
of two swans,
tipped down
so the upper breadths
of their bills touch
at the tips, approximate
the shape of
a bottomless heart.

2.

Introduced to
a lake, two swans
may move
to make more
swans, though
the lake takes
no part in it.

3.

In my arms,
one swan is looking
for another swan.

It's a small swan.
If nothing else,

may my arms

be small
shores for swans.

4.

So two swans are like
two hearts: if one is empty
the other empties.

5.

If you see no swans,
you see something
else, but if you see
nothing else,
you see two swans.

6.

Two swans are still two
lovers. Look!—now our feathers
are getting dirty.

7.

You may do this
with your arms—

encircle them behind
your back to
embrace
a second body.

But you cannot turn
a single thing into swans.

Marsh Hawk on the Paddock Bridge

Over seamless fields, drainages
to deeper water, the eye and re-firing neural paths
are dove-rapt and hunting with feeding birds.

Rictal breath visible in the cold,
primary coverts splay and mantle the dove
peppered in blood, liturgical as a curtain

now offered up on memory's rusted girder.
Tendons shimmer, fibrous and oblong gore.
Trace back the dove

leaving the safety of the maple's lattice,
accruing context through cortex
to slide its shadow across the snowy field.

As from an old source, from hippocampus through
limbic byways, relive the dove plucked on the wing.
There are the rough-edged holes

where blood melts through the snow
and leads to fallen aftermath, the hollowed-out reliquary,
as synapses make my tangled way,

where a dove is obliterated, restaged, rived
and steaming on the bridge.
Blood's metallic warmth, like rust

courses through the Papez Circuit and I'm
cleaning game birds again, or my grandfather
is in his wheelchair, staring at his hands

in disbelief. As if they don't belong to him.
From hippocampus through cortex,
from the maple, wing shadow glides out

and back to hippocampus,
back to the disk-shaped face of the hawk.
Where within its eye-ring

the parabola sharpens, the circuit hollows
the cell that memory becomes—fovea from which
the heart, and not the eye, might see.

Retrace *capturing* and *caught*, re-travel synapses:
my head is on my mother's chest, her heart
beating through her blouse; my body draped

against my father, sweat and bourbon, fried chop
and vinegar on his shirt, he's singing *Deep*
in the Heart of Texas. Remember, and again

the news breaks, our child won't come to term,
blood before the ultrasound, the fields and copses
that the dove sees while in the hawk's grip,

the doctor wants me to sit down, the bird
falls from its branch, and every stone I ever throw
is falling back to me.

That Little Bird Was Not Okay

I have been hiding for two hours behind your idea
of a theme park one giant teacup and a fence
nobody wants to tell you you are the top general
on the losing side of a war I started before I could
speak babies communicate with each other using
shadows and primitive tumbles I love your body
I have to weep every day I don't know why it
doesn't help the flowers grow any faster speed
concerns me speed considers itself so lightly it
doesn't look like thinking it looks small it looks
like a tangerine how many times will I blink
between now and the moment you find me not
here I hope some place I haven't imagined it
is a lark to love your face so much and from a
minimum distance of ten to fifteen feet

Venus Flytrap

I opened (bi-stable) the botanist's tale.
Tripped up the tongue on a rosette digest.
The heart was heart-shaped and flat, terminal
lobes hinged midrib. Because I tolerated fire well,
I splayed my sundews. Who among you
understands the *muscipula* meshwork that takes in
like love? OI' fused tooth is telegraphing red
sunsets again. Because I sniffed around Vulnerable,
I knew dentates mutate in the carnivorous bowl.
(A plant that eats meat? How newsy! How neat!)
Outside I zipped around quick, like museum bird extinct,
super silliest in the hair-brained schemata. Outside
I dodged a reflexive armada. (See *Mary's violet eyes
make boys' flies flutter.*) I was the freak Darwin
shook from the trees. When the world pimpled,
I primped. When the world pinched, I nipped.

Imagination Pig

Some say, "Leave something to the imagination,"

as if it were the runt of the litter
who would starve on its own

and be indifferently devoured by its terrible sisters.
As if Conscience Pig would be the first to nibble

on Imagination, pretending
to nudge its hunger-blitzed kin

when, by complete accident, Imagination's ear
comes loose in Conscience's blunt teeth. I say

leave nothing to this pig.
Imagination is voracious,

omnivorous, and already too fond of human food.
Imagination has the capacity and discretion of a landfill:

it eats the toughened glass
from crashed cars,

the nets from wigs, eats student instruments, full tissues,
tin horseshoes, the spines of kites, someone's notes

for a love letter ("Begin
with hair, work way up"),

eats a plunger, a reel of B-movie screams, all the springs
from a faceless granddaughter clock. Imagination eats

and produces a uniform clump,
colorful as lint. What should we

leave to this pig? What hasn't it already snatched from our hand,
from our plate, from the gilded limb quivering in the garden:

an old woman bathing
in a hole in the sea.

Cuttlefish

IRIDOPHORES

the cuttlefish is over eighty-two percent context—

CHROMATOPHORES

the cuttlefish is over eighty-two percent context—

HECTOCOTYLUS 1

if a female cuttlefish is in danger of starvation— she'll enter a kind of suspended animation— her body turns a pale lavender— and the beatings of her three hearts— slow to the point— they're nearly imperceptible— drifting in mid-ocean currents— tethered to a blade of sea grass— the female cuttlefish can remain in this state for up to nine weeks— waiting—

HECTOCOTYLUS 2

when a male cuttlefish encounters a suspended female— he'll begin a mating ritual normally reserved for the half moon— reanimated by the male's attentions, the female signals— her receptiveness with a series of rapid— color changes— green-purple-pink— green-purple-pink— purple-purple-pink— she is ready— he is orange—

HECTOCOTYLUS 3

just before the male passes his sperm packet into the female's mantle cavity— the female shifts suddenly to the left— her slight repositioning sends— the

protein-rich sperm packet— and the majority of the male’s fourth arm— into her waiting— beak—

HECTOCOTYLUS 4

fossil records show— the female cuttlefish’s mantle cavity is getting closer and closer to her— beak— raising the possibility of anatomical convergence in the near future— male cuttlefish are understandably concerned, and have thus evolved— the break-away arm— but also say they are “busy with lots of other projects, so”—

CUTTLEBONE

bird enthusiasts have been feeding cuttlebones to canaries— and other caged songbirds as a source of dietary calcium since the late 1970s— it wasn’t until canaries began escaping in the late 90s, however, that scientists discovered— each generation of bone-fed canaries was significantly stronger than the last— nowadays the escaped super-canaries’— strength is “legendary”— for example: taking over Jekyll Island off the coast of Georgia— they ruined a wedding within minutes there—

Starfish

CARDIAC STOMACH

Starfish don't mate for life because they eat each other.

NEST

A starfish will remove its radial canal when threatened. There is a shorebird in New Guinea who gathers radial canals for its nest. Squatting there in the midst of a hundred or more radial canals, the shorebird is brilliantly camouflaged against a colorful backdrop. Hardly anything eats that bird.

PYLORIC STOMACH

Nearly all the starfish's history was lost to its folklore.

RING CANAL

The widespread myth that hacked-off arms spawn new starfish is largely to blame for the great starfish collapse of 1979. Later it was discovered that misinformation spreads through the ring canal of the poor creature. It's thought the canal evolved to carry misinformation as a defense against the well-informed wild octopus or dolphin.

SKIN GILL

The story of a starfish is not much different than the story of any domesticated animal. It's a story of eating some things, and then meeting the right people, and

then learning to eat corn. No one could have predicted how well they'd take to the leash. How well they'd adjust to bath time. Now there's a whole industry.

TUBE FOOT

Look at it doing that.

STONE CANAL

One arm of the starfish is much heavier than the others. Professionals know to always throw the starfish from this arm. They'll often wrap the arm in colorful grip tape before bringing the starfish into battle.

Body Work

after reading and sharing Chard DeNiord's "Field Work"

Here's that dog poem I promised. "Dog bone"
it should be called. I love a dog in a poem.

If I can get one in there, I will. Doesn't matter
if he's eating shoes or loving cats only to be hated by cats,

whatever the dog poem wants, that's what he'll do.
The one in "Dog Bone" is dying, which is hard

to take. Then again, hard for a body to work at anything. I went
to the trouble of typing that up for you. Because I'm kind

and go to the trouble of typing things up. That process
should be called "_____ Bone." Not "hambone"

since that's taken. Is your hambone taken? Mine wanders
out of the meter—it's like slapping the lonely air of a hotel

lobby. Wouldn't it be nice if we could call our bodies back
to us, like dogs that don't know better. If any part of me sniffed

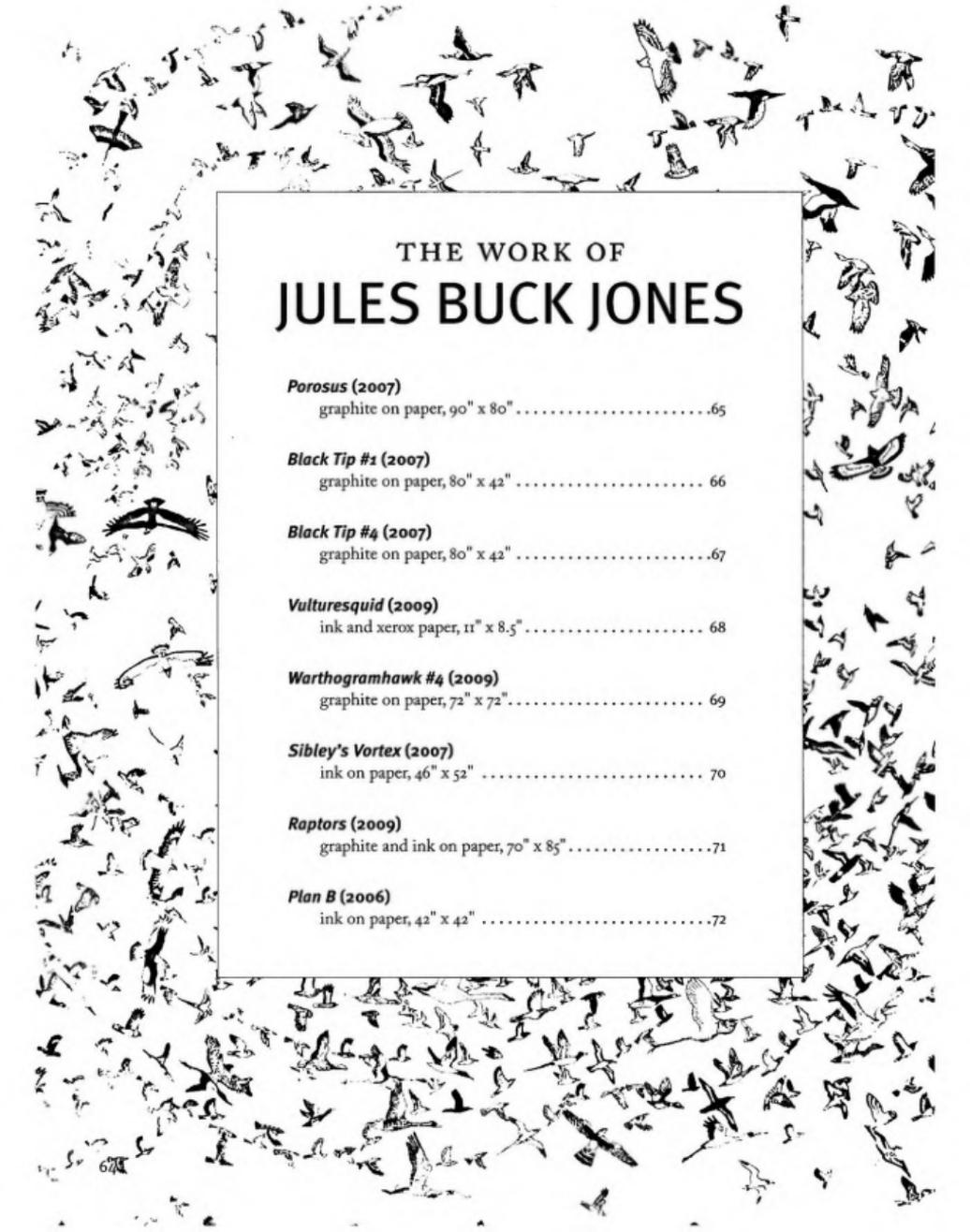
the ass of temptation, I'd feel good yelling for it to come back.
And when my liver returned from the bar, and my voice

box from the auction, and my lungs from the back
of a tour bus, I'd trust them like a porch stray,

always one eye on you and one wild on the field.

Wolfish

Because you are red.
Because you are that red.
Because you are that red that calls, calls
red to red, I call. I come. I sheathe my teeth in
rags of kindness. I purr and mew of love. It's a wonder,
how big my eyes are; I feel I'm little
more than mouth. It's the only way I know to open
wide enough.
I would give you my teeth, beg you: strip
me from my bones and then bite
deeper, until you're gnawing only space, in which
you fuse, o my red star, above a pale,
naked planet, barren but ready
to be reddened into life.
Because you are red,
and inside all that eating
is a red cry
to be eaten.



THE WORK OF JULES BUCK JONES

<i>Porosus</i> (2007) graphite on paper, 90" x 80"65
<i>Black Tip #1</i> (2007) graphite on paper, 80" x 42"	66
<i>Black Tip #4</i> (2007) graphite on paper, 80" x 42"67
<i>Vulturesquid</i> (2009) ink and xerox paper, 11" x 8.5"	68
<i>Warthogramhawk #4</i> (2009) graphite on paper, 72" x 72"	69
<i>Sibley's Vortex</i> (2007) ink on paper, 46" x 52"	70
<i>Raptors</i> (2009) graphite and ink on paper, 70" x 85"	71
<i>Plan B</i> (2006) ink on paper, 42" x 42"72

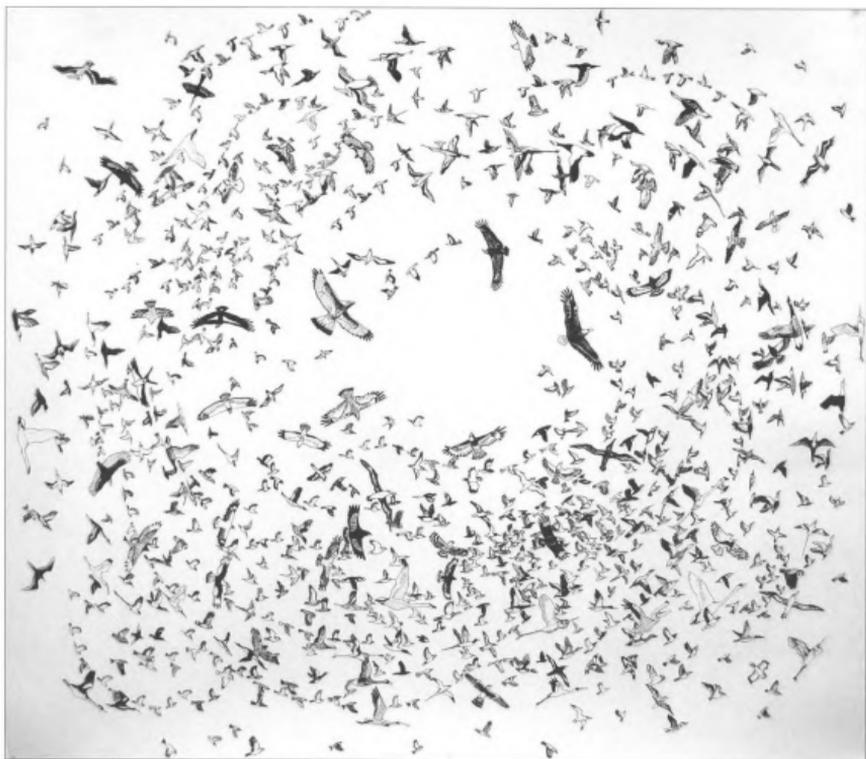
















Field Guide

Kurt Mueller

How can one classify the creations of Jules Buck Jones? In large-scale drawings, collages, sculptures, and installations—all depicting animal subjects—Jones upends scientific categories and artistic structures, wreaking havoc on taxonomic and pictorial order. Throughout his work, Jones mines the animal kingdom for its narrative possibility and psychological resonance, as well as for its potential as image and aesthetic experience. Portraying biodiversity as open-ended and evolving, he employs a matching range of representational, compositional, and mark-making strategies.

Vulturesquid (2009), for example, collides its eponymous buzzard and squid with an ocelot, creating a diving beak with streaming tentacles emitting an explosion of spots. The distinction between abstraction and figuration blurs: eyeball and suction-cup forms make a single pattern, and cross-hatching reads as feathers and fur; the entire collage resolves as a fantastic, frenetic monster. Jones frequently decontextualizes his animals (or animal parts) in this way, portraying them separate from habitat or natural landscape. Instead he incorporates each into the picture plane, as part of the compositional space of the paper.

Likewise, as pictures of animals, Jones's works do not conform to the expectations of scientific naturalism. He works from pre-existing images: typically the photography and illustrations of guidebooks and issues of *National Geographic*. The documentary pretensions of his source material, however, are superseded by Jones's improvising hand and the properties of his chosen media—acrylic, graphite, ink, watercolor, and an assortment of drawing tools. The relationship between the resulting image and its viewer proves similarly mutable. Denying an observational remove, Jones invites his viewer to participate—optically and bodily, conceptually and imaginatively—in the construction of each picture's meaning.

Raptors (2009), for instance, presents twenty-four portraits, each detailing an avian specimen with abstract, gestural marks. This collection is part of a larger installation in which Jones attempts to picture every genera of the diurnal birds of prey. Arranged in a haphazard grid, the portraits clash illustration with formal experimentation; the ambitions of visual order and scientific reason collide with a

spectrum of difference. *Raptors* is a catalogue of variation, a biological and aesthetic morphology, but it can also be construed as family or team portraiture. Similarly, *Sibley's Vortex* (2007) reproduces entries from *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America* (2003) as a single flock. The unlikely, unnatural mass is depicted in flight, circling like vultures. The viewer, looking at this target, becomes its implied center.

Large-scale drawings like *Black Tip #1* and *#4* (both 2007) and *Porosus* (2007) similarly address the viewer's physical presence in front of the work by theatrically confronting her with images of violence, both enacted and suggested. In *Porosus*, Jones draws the head of *Crocodylus porosus*, the saltwater crocodile, super-sized and descending threateningly from the top of the frame. The crocodile's open mouth would appear to engulf a close-looking viewer (or a viewer's hand, as reproduced here). This storyline, however, is only one way to read the image. The crocodile, decapitated by the frame—or hung from its tail, outside the frame—is rendered equally vulnerable. *Porosus* also exemplifies Jones's predilection for predators: reptiles and birds in particular. This interest in carnivores may find its origin in a boyhood infatuation, but Jones's works also empathetically consider the complex and precarious position of topping the food chain, a position we share. As our peers, beastly predators challenge the human desire to control nature.

Jones's drawings skirt issues of genetic manipulation, biological evolution, and extinction. The hybrid forms of *Vulturesquid*, as well as *Wartbogramhawk #4* (2009), suggest a Doctor-Moreau-like laboratory of mutation and modification. Jones's drawings, however, do not offer didactic commentary on natural selection or more artificial tinkering. Rather, his works provoke viewers to react to the results—the alien, unfamiliar, or irrational—asking whether imagination becomes a liberating or constraining force. For Jones, it is the former: *Wartbogramhawk #4* revisits a sketch Jones dreamt up as a child twenty years ago, and *Plan B* (2006) offers a recent vision through which prehistoric animals re-populate Earth in unexpected ways. Ultimately, it is the viewer's imagination that animates Jones's drawings. In their visual abstraction and narrative ambiguity, his works remind us that “monsters” and “marvels” are always, in part, our own creation.

Every Vein a Tooth

Megan Mayhew Bergman

He left when Salli, the tripod retriever, ate one third of his leaf collection.

She has separation anxiety, I said, pleading her case and mine.

What kind of house is this? he had asked.

The technical answer: A Victorian Queen Anne with stick detailing in the gable. A spindled gingerbread in disrepair.

Gray was referring to the three Golden Retrievers in various states of decline—Salli with her missing leg, paralyzed Prince dragging his cart down the hallway, toothless and epileptic Sam dreaming wild on the kitchen floor. Or it might have been the de-clawed raccoon marauding in the living room. The one-eyed chinchilla nesting in cedar chips in what could have been the nursery. I didn't count the feral cats—they largely lived underneath the sofa, out of sight.

Before he left, we had spent a day at Lake Mattamuskeet collecting what Gray called “complete leaves”—leaves undamaged by frost or insect.

Ideally, he had said, we want the entire leaf, a small part of the twig, and a terminal bud.

Mattamuskeet was a mosquito-filled wetlands depression, surrounded by flat farmland and hunting clubs. Just deep as a swan's neck, Gray had said.

I tried not to think of the hidden predators—red wolves behind the tree line, alligators in the marshlands, as I stood next to Gray in a patch of wild millet.

Don't get me wrong, I told Gray, I love predators. I'm just intimidated by teeth.

You should think about getting rid of that chinchilla, he said, waving a banded finger at me. What good is a snap-happy, one-eyed chinchilla?

Gray reached for the triangular-toothed leaf of an Eastern Cottonwood with his pocket-knife shears. In the distance I could see a Great Blue Heron standing awkwardly in the water. A cormorant floated by, and I wondered what it would be like to be aerodynamic, to shoot through the water like a bullet.

Hand me the magazine, Gray said, looking down at me from his portable ladder.

Cat Fanciers' Almanac or *Guns and Ammo*? I asked.

You won't be getting this one back, he warned me, holding the magazine fronted by a sleek Japanese Bobtail.

I don't have much love for hobby breeders, I said. Put it to good use.

And this? he asked, holding the camouflaged cover of *Guns and Ammo*.

Compliments of the local hunter's association, I said, after the press covered the shelter's protest on Sunday hunting.

Don't tell me, he said, shaking his head.

The Cormorant made a quick exit from the water and perched at the top of a Bald Cypress, drying his wings in the winter sun.

Gray carefully inserted the Cottonwood leaf into the pages of *Cat Fanciers*. He nudged an open sleeve of Laffy Taffy and condom wrapper with the toe of his boot in the grass.

There's a story here, he said, raising an eyebrow.

We cast off in the canoe for lunch with peanut butter sandwiches and a small cooler of beer. Deep as a swan's neck or not, the water was opaque and choppy.

I looked for the yellow eyes of alligators.

I always count the geese, Gray said, eyes to the clouds. If they aren't an even flock, something's wrong. Someone's been left behind.

One thing I did not understand: sentimental hunters.

Did you scoop the litter before leaving? I asked, already thinking about my house full of pets, the chaos of dinner.

Nope, Gray said, taking a bite of his sandwich.

He'd been mad with me since I'd brought home the last feral cat. I considered his negligence of the litter box just one in a string of rebellious acts.

Gray stared at the sky, his eyes scanning a skein of Canadian Geese.

Two, four, six, eight... all's well, he said, his words tangled in peanut butter.

When we got home, the cats had marked on the couch. Prince had pulled cereal boxes from the recycling bin. Salli had gnawed through two of Gray's leaf albums, spread the pages and specimens from one end of the living room to the other.

Gray grabbed a fistful of his own hair in frustration and knelt next to his chewed albums.

Unacceptable, he said.

I tried to keep the house clean. I kept the closet door closed. I bought a special vacuum cleaner for pet hair. I lit fragrant candles. I wrapped the couch in plastic sheeting. But there were some things I could not control. I said nothing and went to the kitchen for a beer.

As he had packed, I sat on the living room carpet with my chin on my knees and listened to the sound of him leaving me. He cleared his throat. Walked to and from the closet. Splashed water on his face. Rifled through the junk drawer. Zipped the duffel bag.

Maybe if you can get your life together, he had said, pausing at the door.

I accepted his assessment. My mother had felt the same way. Not everyone could live with tumbleweeds of dog hair on the steps, the night sounds of feral cats exploring the house, the raccoon rattling his cage door at two in the morning.

The retrievers came to me, stuck their cold noses on my cheek. Aged and humbled, they looked like orangutans, their cinnamon- and honey-colored coats matted, eyes framed in white.

When Gray left, the cats came out of hiding long enough for me to name them.

• • •

Two weeks after Gray moved in with his mother, the head of the shelter called. They finally busted him, Emory said. The suburban shepherd.

I'll be there in fifteen, I said.

Bring your mask and gloves, she said. It's worse than we thought.

The suburban shepherd lived in a termite-eaten farmhouse on the edge of town. His porch sagged and the paint peeled. A weather-beaten American flag flew from a piece of PVC pipe. A new school was being built nearby. The people around him had fixed up their homes and petitioned to have him investigated. While there were pens outside, everyone knew he was hoarding sheep inside of his house. You could smell them in the sun, see them in the windows at night, strange silhouettes standing on the couch.

I hung up the phone and took the retrievers outside, topped off the various

water bowls around the house, and caged the raccoon. I'd learned early there was no such thing as a raccoon-proof home. I had a hole in my mattress to prove it.

I arrived at the suburban shepherd's house late that afternoon. Three news channel vans were parked out front. The shelter had pulled their mobile unit around back. Two police cars blocked the driveway.

I'm with the shelter, I said to the cop.

He didn't question me further—my car must have said enough. Most of us shelter folks drove pickups or wagons, paint nearly invisible under layers of stickers. *I Love My Mutt. Woof. Give Wildlife a Break. My Cat Adopted Me at the Hoke County Shelter.* The back of my wagon was stuffed with crates and ramps for my special-needs retrievers.

You won't believe it, Emory said, grabbing my arm and leading me into the house. She was a heavy woman, breathing hard. Her dye job had grown out and her clothes were covered in white cat hair. Emory smelled like cigarette smoke and wet dog.

She was beautiful to me. Powerful. Her voice was loud and her passion was evident. Her eyes flashed when she was interviewed on television. People always say "it takes a special person to do that job"—but for Emory, this was true. She was tireless. She could stabilize an emaciated horse in the morning, trim a goat's overgrown hooves before lunch, attend a court hearing in the afternoon, and still be home to feed the sanctuary of animals she kept herself.

We shelter folk were the purveyors of the downtrodden and hard to love, the eighty-year-old African Gray with a swearing habit, the incontinent Chihuahua, the tetraparetic Pekingese, the Tennessee Scare Goat with skin allergies.

And now, sheep. Seventy of them. But Emory could find anything a home. Show me, I said.

• • •

I first met Gray at a Ducks Unlimited banquet. I was disguised as a waitress. Black jeans, black shoes, white button-up.

Emory had a knack for PR. She knew how to get herself on television.

When they turn the music down and cue the mics, that's when I'll run to the front, she had said. I know someone in catering who knows someone in event planning, and they'll give me a signal.

What do you need us to do? I asked.

Bail me out of jail, she said, and winked.

Emory had requested that four of us sign on as temporary wait staff for the event. We'd been interviewed over the phone by someone who had asked if we were on drugs or had a critical record.

You mean criminal, I had said.

Whatever, she said. You're slinging plates of microwaved cordon bleu. Can you handle that?

I came to the banquet with nervous energy. Here I was, part of a plot that would piss off a hundred semi-woody men, some with sniper-like accuracy, some who were already drunk on boxed wine.

As dessert was served, Emory received the signal. She refilled the speaker's sweet tea and then turned to command the mic.

How can ducks be unlimited if you shoot them? Emory asked the audience. You conserve so you can kill them? So your children can kill them?

She cleared her throat. The screech of feedback from the microphone ricocheted off the walls.

You talk about how to save them, she said. Then you talk about how to *hunt* them.

An embarrassed man in a bow tie tugged her down from the podium and escorted her out of the room by the elbow.

I finished serving flourless chocolate cakes to a roomful of disgruntled hunters and businessmen. When the catering staff moved into the dining room for cleanup, I took an extra cake and snuck out the side door.

Golf carts lined one end of the parking lot, which was filled with expensive SUVs and luxury sedans. Gray was sitting on the curb outside, legs outstretched, smoking a cigarette and drinking whisky from a flask.

The spring night had a chill. Gray offered his sports coat.

You want to share some of that cake? he asked.

I sat down next to him and handed him the ramekin.

Dig in, I said. Fingers are fine.

Gray was long and lean and kept his long hair pulled back in a ponytail. He wore a suit with what looked like wingtips.

An old pair of golf shoes I took the cleats out of, he said, shoveling chocolate into his mouth.

Whenever I dine at country clubs, I said, which isn't often, I only eat dinner rolls and dessert.

I know what you mean, Gray said. They think they can slap nuked cafeteria food on nice china and fool us all.

Why are you here? I asked.

I'm a bow hunter, he said.

I pictured him in a loin cloth, jogging through the local forest with a hand-made bow and feathered arrow.

We had passed the flask of whisky back and forth until both of us were drunk.

A friend once told me there were two kinds of urban naturalists. The McDonald's-eating semi-hoarder animal activist, and the armchair conservationist with blood lust.

I have to tell you something, I said.

He moved in closer to my face as if he was going to kiss me.

You're the enemy, I said, laughing.

Maybe not, he had said. We want the same thing, right? Ducks?

We made out behind the bushes. I felt like a traitor.

• • •

Emory led me by the forearm to the basement of the suburban shepherd's farmhouse. The brick walls were lined with skulls.

We stood in silence taking it in. There were at least fifty sheep skulls, stacked neatly on top of each other in rows, with open sockets, worn molars, gently curved mandibles.

The smell was too much.

I need to go outside, I said, pushing open the basement door.

The bright sun made my eyes water. There were sheep everywhere in the small backyard pen. Some, with hooves so destroyed they were forced to walk on their knees, dragged themselves across the grass. You could count ribs on the flock like the bars of a birdcage.

The ground was littered with Styrofoam and paper bags from the fast food joints across the street.

My first reaction was to throw up, my second, to cry. I pictured the slow torture of the suburban shepherd in his own basement.

Two malnourished lambs licked each other's coats in the fence corner.

These are things we need to see, Emory said, wiping her eyes. To remind us.

• • •

Show me someone who can explain her first love, my mother once said.

I tried to explain Gray to myself. Here I was, in love with someone who killed animals for sport. But that was not everything—or was it? We were like people of opposing religions trying to make it work. And I wanted it to work.

He was passionate about his hobbies; he spoke beautifully of his love for rare tree species, his need to see a Lost Franklinia and protect the Carolina Silverbell. I was with Gray the afternoon he saw his first Mountain Camellia. It was like watching a man find God.

Gray was competent—he could cook with nothing but a multi-tool at his disposal, start fires, do taxes, hang pictures. He cleaned his aging mother's house, made her lasagna and eggplant parmesan, let me buy junk food and keep it on a shelf only he could reach. Gray knew what days I needed chocolate biscotti doled out.

He had a fascinating shoe collection of stolen bowlers and golf cleats, tolerated my fear of predator cats, alligators, bears. Bottom line: Gray made me feel safe in a way I never had, and I did not want to give that up.

• • •

I'm asking you to dinner, Gray said on the phone that night.

Even after I showered, I felt as if I smelled of sheep.

Gray was waiting for me at the bar, his wingtipped, cleatless golf shoes propped on the stool rung.

I kissed him on the cheek.

How are you? he asked.

I burst into tears. I could not decide if it was because of the sheep, or my empty bed at home.

I let Gray jump to conclusions.

Come here, he said, bringing me close. We can work this out.

He gave me his glass of wine and ordered another.

After dessert, Gray walked with me to my car and got in the passenger side.

Are you sure? I asked.

I drove home with his hand on my knee, then up my skirt. The neighborhood was quiet—it seemed as if everyone else knew something we didn't, that there was a reason to be in bed with the lights off after dinner.

When we entered the front door, the dogs greeted Gray with gusto, rubbing their muzzles on his thigh, leaning into his legs, whining.

I missed you, too, he said, crouching down to let them kiss his face.

The feral cats remained hidden. I imagined them still as garden statues underneath the couch, ears clipped, nails carved into the wooden floor.

We went to bed with the door closed. Gray undressed me, rubbed my shoulders.

I want to come back, he said.

Prince began whining at the door.

Gray moved his hands lower, began kissing my neck.

Prince paced the hallway. His cart had a squeaky wheel.

I can't, Gray said. *Augh*.

He flipped over on his side and put a pillow over his head.

I noticed I had wet dog food underneath my fingernails. I'd heard from friends what infants did to your sex life. I imagined disabled dogs did the same.

Prince barked and rattled the door knob with his nose.

I'm coming, I said.

• • •

My mother had a compulsive need to exhibit porcelain Christmas villages year round.

On Sundays she'd make hot tea and show me the new figurines she'd acquired. Soon there were cider stands in front of City Hall, frosted fir trees, stray dogs and hobos by the train station. I hated them all—houses with glowing windows, children with cherub cheeks, plastic geese on the frozen pond, men in top hats gazing sentimentally at petite wives.

When she passed away, she had willed them to me. All ten thousand dollars worth. As if she was saying to me: *Live like this.*

I sold them immediately and used the money for a down payment on a new house—I had needed more room. I knew it was wrong, using her money that way, funding a lifestyle she did not condone.

You'd give those dogs your own bed, she'd once said, not realizing it was true.

Mom had her villages, Gray his leaves. My dogs, the raccoon, the chinchilla, the hidden cats—these were my trophies.

When I was younger I had grieved for birds nesting in the sickly McDonald's dogwoods, the wet deer carcasses left to rot on the side of the road. I thought twice about killing bugs in the house, opting instead to usher them out on sheets of paper.

One afternoon after we had first met, Emory hit a bird with her car and called me.

Talk me through this, she had said.

Can it be saved? I asked.

No, she said. It's suffering.

She was standing over it in a parking lot, her car running.

Run over it again, I said. You have to.

She gunned her engine.

We cried together, hysterically. I felt as if I had found sisterhood.

• • •

If I come back, Gray said on the phone, the raccoon, chinchilla, and cats have to go. The dogs sleep downstairs.

I'll have to think about it, I said. I can't make promises.

Here's what I knew: At the shelter we addressed drop-offs with steely eyes, found no sympathy for those who didn't trust cats around the baby, who had boyfriends allergic to dogs.

I missed Gray. I missed his shoe collection in the closet. I missed watching him brush his hair, as if I was seeing something I shouldn't. He said he felt effeminate styling his hair in front of me, pulling it back into a slick ponytail. I missed his body in the bed, the way he slept with one arm tossed across my back.

But here's what I saw when I lay in bed at night: the deep abscesses on the chests of the sheep, dragging themselves to food and water across a rock-strewn lawn. The scared eyes of the feral cats underneath the sofa. I felt the warm bodies of the retrievers next to me at night, the kind of limitless love other people dreamed of and I had—all to myself.

• • •

Proctor and Gamble arrived in the backseat of Emory's jeep, freshly castrated. At first we could not coax the sheep from the car. I pulled dog treats from my jean pockets and offered them in my hand. They stared at me with slivered eyes and split lips. Both were chestnut brown with black spots.

Grazers, Emory said. Probably not interested in faux bacon.

For a minute I thought it best if they stayed in Emory's car, cowering in the back seat. It might save me from what I was about to do.

You're going to keep these guys in the dog run out back? Emory asked.

Sure, I said.

Emory and I pushed the sheep into the back yard, dog collars and leashes around their necks.

Two things you've got to do, she said. First, you've got to deworm these babies. You put the pill in the back of the throat like this.

Emory deftly pried Gamble's mouth open and shoved the pill in.

You want to bypass their first stomach and get the pill directly into their second stomach, she said.

Fine, I said.

I wanted to act as if I was not intimidated, as if this was not the first time I was learning of multiple stomach scenarios, pilling sheep.

Second, she said, you'll need to trim their hooves regularly.

With what? I asked.

Trimming shears, she said. Hold the foot by the ankle in your left hand, the shears in the right.

Emory flipped Gamble upside down to demonstrate. His stomach was the color of oatmeal.

Good ram, I said.

A castrated male is a wether, Emory said. Gamble hasn't been a ram in a week, have you Gamble?

His body was rigid, inflexible. He did not respond to her voice.

These guys will take your yard in two days, Emory said. Then they go bipedal on you, standing on their back hooves and eating the leaves off your trees. I'd recommend getting some hay. You don't have a neighborhood association, do you? she asked.

Not one with any bite, I said.

As the sun went down I found myself afraid to leave the sheep untended in the backyard. They huddled together in the dog run. I peeked at them through the blinds every ten minutes.

That night the raccoon crept onto the back of the couch while I was watching Mr. Ed re-runs and grabbed my necklace, snapping my head backwards.

Rodent! I said.

Later, I found the retrievers licking the open dishwasher.

Get! I said. Get out!

I was embarrassed by the desperate, angry sound of my voice.

Sam lowered his head, then raised his large brown eyes.

We are just being dogs, he seemed to say.

One of the feral cats brought a rubber band to my chest during the night. A gift I consciously mistook as gratitude.

• • •

Gray and I had a tradition when it came to rashes. We named them after members of the Jackson Five. Gray once had a patch of poison ivy named Tito. I had ringworm named Jermaine.

A new ringworm had appeared on my elbow. The doctor said I had gotten it from Proctor and Gamble. Emory said I had washed them too much, removed natural lanolin that protects them from the worm.

I broke with convention and named it Latoya.

I thought of the pristine sheep in my mother's Christmas village, white coats like fine cashmere, led down cobblestone streets by fungus-free children.

Gray and I had started home improvement projects before he left, painting the front door pale green, planting bulbs, laying sod. It had taken Proctor and Gamble a day and a half to work over the back lawn. We'd planted a melon patch in the side yard that was beginning to come up. I figured the sheep would get that, too, given time.

There was a garden cottage in my mother's Christmas village, overgrown with ivy and wisteria. A woman with golden ringlets had sat on the stone steps, a baby in one arm, a cup of tea beside her.

Live like this.

Even at two in the morning, my house felt alive. I could hear the raccoon chittering at the cats, Sam dreaming, the chinchilla knocking his head against the water spout. Salli had taken Gray's spot in the bed, her three legs outstretched, head on the pillow.

I was outnumbered, out-maneuvered. There was no one to do the dirty work for me. And to me, the dirty work wasn't lifting hairballs from the living room carpet. It wasn't mashing Sam's dog food with water and fish oil tablets. It was discipline.

• • •

I did two strange things that week. I began sleeping with Gray's flannel shirt underneath my pillow. Then, I took a volume of his leaf collection—the one with

the pressed, waxy leaves of the Mountain Camillia—and hid it in the drawer of my bedside table.

When he came back for the remainder of his things, these things I would keep.

• • •

Have you thought about us? Gray asked. Are you ready to make some changes?

I'd love to have you here, I said. But you know I can't get rid of the animals.

I'm not asking you to get rid of *all* of them, he said.

You know I can't, I said. Not any.

I'm looking at a job in Texas, he said.

I understand, I said.

You could go with me, he said.

I couldn't, I said.

I'll call before I leave, he said, and hung up the phone.

For my birthday Gray had given me an antique drawer lined in white canvas with a mounted Amazonian parrot wing inside, emerald green with flecks of blue and yellow. Pinned below was the skin of a small marsupial, then two leaves that looked like lace.

It's beautiful, I'd told him, lying. He'd beamed. I knew it had been an expensive gift, something he thought represented the convergence of our interests. Something we might pass down to our children.

A conversation piece, he'd said.

I had been embarrassed to display it, worried Emory would see the remnants of animals pinned like trophies behind glass when she came to the house.

I took it out of the china cabinet and opened the glass lid. I stroked the soft wing and marsupial pelt, then touched the leaves. They crumbled like dust.

• • •

Recipes began appearing in my mailbox, compliments of neighbors. Braised lamb shanks with rice. Curried lamb stew. Lamb kebabs. Tandoori-spiced leg of lamb.

You should move further out, Emory advised. Get into the country.

For an animal activist, moving to the country meant moving across the line from hobby rescue to sanctuary. I was not ready for that move.

I like where I am, I said.

How are the sheep? Emory asked.

Sheep-like, I said.

Proctor and Gamble were like garden gnomes, frozen when I was outside, yet surprisingly destructive when unwatched. They stiffened when the retrievers sniffed their tails, flattened their ears like Yoda.

Remember, Emory said. Dogs have double lives. They can kill the sheep when you're not looking.

One of my dogs has no teeth, I said. One is bound to a cart. The other has three legs.

Over fifty percent of sheep attacks are launched by domestic dogs, Emory said.

There are other things I'm losing sleep over, I said.

To Emory, all living things were in danger. It made her feel like a hero.

I spent the afternoon laying stones for the sheep, hoping the friction would help wear their hooves down. The spring sun was warm. I drank lemonade and vodka and let the dogs loose in the back yard.

Sam found a rabbit in the ivy patch. He gummied the rabbit by the neck, brought him to me.

The rabbit was half-dead, but not because of Sam. He had silvery blisters in his ears. He was mite-ridden, missing an eye. Soon, he'd be caught by a cat or a hawk. He shook in my arms.

Gray would tell me to snap its neck. He'd shown me once with a squirrel he'd run over in the driveway.

I placed the rabbit underneath the porch with water and food.

I was the shepherd of a strange flock.

You are looking for things to put between us, Gray had said when I told him about the sheep.

It was true.

Was there room for me in the porcelain village? My run-down house, my dogs, my sheep? Would my figurine be coated in hair?

The sheep huddled in the corner of the yard, leaned into each other, suspicious of my stones, Salli's strange gait, Prince's squeaking cart.

I went inside to top off my vodka and lemonade. I thought of Gray's leaves in the drawer of my bedside table and went upstairs to retrieve them. The raccoon had nested in my pillow. He looked so gentle, so asleep, that I did not shoo him away. I took the album outside and sat on the back steps—the one-eyed rabbit underneath me, the dogs beside me, the sheep watching me with their slivered eyes.

People always say: don't give up on things you love so easily.

But you can, and I did.

I ripped the leaves from the album's pages and threw them into the air like confetti.

Feast, I said to the sheep.

And eventually, they did.

“Schubert on the Water, Mozart in the Din of Birds”

The problem is the core, or lack of same,
a ghost must live here, it's so cold.
Well, not “live.”

And so, approaching the indefinite brink of you,
I can be anything, eyes that can't focus
absent instructions come apart
and the figures barely reach you with their love
intact. For they do start from love, you know.
Did you think they were meant to be catastrophes?

For instance, zeppelins. You may think of them as fat
floaty things flying low over your head.
But descend with me now
into the motor gondola. *Feel the vibrations.*
A purr—think of being inside a purr.

Such sights we could share! E.g.,
looking down on Los Angeles at night,
the millions of delicate lights,
the geometry no one has ever filmed it's too big:
if it were projected on a screen
the corners wouldn't even be visible
we are nauseous there is too much world to show to anyone,
love in the parks.

Rubbing the Hairs on the Back of a Man's Thighs

The woman in me stands at the door watching for her man
to fly down from the sky. "Jesus,
get a move on." She wants me to be
3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 times
more trumpeting than the elephant rains.

Galoshes in the snow are not dearer than the man in me
when the woman in me
is weeping and bedewing herself
like a sloppy lot of dew.
"Do right by me," she says

(has collapsed
is so discouraged already). "Get good reviews,
establish yourself; you will astonish foolish distractions
with your smell of the whole."

"Dead," her eyes say. "You'll have sex with a tomb."

I hate her eyes her eyes have come
hungry out of the bedroom of the crystal.

Deception Falls

O doctors of the falls, there was a cleaning establishment here, it tried on my father's gray suit,
my mother's blue dress, forgive its presumption, it wanted to know their
animal reserve, reverse diorama of their silences, of which I was the uproar,
fleeing

O doctors of the spits the "I" was a plunge pool where, now here, now there,
a dead distempered puppy leapt as if to catch a ball, and a woman with rain-
bow trout locks pounded the keys of a rocking upright and sang,
"Cuddle up and huddle up with all your might. O! O! O! O!"
while a man on the bank cranked the cold engine of the snow

O doctors of the city; it was on East Sprague that you taught my brother to play the violin,
until he was a high E note walking around the house blindly with distemper while
I fingered the bitch nipples of a clarinet and mother played the whip
saw she had anchored in father's fly, once upon we were living
in the vacuum tubes of krauts and allies

O doctors of the ringworm, your two nylon-capped flappers, rather pretty boys, escaped on the
horns of the Great Northern railroad, kicking the trees, fucking the goat, were
recaptured bloodsmeared always new in town unable to cry holding back each other's
spilling brotherly bowels

O doctors of the rebuff, not in the history of butterscotch corduroys, not in the cysts on the
bicycle's forehead, nor in the roller skate key's mislaid mouth did you plant
your image but in the comet of the sock you distributed the semen of the
dead while high in the forests virgins rode bareback the wet black bark of the bears

O doctors of the butcher shop, the finger-painting on your aprons is the pain in my chest,
I ignore it; I am salty, like a cloud; clean, like a vertical; watery, like an

onion; tasty, like a fishtail. The hundred cries of Deception Falls pour through my veins, the pain is so cold it's exhilarating, I will not go back to the scorched butterscotch-corduroy fields of the catalogues, to the epileptic popcorn dark of matinées, to father's pocket watch shut up like a leaking secret in his pocket

- O doctors of the archaeologies, who jerk off to valedictions, goodbye, goodbye, I say fie to everything that doesn't hurt so much as always, much always, and for so long. Those who have been too little born, and too much, shake their chances like a cat in a dog's mouth. Yet, in the aphid prime of Chance, in the urgently swollen hurt hours of a parrot-tulip-twisted rose, they escape into monstrous delusions, as of a heavy orange popsicle-slushy burning *struggling* moon rising from the dead smell of practice rooms, and play themselves *out there* like a guitar of tigers snarling in the "in" existence
- O doctors of industrial strength, bring me an acid high, for I would bang sharp at the window of the spike while feeling Up caffeinated hair with airplane ride on it through the quantum flocks' living sugars' drunken lurches at inexistence
- O doctors of smudges, burning sage to purify the spaces, this is the age of tear sheets and exposures, the Powers hesitate, or not, the measure is enormity, not the enormous. The moons have been routed from their nests, they cannot find the bowels of the rose, they are angry, they eat meat, the bastards
- Yes, doctors of the falls, baldfaced hornets are singing in the splintering piano, yes, doctors of the butcher shop, bloody wasps swarm your display cases, yes, doctors of the city, the musicians are playing the backs of the yellow jackets, the bright stripes, and the dark

About Two “Equals” Signs, then about Absolute Beauty

*i'm a little stiff from sitting still so long. "Of course you are, darling."
cloudlets draw together like railway cars without motion no one has much pleasure
Racine's lines curve in and out of the station
wind rippling between the legs of thought when thought goes out on its hillocks
more joyous than when thought holds the yellow light like a body in its arms
multiple black shadows moving in the glowing tents
the soldiers swore the dawn forward in the cold as men can be
blow on the fire the darkness will leave it clearly
the tall shrubs standing up and looking about like rabbits
the imagination, too, thinks phenomenologically, moving by little limps of light
a new thing is more natural
hum the basis of the comparison
it drives you mad to sit and smell yourself
gave it all my blood it looked ghastly in the morning
orders to kill that part of the sentence
to free yourself is not to know yourself*

the infinite stages you, you stage the infinite

*"they were startled to discover master Percy full fifteen feet from the ground,
straddling the branch of a tree." —Page 63*

the sacred is "a great struggle in tenses"

somewhere where you can't love it's so deep

in our disappearance to think of our reappearance

be cured of that

friend, go to the next stall if you want a vast interior

ride away from the inheritance that isn't really yours

be cured of that

we are in the way to see

like a colt kicking in a delicious lack of certainty

modern art jostles the infinite

coon doggie gonna dance out the lights tonight

book of the cataphonic collision of tiny mislabeled bottles

you aren't fragile you're just unstable

everyone is betrayed, hell, they're good at it

to collapse on the dune, mauling it

*gaze into the orchard like a woman who can see her baby in the dark
the darkness which has nothing well in hand
grasshopper lifting off sideways and turning like a helicopter
day grasshoppering in its great individual adventure
faun costume spotted koi terrible animal
the eye a hydrant when the mind is blue killed
the mind is jeep tonight with some make-out excitement
a lot of things all over had no idea to mean
so many clothespins to hold in the teeth
sofa and conversing in low tones
The Loves of a Druggist number one on the best-seller list
be beautiful pretend perfection a very pretty choice
for the wearer of the mask something is changed
a one in front of the zero
a very pretty move*

My Father in Cars

Margaret MacInnis

Before seatbelts I was a child who fit comfortably between my father's lap and the steering wheel of our red 1970 Oldsmobile convertible. My father used to cover my hands with his as I gripped the wheel, and say, "Look! You're driving, you're driving!" Sometimes he pretended to lose control of the car, and we'd swerve towards trees or a lake. I'd scream, and he'd raise his hands, shouting, "Drive! Drive!" In what felt to me like the nick of time, he'd take the wheel again, laughing and squeezing my hands beneath his. We never hit a tree, we never swerved off the road into the lake, and we never played this game with my mother in the car.

• • •

My father was fifteen the night he drove my grandfather's black Chevy convertible off a back road and into a tree. Because my grandfather Red treasured this car, no one thought he'd ever let my father near it again, but after both the car and my father had recovered from the accident, Red handed him the keys again. The first thing my father did was to drive the car up the street past St. Denis Catholic church and park in a cousin's driveway. Two other cousins, the Saviano brothers, were standing in the open garage. On that sunny afternoon the cousins were happy to see my father up and around. He'd given everyone a scare. Family, friends, and neighbors hoped he'd learned a lesson from the accident and calmed down a little.

My father and his three cousins made small talk and joked until my father said he had "places to go and people to see." With a wink and a wave, he was gone.

The Saviano brothers chatted in the doorway for a few more minutes before heading for home. As they walked the length of the driveway, they glanced toward the road my father would have taken to leave, the road that went past their grandparents' house, and could not believe what they saw there—Red's car right against a tree.

This could not be happening again, they thought, sprinting to the car, where they found my father hanging out the door, eyes closed. They weren't seeing

straight, they weren't thinking, so when they stooped to see if he was still breathing, he shocked them by grabbing one of the boys. "Gotcha!" he laughed. "Gotcha!"

• • •

"Johnny's been in a car accident," the police officer told my seventeen-year-old mother, who stood barefooted and bathrobed in the open doorway of the cottage where she and my twenty-four-year-old father were living. It was past midnight. She'd been awake, but the banging at the door had woken the baby. Johnny hadn't tried to brake, the police officer explained. There were no skid marks. He must've thought the road kept going. The car was totaled. He was lucky to be alive. My mother was trying to process what the officer was saying, but he kept talking. Johnny must've been very drunk, which was why he hadn't braked. My mother couldn't hear herself think, though that was probably for the best since what she was thinking was that my father had driven into that cement wall on purpose. The real accident was that he had survived.

• • •

I used to love being in the car, alone with my father. I reveled in the fleeting but glorious sensation of our being the only two people in the world. No one could touch us. While we traveled the winding back roads or the highways that cut through the Blackstone Valley, no one could disrupt our happiness. We'd sing along to the radio or eight-track, me sitting as close to my father as possible without being in his lap, something he didn't mind because he didn't want me leaning against the passenger door.

How I looked forward to those Saturday mornings when it was my father's turn to drive me to the hospital for my appointment with the asthma specialist. Who would have thought getting a shot could be so much fun? But it was. And, unlike my mother, my father stayed with me while the doctor administered the needle. He'd tell me to look at him, and then he'd tell a joke or ask a silly question to divert my attention from the jab and the ensuing sting.

• • •

He hit the stump. He ran into it and over it and then into it again. We should not have let him leave the house in that condition; but who could have stopped him really? Who could ever stop him when he wanted to leave? He and

my mother had argued viciously when he'd come home earlier. My father almost never drank or was drunk in front of my younger sister or me, but he had come home drunk this morning after staying out all night, and my mother had snapped, shouting, challenging him with her, "What are you thinking?" Drunk or sober, my father couldn't tolerate my mother's confrontations, couldn't answer this question, and I believe to keep from hitting her that day, he ran from the house.

In the midst of the shouting, the slamming doors, and the revving of the car's engine as it rammed into the stump, I didn't notice that my dog had slipped out behind my father. Sandy was a Sheltie, given to me by a friend of my grandmother's when his wife passed away; it had been her dog, and she had wanted me to have her because I loved her so much. And I did. Love the dog so much. When we discovered her missing, I went a little crazy myself. My grandmother went outside to look for her, heading to the road first because we all knew Sandy liked to chase cars. That was why we typically watched her whenever a door opened or closed. In the blink of an eye she might disappear, as was the case that day when I was seven, the day my father hit the stump, the day he ran into it and over it and then into it again, the day we should not have let him leave the house.

From the side porch I watched my grandmother walk towards the house cradling a brown bundle in her arms. Her steps were slow and heavy. She had no need to run. The dog was already dead.

I had been crying for what felt like hours by the time my father returned and found my sister and mother and grandmother sitting on the bed beside me. Downstairs my aunt must have told him what happened. "Jesus Christ," he said from the doorway. "How long has she been crying like that?"

My mother, grandmother, and aunt started talking at once, their voices distant and muffled. Having worn myself out from crying, I lifted my head to see and hear one last thing before I fell asleep. I could see my father covering his ears with his hands. "I can't take it," he said. "My sister used to cry like that. Jesus Christ, she sounds just like my sister. Make her stop."

• • •

Following a nurse towards my father's hospital room, my mother saw Leo, one of my father's drinking buddies, and two women she had never seen before sitting in the hallway outside his door. When Leo saw my mother, he stood. The two women stared.

At the door the nurse placed a hand on my mother's shoulder. "Don't worry honey. He's going to be okay. Are you his little sister?"

"I'm his wife."

The nurse blinked.

"Can I see him?" The nurse nodded, leading her past the two strange women. My mother pulled up a chair and sat next to my father. He was either sleeping or unconscious.

Leo approached and asked if she needed anything.

"I need to know what happened."

"I don't know, Vicki," Leo said. "He was fine when he left the bar."

She could smell the booze on Leo and knew he probably wasn't the best judge of who was and wasn't fine. My mother didn't ask about the two women. She didn't want to think about the two women.

The next morning, for insurance purposes, my mother went to her uncle's garage to remove the car documents from the glove compartment of the wreck. She was afraid to see the car, afraid to see how close my father had come to killing himself, but she had no choice.

The car was totaled, the passenger side completely crushed in. If she had been in the car with him, she'd be dead now.

To get to the glove compartment, my mother had to enter the car through the driver's side. Leaning across the seat, she saw something she had not expected to see, something that disturbed her more than the sight of the crushed passenger's door. There, dangling from the indicator, where my father must have slipped it before he went into the bar, was his gold wedding band.

• • •

"Don't worry. Don't be jealous. No one could take your place," my father said after my sister was born. The day she came home from the hospital, in an act of protest, I locked myself in a closet with a pair of scissors and cut off most of my hair.

My father patted the fuzz on my head as we drove down Main Street on our way to the Goodness Store and Restaurant, where you could get the daily dirt on your friends, enemies, and extended family while you stood at the counter drinking your coffee, eating a doughnut, and scanning the headlines of the *Worcester Telegram and Gazette*. If my father were home on a Friday night, we'd go to The Goodness Store to pick up our fish and chips. If he were home on a Sunday morning, we'd go there to pick up his reserved copy of *The New York Times*. "Can I carry it?" I'd ask, and he'd hand it to me. "It's heavy," he'd say, and he was right. I tried to wrap my arms around its bulk, but would feel it start to slip before I made it to the screen door. Every time I knew if I let go, the sections would fall and scatter. My goal was to make it to the car with the *Times* in one piece.

• • •

What went through my sixteen-year-old father's mind as he sat in his uncle's car, silent for the half hour from the Greyhound station in Worcester to their home in Douglas, Massachusetts? Someone had died. That's all they'd told him. Could he have imagined his sister's death? The way she fell from the faulty passenger door of her friend's car? The same way he had pretended to fall that day in front of his grandparents' house? Or did he imagine that one of his parents had finally stabbed the other to death in a fit of rage? Surely that would have been easier and less painful to imagine than his sister dead in the road.

• • •

Ninety meetings in ninety days began to wear on my mother; she hadn't let my father out of her sight in weeks. On weekends he wanted to go to two or three AA meetings in a single day. One Saturday my mother wanted to take my sister and me to the lake. Couldn't my father come with us and go to a meeting later, or go to a meeting in the morning and then join us at the lake? Why weren't these options?

My mother needed to go to the lake, and my father needed a meeting. She'd have to let him go alone. The first time she did, he'd come to the lake to say goodbye, and after he beeped one more goodbye and drove away, my mother felt her stomach drop to her knees. She stood breathless on the dock, following the car with her eyes until it disappeared. In that moment, a moment that would pass, she had to accept that if my father wanted to drink or cheat or drive off the

road into a tree or a cement wall, he'd do exactly that, and there was nothing she or anyone else could do about it.

• • •

Any time my father braked, whether suddenly or not, his right arm would jut across the seat in front of my face. Every time it startled me. Every time I asked, "Why do you do that?" Every time he answered, "Because if anything ever happened to you, I'd kill myself."

• • •

My sister Jessica and I sat wedged together in the front bucket seat of my father's silver Chevy Monza. We all knew that one of us should have been in the back, but we both wanted to sit in the front, and my father couldn't say no to either of us. I always wanted the middle, and he didn't have to remind me to lean into him so that Jessica was not pressed against the door. He laughed as he listened to us boast that surely we were the only three living on the lake to have walked downtown after the Blizzard of '78. My father noted that today the snow was melting slowly for the end of April; Mother's Day was only weeks away.

And that's when it happened. In the instant that it takes for an accident to irrevocably change your life, an instant that will define you, and will become the sieve through which all experience must pass; in that instant, the passenger door opened.

Before Jessica and I realized what was happening, my father reached across me and grabbed Jessica's upper arm so hard that bruises in the shape of his fingers would later appear. Then, pulling to the side of the road, he opened his door and walked around to the passenger side. Without saying a word he slammed the passenger door shut so fiercely that the car shook.

Startled and frightened, Jessica and I locked fingers and eyes, but my father was unable to offer any words of comfort. For the remainder of the ride home, he didn't speak. Thirty years later I can still see him driving home with one hand on the steering wheel and the other clenched in a fist over his mouth.

• • •

One afternoon the summer I turned thirteen, I watched my father packing the car. He was leaving again. My mother was crying. She didn't think she could

live without him. I wondered if he was as tired of leaving as we were of watching him leave.

• • •

"If anything ever happened to your mother, I'd become a monk," my father said at a red light when I was fourteen. "I could never love anyone else."

I nodded, not quite sure of the appropriate response, wondering what my parents talked about when they were alone in the car.

• • •

I was almost fifteen the Sunday afternoon at my grandparents' house when my father offered to give Jan, my uncle's new girlfriend, a ride home. She accepted, and the three of us headed out to my father's new car, a silver Caprice Classic, a beautiful car, I thought. Since it had been a Sweet Life company car, my father had gotten a great deal on it, he said to my mother when he surprised her with it.

"You're in the back," I told Jan. I don't remember a word spoken in the four or five minutes it took to get from A Street to Cummings Court, but I do remember clearly what my father said after Jan slid out the back door, and leaned into my window to say, "Thanks and goodbye, *John*" before she walked into her house. He said, "I think Jan is pretty in a strange way. Don't you?"

I thought about it for a minute before I agreed. She was definitely odd-looking, but not ugly. She was odd-looking enough to be, as my father said, pretty in a strange way. He asked if I liked her. I said she was a nice girlfriend for Michael, who was eighteen years my father's junior. He nodded, and that was the end of our discussion of Jan. Over the next few weeks, however, Jan's name crept into our conversations. "In a lot of ways," my father said one day, "Jan reminds me of your mother when she was young."

My mother was thirty. I didn't think of her as old.

He wasn't talking about age, he said, more about mannerisms, a certain look. "I'll tell you a secret," my father said, swearing me to keep it to myself. "Jan is a virgin."

It wasn't a secret. "Michael already told me," I said. "He also told me that he wants to be her first."

My father stared at me, oddly shocked, oddly I think considering what he had just told me.

• • •

One summer night my father, Jan, and Michael drove to Boston in the Caprice. My mother didn't go with them, and Jessica and I weren't invited. I don't remember why they went in the first place, but I remember waiting up, and I remember a stranger's truck pulling up the driveway and letting my father out. He came through the door looking feverish. "You're never going to believe what happened," he said. Someone had torched his car.

"What?" my mother said, having suddenly appeared in the living room doorway.

Someone had set his car on fire. When he, Michael, and Jan had returned to the parking lot, there were fire trucks everywhere, and my father had the strangest feeling that it was his car, and when he got closer, he saw that it was.

"How did you get home?" my mother wanted to know.

"One of the guys on the fire department lives in Worcester. He gave us a ride."

My mother said she was going back to bed. She would deal with this in the morning.

"You should've seen it, Margaret. There was nothing left except a burned out shell. I've never seen anything like it."

"Were other cars burned, too?" I said.

"Nope, just mine."

"How strange," I said.

"It sure is." He ran his fingers through his hair, making it stand on end, and this effect, coupled with the fever in his eyes of whatever had happened in Boston, made him look like a madman. "I'm going to bed, too," he said. "Your old man's had enough excitement for one night."

The next morning my mother made phone calls. My parents would get money from the insurance company, enough to buy another car and there might be some money left over. I found it bizarre that my mother wasn't angry about the car. She wasn't angry about anything. Instead she grew calmer and quieter as each day passed. One morning soon after, I discovered my father sleeping in the downstairs bedroom.

• • •

"I don't think your mother loves me anymore," my father said one afternoon when I was fifteen. I knew that if I looked at him, I'd start to cry, so I fixed my gaze in the rearview mirror and watched our house shrink behind us.

• • •

The first time I went somewhere alone with my father and Jan, after they became romantically involved, I once again told Jan she had to sit in the back, that I'd be sitting in the front with my father. Who was *she*, after all? What was *she* but an interloper? Jan looked at my father, but he only shrugged his shoulders. "You heard her. She's the boss."

I didn't feel like the boss. I certainly didn't want to be Jan's boss. I didn't want to be anyone's boss, not really, although my father could have used some bossing. At fifteen, I was simply not prepared to share my father with an eighteen-year-old. It was ridiculous, it was madness, and it was only the beginning of what would be our final spiral and descent.

• • •

The Saturday trips to the asthma specialist stopped when I turned eleven. There were preventative pills I could take, and other medicine that could be inhaled rather than injected. On one of the last of our Saturday drives down the highway to Worcester, my father slowed at the sight of two hitchhikers. I shook my head. We shouldn't pick them up. My mother wouldn't have stopped: I know that. But my father did, insisting that I had nothing to be afraid of. "Relax," he said, laughing as the bedraggled couple slid into the back seat. My father chatted with the hitchhikers as if they were friends while I quietly seethed, mentally composing what I wanted to say to the strangers in our car: My father should not have slowed down when he saw you. He should not have made eye contact. He should not have stopped to open the door. Can't he see that you have the potential to hurt us? On an impulse you could ruin our lives. What was my father thinking? I didn't want to pick you up. Didn't want you in our car. Didn't want to listen to your incessant idiotic chatter in the backseat. But I had no choice.

In that moment I felt trapped beside my father, unable to speak, unable to express what was pulsing through me. Because I was forbidden to ever touch the door, I clutched the leather beneath me, sinking into the seat, wishing I were anywhere else, praying I'd survive the ride.

Exemption Limits

K. C. Wolfe

There are no other cars on the Canadian side except for an aging RV with Utah plates, parked just past the guard shack. We pull up and the officer leans out of the window, which looks like a drive-thru for a Taco Bell. He's in his early thirties and plump, with glasses. His tone is such that if he didn't wear a uniform, I'd have trouble taking him seriously. Where are we coming from? he says.

New York, I say. Or, well, Colorado really, but New York I guess, originally, you know.

Where are we going?

Anchorage.

Do we have any weapons, any liquor, any drugs?

No, I say.

Do we have more than \$10,000 in currency?

I wish, I say, laughing, and maybe I laugh too much. Maybe Sarah laughs too much. Maybe we sound fishy. The officer looks at the IDs in his hands as if he's checking a watch. He chuckles.

Everyone says that, he says.

They search us because we wear the road on our faces like the tramps we've become. Because we're in the middle of arid grassland, waiting to ignite, and ours is the only car pushing across it. Because Sarah, whose eyes catch the light like new pennies, looks so young. Because we're not tourists. Because there is no plan, it seems, except to have left. Because we're in an old Chevy with a buckle and a dent in the hood and an inch of Montana dust on it; busted high beams, busted cruise, brakes that squeal, shocks that squeak, New York plates. Because it's not a recreational vehicle. Because open spaces induce panic, and emptiness breeds suspicion. Because we left for no other reason than not having left before. Because we're guilty of leaving. Because we're due.

Our lives are emptied onto a gray plastic cart: backpacks and garbage bags of clothes, a box of books, a toolbox, a tent and its poles. CD books, notebooks,

bags of rice, boxes of tea. A CBP officer in a black uniform fishes a hand into five inches of cooler water and then closes the lid. She's in her late twenties, polite but not warm, with a blonde ponytail that bounces as she pulls bags out of the trunk and places them on the cart. She drags out clothes from the bags and checks their pockets and flaps the pages of books so little notes I've left in them fall lightly to the ground. She reads the titles of the books. She reads the notes. She calls us Mr. Wolfe, Miss Fleming, sir, ma'am. She makes polite conversation: *Do you have a job in Alaska, Mr. Wolfe? Do you have family there? I lie: Yes, we have a purpose, a plan, yes, we have people.*

If there are drugs in the car, Mr. Wolfe, tell me where they are right now. We're gonna have to rip this car apart, Mr. Wolfe. Mr. Wolfe, tell me where the drugs are.

My voice cracks when I say that there aren't any, ma'am, that we're just trying to get through the country. *This trip, I say, it's too important.*

But she asks me again and again and again. *We're gonna have to rip this car apart, Mr. Wolfe. Mr. Wolfe, it'll be a lot easier if you don't lie to us. Mr. Wolfe, tell me the truth.*

There is one small window in the office, behind the interrogator's desk, which looks out over the guard shack and the international zone. Past the shack, without fences or lines or stakes in the ground, Montana bleeds into Alberta. The afternoon looks brighter than when we arrived. I can faintly hear the wind.

My interrogator says that Canada appreciates my patience, but what Canada doesn't appreciate is dishonesty. He ends every sentence with *Mr. Wolfe*. He looks up from the papers as if he's practiced his glance in front of a mirror.

You're a convicted felon, he says. You lied to us, Mr. Wolfe.

My shoulders tighten and I stare at him, blinking, for an indiscernible amount of time. He hasn't given his name or his title, and now I want to call him that, Agent or Corporal or Mister, the kind of address that will make me sound professional and confident; a participant, not a target.

1996, he says, New York.

I read my memory as if it's someone else's, an objective observer, searching out anomalies. What have I done wrong? What have I forgotten? I see home and high school and drinking beers in my buddy's car. I see baseball, basement parties, my first sexual experiences, a fight I watched at some playground, the fake ID I had, the red, late night faces of my friends. But I see home more than anything else—hear the bagpipes the cops in my neighborhood played and the sound of the bus going by the front of my house, the surprise in my mother's face when I told her I was leaving. Home, like a blueprint for memory, for every place I've come from and every place I'll go, becomes more pronounced and vivid than I've imagined it in the six weeks since I've left it. Homesickness is not born of nostalgia. It's born of guilt.

Indignant, I tell my interrogator that this is silly: I was fourteen in 1996 and I have never been convicted of a felony, or a misdemeanor, for that matter. But he is otherwise convinced.

You were convicted, Mr. Wolfe, in 1996.

I ask for a piece of paper.

I'll give you my social security number, I say, and that will clear this up.

He hasn't taken his eyes off of me since first reading the paper and he doesn't say anything now for a long moment. He has dark eyes which make his face appear smaller, like a squirrel's, and dark hair and a pale complexion. He's anonymous and bureaucratic-looking: early forties, cheap blue suit and blue tie, cheap white shirt.

Where were you born?

U.S.

Where?

He is mechanical and rhythmic: What was the name of my high school, my college? What is my mother's maiden name? What is my relationship with Miss Fleming and how long have I known her? Where did we meet? How did we meet? Where am I coming from? Where am I going?

I pace when I have too much to think about, like a mute lecturer, a hand going through my hair or wrapped across my chin. At quick glance, it's a nervous posture, though having too much to think about doesn't always make me nervous. It would be suspect here of course, waiting in the Border Waiting Room, so I just

stand, and sit, and stand, and read the posters and signs: *Be Aware and Declare! Know Your Personal Exemption Limits*. Sarah comes out after twenty minutes and sits down next to me. She takes my hand. She's about to cry. *They think I'm someone else*, she says.

Me too, I say.

I supposedly committed fraud in, like, the early nineties.

I got caught stealing.

They make you feel so guilty, she says.

We look up hopefully at everyone who comes by. An officer comes and goes. An older man with sunglasses opens the door, sticks his head in, and then closes it. He appears lost. It's like a hospital waiting room, but the loved ones we're desperate to hear about are ourselves. Sarah looks out the window and I look at the clock. It's five in the afternoon. We've been here for four hours.

What do we do, she says, *if we can't get in?*

I see the ease of turning around, of going home, like a solution to a problem I never knew we had—the relief of family, the security of known places, the life we'll slide back into as if we'd never left it. Part of me feels so good to know this. Part of me doesn't.

In fourteen hours we will be in northern British Columbia, driving through a fog so thick that I will mistake the endless fields of wheat for dense forest. The sun, rising, will burn it off, in patches at first, then in one fell swoop, until we're surrounded by acres of gold. *Truckin'*, by the Grateful Dead, will come on the local radio station, and Sarah will wake to me singing it, my voice cracking during the high parts. I'll know most of the words. Four days later we'll drive into Anchorage under clear skies and park where the road ends, on Cook Inlet, and call home. We'll leave two years later.

But before we continue north, before the interrogator brings us back into his office and clears our names, before he sends us back to Montana for more cash to prove we can pay our way through the western provinces, Sarah and I sit in the waiting room, unsure if we'll get out of there. The light changes outside. The shadows grow, spreading across the prairie like brushfires. She glances behind her and then leans toward me, whispering. *I'm not going home*, she says. *Are you?*

Dividend of the Social Opt Out

How lovely it is not to go. To suddenly take ill.
Not seriously ill, just a little under the weather.
To feel slightly peaked, indisposed. Plagued by
a vague ache, or a slight inexplicable chill.

Perhaps such pleasures are denied
to those who never feel obliged. If there are such.

How pleasant to convey your regrets. To feel sincerely
sorry, but secretly pleased to send them on their way
without you. To entrust your good wishes to others.
To spare the equivocal its inevitable rise.

How nice not to hope that something will happen,
but to lay on the couch with a book, hoping that
nothing will. To hear the wood creak and to think.
It is lovely to stay without wanting to leave.

How delicious to not care how you look,
clean and uncombed in the sheets. To sip
brisk mineral water, to take small bites
off crisp Saltines. To leave some on the plate.

To fear no repercussions. Nor dodge
the unkind person you bug.

Even the caretaker has gone to the party.
If you want something you will have to

get it yourself. The blue of the room seduces.
The cars of the occupied sound the wet road.

You indulge in a moment of sadness, make
a frown at the notion you won't be missed.
This is what it is. You have opted to be
forgotten so that your thoughts might live.

Fantasies of Management

When we tell ourselves
that so many bells
have rung beyond
our understanding,

what we really mean
is that so many ring
counter to the way
we wish to understand them.

When I think back
long ago, almost back
to that barbaric time,
what I want is to lie

down in a mile-wide
bafflement of grasses
until there is nothing
left of me but willingness

to go through it all
again, because unless
a donut box of dollars
falls down from the

sky I lie beneath, admiring,
it can't be avoided—

only this time, when they talk
as if I have a choice

in the matter, a way to say
no and live, I'll ask
if they wouldn't mind kindly
doing me the favor

of repeating that please
because I couldn't quite make out
whatever they just said
through all that privilege.

No Mission Statement, No Strategic Plan

When loathing's narwhal thrusts its little tusk
 deep into the not-for-profit of my thought
and anchors in the planks across which I have

stomped unfathomable hours, and thanklessly;
 when I feel the panic of it struggling to dislodge
and all the damage done to the ship thereby—

the prow, to be exact, if we agree this is a ship,
 and now I fear we have no choice—when lost
in drear blue Baffin Bay, if night's first voice

says *Quick, we're sinking, yank that narwhal out,*
 it must be night's second, less impetuous voice
saying *Not so fast. Why not leave it where it is?*

His Theogony

In the bathtub I envision
twin deities suppressing
the same eternal yawn.

Tiny handprints prance
across their tightened lids.
Trembling beneath this

revelation, dozens more
wait to hatch, but I lack
the wherewithal to make them.

As I sink back thinking
they can all just imagine
themselves themselves

tonight, the twins' eyes pop
open like the massive
tambourines of the future!

In this life I'll almost certainly
not be acquainted with
much luxury, so if it ever

shakes in front of me again,
I'll take it in my hands
posthaste: to play with, then destroy.

Walking It Off

Whenever I try to maybe just breathe
 some appalling shit happens
 and I have to get on the couch

and pretend to recover. Even when the trouble slows
 I'm a lightbulb with a skull fracture,
 a brick in a way in a dumb-dirty river

being lobbed by semi-kids in splashy shorts
 and bobby pins. And yes being tossed
 wounds the poor viscera

and no we should not be so self-important
 as to think in the plural first person
 as yes we know

we are not the protagonist of the story
 or even a semicolon
 in the middle of a sentence about it

as what really matters is America and *her* heartaches,
 her girls on rollerskates. Yes the moon landing
 and yes the GDP.

O Michael Jackson O Walter Cronkite O Natasha
 Richardson: what was it like
 that last second

in the U.S. among us? Was there
 a rope to grab or was it a staircase of mist
 and did you climb to outer space

or was it more like being knocked out
 and carried into the woods
 and thrown into a ditch

or should I imagine each of you wrapped
 in receiving blankets after being
 milked and powdered

or should I think up ants and other insects—
 weevils—crawling your bodies
 and what do you miss

the most? Your skin, your mouths, your
 unique way of thinking with the radio low
 and you smoking at the ravine all hot and giddy

or is it something more unspeakable
 such as your glee with the speed at which
 you rose and flew I guess

and left us ramshackle and lowdown and droning and loose?

24-Hour Roman Reconstruction Project

—for Obama on his 99th day in office

To hold both masking tape and scissors,
glue stick and pen labeled permanent?
Does this poem need a branch of myrtle in it?

Lately, I've been tracing the flight paths
of a dollar bill then cutting it
into halves and I have knots. Could you

rub a bit harder, and to the left, please?
The invitation says you don't need to bring
your own weapon. You can make one

when you get here. In Texas we've got
an ammunition shortage and a cute
mixed-race point guard trash-talking

the Mavericks' center. Do you know him?
Don't shoot the mistake.
Don't shoot the doctor in the face.

Yes, there will be wrestling.
Yes, there will be snacks.
When the immortal skyline proves mutable.

When a child is born three weeks (we say) early

and by this mean the difference between
expectation and crowning.

My fellow shillabers, my tired Visigoth,
late it gets. Time lapse
makes a flower bloom so fast.

Into Closeness

Don't think of me as cabbage
shredded, my head I mean,

content to follow this scar
on your tongue to some dark tarn

where the eyes of potatoes
bubble up from grey water

to ask if you've forgotten
my name, the one I club you with.

Or, the sea floor spreading
the part in your hair

where birds sing so greedily
from the vent, trapped

in blue light, want still clinging
to my silence, no longer

sweating semicircles, no longer
dangling suitcases from a crane.

Infomericana

This is the Ab-Slide. A revolution in evolution.

It's been called the new natural wonder.

Can it chop through bone? Glide through frozen foods? Fillet fish like a pro?
Slice bread evenly?

Oh, it's perfection.

It's the best exercise of yesterday combined with the high-tech of today. The muscle-building strength of the Ab-Slide movement

(plus a flavor injector and barbecue gloves)

supports your structure, it supports your lower back.

The lat muscles are working, the serratus muscles are working, the intercostal muscles are working, the chest muscles are working.

Studies have shown that both negative and positive resistance have benefits.

I remember distinctly closing my eyes, firing my guns,

food food food everywhere you go,

and by the time evening rolls around we're eating this huge giant enormous meal

plus some of the rarest and recently declassified footage.

If we had laundry we could do it right here on this washboard stomach.

Hi I'm Tom Jourdan. And I'm Jennilee Harrison.

And

for only one easy payment of \$39.95—but there's more—

only four eeeeeea-sy payments of only \$39.95.

The editing took the comments and the visuals and put them together in a story that gives you a whole new perspective on what happened in the sky.

In my mid-section and lower abs.

In the can so freezer packs are no problem for this tough guy.

In one belt-tightening, muscle-building, slide-to-slim movement.

I get turned on like I want to have sex all the time now. Jan said it's like Progenis has created a monster. I'm all over her all the time and she's loving it—we're both loving it—we couldn't be happier and we owe it all to

the guaranteed replacement at any time for any problem.

Soy is the highest form of plant protein possible.

Tough enough to zap through bone.

When I could no longer have sex with my wife Anne, it, it wasn't all of the sudden, it was something that happened slowly, gradually, and eventually it was just gone, my sex drive, my ability—it was just gone—so, as unhappy and frustrated as we were, we, we just lived with it, sort of suffering in silence.

Joan from California's on the line.

I mean let's be real and that's what this system is, it's real and it works.

You're not going to look good if you don't do something.

I've seen the proof.
I felt changes in my body,
I felt huge changes right away.
I'm also really excited to share this with everybody:
the abs even have their own language.
Because it has a spring in it
we'll be back in a couple of minutes
so rush to that phone now,
go ahead and roll the device out.
You'll also receive an instructional video
but that's not all—
notice one thing: no tears.

The lines in this poem were taken from infomercials for the following products: The Ab-Slide, The Titanium 2 Cutlery Set, Hunters in the Sky (DVD series), The Ultimate Lean Routine, Progenis (sex drive booster for men), and The Ronco Showtime Rotisserie and Barbecue Grill.

Property of Alvin Flover

I poked my stick into a crumpled coffee cup and before I put it into my trash bag I noticed that written on it, in black sharpie, were the words PROPERTY OF ALVIN FLOVER. I didn't give it much thought. People write their names on coffee cups fairly often, or push dents in them to designate what's theirs. About a week later though, in a different neighborhood, I poked my stick into an empty package of batteries upon which PROPERTY OF ALVIN FLOVER had also been written. Hmm, I thought. The occurrences continued. On Jones Beach, there was a Styrofoam Big Mac container with PROPERTY OF ALVIN FLOVER. Also that day I found his mark on the shell of a crab, the inside of a Snickers wrapper, and a piece of blanched driftwood. My community service had me all over the place and I had nothing better to do, so I decided I might as well help him. I started scribbling PROPERTY OF ALVIN FLOVER—first on certain interesting pieces of refuse, then on just about everything. It was actually a godsend. I won't even get into why... Anyway, adding to the evidence of Mr. Alvin Flover's stay on earth became my new game. I tagged old LP covers in piles of street trash, cigarette packs, blue iron mailboxes. I moved my Sharpie from my pants pocket to my breast pocket. When no one was looking, I even leaned over my dead uncle's coffin, unbuttoned his shirt, and FLOVERed right on his chest. (It was sick, but I used to think that Flover would be especially proud of this one.) Of course I liked to think that others were out there as well, spreading his cause, but there was no way to know. Perhaps it was just a two-man operation: Flover and myself. Perhaps he and I alone were a "we." Up late and alone—and it's six years later—I still find myself thinking of him. In my fantasy he is on a walk deep in the woods. He comes across a faded beer can, doubled over. Removing his Sharpie, reaching down to that small piece of the universe, he discovers with great surprise that it already belongs to him.

Einstein

The men in his unit had called him Einstein, at first behind his back, but once they saw how little it bothered him, to his face. He'd been teaching high school chemistry when he got called up. It wasn't that he knew so much. They just seemed to know extraordinarily little. After a while, he started feeling like a trained monkey, delivering the goods on demand. *Hey, Einstein. Smithy says ask you what the five factory medals are.* And Smithy, with a tad more intelligence than the rest of them, saying, "It's refractory metals, you idiot—not factory medals."

Now, his head encased in gauze like a piece of fine chocolate, he tried to remember everything—anything—he knew. Five refractory metals. *Rhenium. Niobium. Tantalum. Spoon. Felicia.* That wasn't right. *Rhenium. Niobium. Chrysanthemum. Felicia.* A nurse leaned over. The smell of her, all bleach and isopropyl alcohol, made his eyes water.

"What is this?" she asked again, holding up a pencil. "Try not to get frustrated." *You're a cow,* he thought.

"Pencil," he said. But between his brain and mouth the word twisted like a snake and shed its skin, morphing into something different. *Shoe* was what came out of him; the *shhh* drawn out like an exhalation of final breath.

"Again," she said, maybe an edge of exasperation creeping into her voice. He recalled standing in front of his students, practically willing them to grasp what he thought, at the time, was important. *Rhenium. Niobium. Felicia. Felicia. Felicia.*

Joseph Holt

Your Nightmare

The other night you had a nightmare. You kicked across the bed and woke me. In my own dream there was something of an earthquake or a collapse, some kind of disturbance—things were shaking. I realized it was you, turning over on the mattress, struggling against something holding you down against your will, but nothing was there.

I know what it's like in dreams: though we try and move, our bodies are always tethered. I've had dreams I was back in high school at a track meet, running the 100-meter dash. I take my place in the center lane, the black rubber composite warm under my fingertips. The starting gun goes off. I rise from the blocks but my feet seem anchored to them. I pump my arms and pitch my shoulders, yet move nowhere. The humidity closes in on me; sweat beads over my forehead. I look up for help and become disheartened: the scoreboard flashes the seconds in normal time—faster even, it's been a full minute already. The woman in the lane beside me shrugs; she whispers, *Aren't you even trying?*

You never told me about your nightmare, and I never asked. A few years ago, on a Sunday in late August, we were sitting beside each other on the patio, iced teas in hand, surrounded by dusk. Earlier that afternoon I had hand-tilled the garden while you read by yourself in the study. I told you of my plans for next season, of azaleas and clematis and larkspur, all bordered with a lattice of honeysuckle; I described to you a fireworks display in flowers. You nodded, your mind elsewhere. I finished and a silence descended upon us like the night. Before we went inside, you said, unprovoked, that sometimes we don't need to talk, we know each other so well. We know each other *too well*: those were your words. And that hurt me, as if you had somehow realized there are parts of me you don't want and wish you could unlearn. In defiance I withheld myself and became cold to you; and you became cold to me. Soon the little things fell away. That spring you hurt your knee and we quit playing tennis. I stopped sending surprise letters to you at work. You no longer kissed me anywhere but above the neck. I gave up shaving my legs during the week.

Someday we'll look up: the scoreboard lights will have burned away; the twilight will have closed in around us. But I am trying—I'm looking up now.

Your nightmare, what was it?

To Satisfy This Demand for Salt There Is First of All the Sea

Everyone is salted with fire. The flames of salt burning blue, the color of driftwood fires. Everyone walking along the beach at night has hair whipped by wind into the mouth: salt, a sticky sweetness, the same film covering arms and legs, drying white-rough. Along the shore where waves pull back, algae glows green and alien, phosphorescent.

If bread is the staff of life, salt is the spirit. It sings in the mouth. We followed the animals to its source because, becoming agricultural, we needed more of it. Small grains like the lick of tears. Salt seals the deal; there is pain in binding, in salting wounds for preservation. It is now known that salt exists almost everywhere on earth—sea salt, brine salt, rock salt. And even after this knowledge, we have salaries and go to war.

In the parable of the mustard seed, the smallest seed grows into a magnificent tree and becomes a hotel for lodging fowl. It spices the world. A tree of salt is a tree of cures, also a tree of necessary greed; its leaves are like crystals catching the light, disappearing in the rain, a soluble currency.

As a child I poured salt from the shaker into my palm and licked. The sweaty hand smelling like dirt, things of the earth. The one day it snows in North Carolina, less than an inch, the roads are overly salted. The asphalt white where it was black, and the tires of trucks are white-powdered-salt-white silent. I catch my cat eating from the salt bowl. Animals need salt, although scientific studies vary in given quantity per species. One source says 10.3 kilograms for milk cows.

Deeper within the earth lie terrestrial salt deposits, which have formed through the time span recognized by geologists, from the earliest or Precambrian era (over five hundred million years ago). The salt mines rise around a camera crew filming a TV cooking show—walls shimmering like catacombs for giant cattle and their fat pink tongues.

Into the Fridge

Nancy Geyer

Now and then, while driving around the southern tier of upstate New York, or traveling five hours by bus to New York City (much of it along a rural highway with few towns or landmarks), I spot a lone kitchen appliance or bathroom fixture or piece of upholstered furniture in a field. A toilet put out to pasture is mildly amusing the first time or two, and a sofa, in those rare instances when it's artfully arranged—amid wildflowers or overlooking a pond or accompanied by a side table and lamp—can be a wonderful evocation of world-as-living-room. But a discarded refrigerator is in a different category: it conjures danger, especially if you were a child, or the parent of a young child, in the 1950s or '60s. It doesn't matter that it's always a "modern" refrigerator; that is, one that was obviously manufactured after the Refrigerator Safety Act went into effect in 1958—which isn't to say that vintage refrigerators, with their outside door latches, don't occasionally surface all these decades later. The connection was formed early and is indelible (and even today's refrigerators aren't completely childproof).

I don't remember who first warned me, in the mid-'60s, when we lived on the fringe of a college town in the Shenandoah Valley, to stay away from abandoned refrigerators. My mother, probably, either in response to rumors I'd reported, or because she saw yet another newspaper headline, or simply felt it was time given that I had the run of the neighborhood in a place and era in which childhood wasn't so obsessively managed. I imagine she was firm but not graphic in the telling, avoiding gothic tones that would haunt my dreams. I would have asked "Why?" and she would not have responded, "Because I told you so," for I might then have done the very thing she'd forbidden me to do. Rather, she would have explained, matter-of-factly and in simple terms, our dependence on air or oxygen, and how, if I were to become trapped, it might run out. The imperative to look both ways before crossing the street had already been ingrained, but that was self-evident by comparison and entailed little mulling over. I could count many ways I might come to harm, each with its own harsh lesson—the potential evil of "strangers" being the hardest to absorb—but it was this new danger, more

than any other, that gave me an inkling of myself as an animate being. It forced me to ponder breathing. (What if, I know I asked at some point, I forget to breathe while I'm asleep?) And for the first time I had to grapple with the invisible, with something not available to any of my senses.

For years after the new regulations were in place, requiring new refrigerators to have doors that could be opened from the inside—either by a fifteen-pound push, or by turning a device that resembled a conventional doorknob—children playing hide-and-seek or engaging in pranks continued to perish, singly and often in pairs¹, in old refrigerators that had been emptied for defrosting or abandoned for good: in garages, basements, backyards, temporarily vacant apartments, dumps. Even today, there is the rare headline, sometimes from halfway around the world. Children were much more likely to die in other sorts of accidents, but the refrigerator deaths seemed especially horrific, not only because they were easily preventable (so was poisoning and suffocation by plastic bags) but because they occurred in one of a home's most familiar, most life-sustaining features.

It didn't occur to me that the solution to the problem was anything other than the sole province of engineers until I happened upon an October 1958 article in the journal *Pediatrics*, titled "Behavior of Young Children under Conditions Simulating Entrapment in Refrigerators." The paper, available online, presented the results of a 1956 study assigned to the Children's Bureau (part of what is now the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) in the conviction that child behavior had to be taken into account in the redesign of refrigerator doors. In other words, we first needed to know: How do children behave when they are stuck inside a fridge?

The study, whose lead investigator was a pediatrician, can hardly be said to have truly answered that question. After all, using a real refrigerator or

1. And sometimes in groups larger than two. There was a particularly ghastly thirty-six-hour period in August 1953, five years before the Safety Act went into effect, in which eleven children died in three separate incidents. Five of the children, who apparently had been playing follow-the-leader, were found in an icebox on the porch of their "farm cabin" near Crawfordville, Arkansas. Their mother, described as the wife of a tenant farmer, was reported to have been out "chopping cotton" with her two older children. In a similar incident in Richmond, Virginia, four "adventurous barefoot boys" were found in a wooden icebox. The two other icebox deaths occurred in a dump in Haverhill, Massachusetts.

even a facsimile was unthinkable.² There was the possibility that it might be too traumatic, of course, but also the converse, that the children might want to repeat the experience on their own. (For the same reason, and because it was important that the children's experience resemble as closely as feasible a naturally-occurring entrapment, they weren't told the nature of the study.) And so a relatively soothing surrogate was devised—a plywood "playhouse" whose interior dimensions approximated that of a contemporary refrigerator minus the freezer compartment, or 40 x 18 x 25 inches.

Judging from a black-and-white photo accompanying the article, the structure was attractive enough. The plywood was covered in a simple floral print (like what you might find on a hospital gown), the house had a peaked roof and a faux brick chimney, and, on the inside, the walls were encircled by a train motif. And yet, despite this and additional precautions taken to cushion the children's experience, the study makes for uncomfortable reading.

The kids must have thought they were in for an adventure. The two hundred and one girls and boys, between two and five years old, were brought one by one to a former estate that had become part of the grounds of the National Bureau of Standards in Washington, DC (now the National Institute of Standards and Technology, relocated to Gaithersburg, Maryland)—a lavish landscape with "trees, shrubs, and spreading lawns." They entered what appears to have once been a grand residence with capacious rooms, and were diverted with toys and coloring books and puzzles until it was time to separate from their parents. They then accompanied a researcher to a tiled terrace to play ball in an attempt to form a bond before moving on to the test room, where their heights and weights were measured. Finally they came to the playhouse at the room's far end. The children were "lured" into the enclosure—whose door was equipped with one of six inside

2. Real refrigerators were used in research involving dogs, however. A 1973 patent application filed by Richard E. Vallee and Gerald E. Vallee cited a study that found that dogs survived for about four hours in a closed, unplugged refrigerator, while dogs in refrigerators that were kept running survived for at least twenty-four hours. Rising temperatures, fueled by body heat, were a more immediate threat than dwindling oxygen, the study concluded. The Vallees' invention, intended for refrigerators with magnetic door gaskets (which is how the doors of most refrigerators manufactured since 1958 are secured), was a device that would break the magnetic seal and pop open a refrigerator door when the temperature inside reached a certain level.

release devices³ connected to a gauge that could measure the amount of force they applied in their attempts to get out—by “music and Donald Duck chatter.” Once they were inside, the door closed, the cartoon came to a halt, and the children were plunged into darkness. They could hear little of the outside world.⁴

The study reported a wide variety of behavior, ranging “from complete inactivity to violent panic,” divided into three groups:

1. Inaction, with no effort to escape or only slight effort (24%). These were the children who stood or sat patiently, apparently waiting to be let out or for the movie to come on. Some made slight exploratory movements, gently touching the door or walls. A few knocked politely, saying “Please let me out” or “I’m ready to come out now.” A few were almost motionless. Some cried gently, others made no sound and apparently were unconcerned. More than one child sat quietly for fifteen minutes...
2. Purposeful effort to escape, without violence (39%). These children went to work, usually immediately, to find a way out—pushing, feeling, or trying to manipulate a knob or device, if present. Some were quiet,

3. Two of the six devices were added mid-experiment, including a doorknob after it was observed that enough children seemed to be searching for one to warrant including it in the test. I immediately flashed back to an image of my two-year-old niece, grappling with the doorknob to a bedroom. Hearing the click of disengagement, she turned around and smiled at me, broadly. To my niece, was one door like any other door? What about context? It seemed to me that the children in the study were given every reason to expect a doorknob, having just walked into a structure capped by a roof and chimney. Would a child look for one in a refrigerator? Or maybe the more pertinent question was, simply, whether a doorknob inside a fridge would be helpful. Perhaps, but it would also be highly suggestive. The second device was ultimately deemed impractical. Who would have predicted that some children would be so passive that the researchers would feel compelled to devise a panel that rolled along the playhouse floor, forcing the door open at the slightest movement, even if a child was leaning against a side or back wall?

4. The outside world could hear and see them. Recording and infrared photography equipment, including a microphone, tape recorder, and 16mm motion-picture camera, were hidden beneath the roof and elsewhere. And, through the back of the playhouse, a snooperscope was trained on the children, converting their infrared images so that they could be observed as if in visible light.

others cried or called out, but at the same time made direct efforts to let themselves out...

3. Violent action, with or without purposeful effort to escape (37%). These were the children who kicked, banged, jumped up and down, threw themselves against the door, or exhibited anger. Many of these directed their violence toward escape, but some panicked to the degree that no purposeful effort was apparent...

They also screamed, wrung their hands, called for their mothers, and "made curious twisting, twining, and picking movements of the fingers."

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It's difficult to read the *Pediatrics* article, written over half a century ago, and not be struck by a certain immediacy. These were not 1950s children, safely in the past and participating in a study whose ethics had long since ceased to be profitable to interrogate, but simply children. Just two to five years old, their behavior for the most part still raw and elemental, they were too unmolded to be claimed by any given time. (Unless you study the photographs—of a girl leaving the playhouse and not looking the worse for it, or a boy still trapped and crouching in a corner—in which their clothing, particularly their shoes, gives them away.) Immersed in their travails, you sense your protective instinct kicking in, even though the playhouse door has long since been thrown open. The authors' straightforward prose contributes to the narrowing of distance. It's free of jargon (here too the children are simply children, and not "subjects" or "participants") and evasion, employing vivid language like "lure" and "violent panic"—even at the risk of casting doubt on the wisdom of the experiment. You might say that, quite unlike what one might expect from a clinical research paper, the report is touching, or has emotional heft, because of the children's vulnerability but also the researchers' obvious concern for them, though in their statements to that effect you might also detect a note of self-justification.

The children's parents, along with the study's protocols, *do* seem to belong to a bygone era, however. I pictured a mother in the waiting room, reading "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" in *Ladies' Home Journal*. I pictured *my* mother, recalling her black clasp purse and low heeled pumps, and then picked up the phone to ask: Would you have volunteered me for the study? "No," she answered unequivocally. "That would be a terrible thing to do to a child." (The article doesn't make clear exactly what the parents knew in advance. At minimum they were informed about the general purpose of the research, but at least one mother is recorded as saying she wouldn't have given her permission had she been aware it would entail solitary entrapment.)⁵ I doubted the experiment could be carried out today. Would we subject children to likely distress, however briefly, even if good data depended on it and might be expected to save lives? Child experts had recommended a three-minute limit on the time "that a child might safely and excusably be allowed to cry," though he or she was released earlier if especially distraught: How did they determine how long three minutes is to a child? Even if, under tightened rules of informed consent, an equivalent experiment were to get the green light today, would today's parents, as a group more questioning of authority and more pampering of their offspring, respond as their predecessors did: in a way that was "immediate and generous"? If not, does that mean we have less of those qualities now? Was it even possible to be generous *with* (as opposed to *to*) one's child?

However precise the researchers' measurements, the study's benefits to public safety could not themselves be measured with any accuracy. In 1985, the

5. If the parents were not fully informed in advance about the enclosure, it may have been because the researchers knew that if they appeared to be concerned upon being reunited with their children then that concern would be infectious. The authors cited a disaster study in which it was found that children's reactions to the 1953 Vicksburg, Mississippi tornado (actually a series of tornadoes that touched down in three states) "was almost wholly parent-determined." This reminded me of an incident in my childhood in which the father of twin friends of mine asked to join in a game of doctor. He got naked and lay on a single bed in his daughters' bedroom and suggested we hold him by the wrists and ankles to keep him from moving around during "surgery." I'd always assumed that the reason the episode left no lasting marks was because it was relatively benign as these things go—he didn't touch me—but my mother's calm demeanor as she spoke to me later (the man had turned himself in to the police, who promptly came to our home) probably went a long way towards how I processed it.

results of a California study published in *Public Health Reports* showed that over a twenty-two-year period, from the beginning of 1960 through 1981, eighty-four children in that state suffocated in refrigerators or freezers. Most were between two and seven. The death rates fluctuated over that time but declined significantly after 1968—from about 1.8 deaths per million children in 1966-68 to less than .5 deaths per million by 1978-81. From 1972 on, none of the incidents involved appliances manufactured after 1958, the oldest of which were nearing the end of a fifteen-year life expectancy and thus prone to abandonment. And yet the federally-mandated redesign of refrigerator doors, informed by the findings of the *Pediatrics* study, can take only partial credit. During this same period, California was more conscientiously enforcing its own rules on discarded refrigerators, requiring the removal of latches and doors, even if they were up to standard. The behavior of children was changing too: they were spending more time indoors watching television and in organized activities. The change in children's behavior was linked, of course, to shifting norms in parenting, which included stricter supervision of offspring. Fewer and fewer kids were merely instructed to listen for the dinner bell or to "be home by dark." (In the playhouse scenario, however, where the more "successful" children—those who not only got out on their own but did so quickly—tended to have parents with lower levels of formal education, the researchers speculated that they succeeded *because* they'd had "more opportunity to play independently" than did the offspring of parents with college or graduate degrees. These children, presumably, were better adapted to a rough-and-tumble world.)

If the *Pediatrics* study couldn't really answer how children behaved in a naturally occurring entrapment, but only how they responded to being trapped in a cramped but pleasant-looking playhouse, with the knowledge that adults were out there somewhere and might come to their rescue, and the hope that the movie would begin again at any moment, neither could it answer another fundamental question: What sort of child gets stuck inside a refrigerator in the first place? "Is he bold and aggressive and may he therefore be expected to be active in releasing himself?" the researchers wondered. (If so, I'm guessing the

results for the timid children would have to carry less weight.) “Or does he often seek solitude?” (Then the several kids who sat placidly in the playhouse for fifteen minutes were not, for the purposes of the study, so unusual.) “What kind of child is lured in, or shut in, by companions?” (Maybe a gullible or unpopular child who might be slow to figure things out for himself.) To address these questions, some sort of companion study would have been necessary—perhaps a qualitative approach in which a victim’s family and teachers and neighbors are interviewed to piece together a kind of portrait. And data of that nature, not surprisingly, had never been collected.

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Following the progress of the children, across that lush lawn and through the corridors and big rooms of that grand mansion and right on up to the bright chatter of Donald Duck, I thought reluctantly of my youngest nieces and nephew. I thought also of myself, for it’s hard not to ponder how *you* would have reacted to being shut inside a suddenly darkened playhouse (you were, in effect, being lured there yourself). I went back in time, not to 1956 but to my own earliest years—except, because I’m not endowed with that sort of memory, I couldn’t quite get there. But maybe you can use what you do recall and extrapolate backwards to arrive at a plausible scenario. I fear I might not have been among the more “successful,” if that meant acting swiftly. As far back as I can remember, I prized time to myself and sought out cocoons in which to daydream—the weeping willow in our backyard, where for hours during the summer I’d sit veiled by its cascading branches; an actual tree house after we moved to another state, immediately upon returning home from my piano lessons. Once, on a family outing to a park in San Francisco, I found a small clearing among some boulders on a slope away from the crowd and stayed there past dusk, later paying dearly for my reverie. I was invariably abstracted, like the boy in a Louis Jenkins poem—who, thinking he hears, through the open window, far-off voices frantically calling his name, stays in bed and studies a crack in the ceiling, wondering all the while what it’s like to be lost. I might have wished for a larger playhouse, but I might also have

seen it, up to a point anyway, as a reprieve, especially after being weighed and measured and otherwise handled by the experimenters.

But in real life, had the opportunity presented itself, would I have ventured into an abandoned refrigerator? It's hard to imagine anything more forbidding. The metal is cold, the molded plastic is hard. The door is heavy and it closes with a thud. Though I loved to crawl through the sewer pipes waiting to be buried in an undeveloped field several blocks from home, light was waiting at the other end. And I know that girls—whether because they were naturally more cautious or had a better cognitive grasp of hazards or tended to be more restricted in their activities (though I was not)—were at best half as likely as boys to find themselves in a discarded refrigerator. I was, as many of the study's participants must have been, the wrong "kind of child."

But that, of course, is wishful thinking. There is no such "kind of child." Or there is, but there's also a common denominator at work: Given the opportunity, and one or a combination of factors—a moment of impulse, a desire to copy-cat a playmate, a challenge from the older boy next door (for timidity can work both ways), an urge to outfox a foe, an injunction that happens to coincide with a phase of rebelliousness, a guardian who's looking the other way—any one of us might go into the fridge.

Sometime after I put aside the article, I found myself wanting a *Where Are They Now?* update. The oldest among them were nearing sixty, a good time to take stock. I wasn't looking for long-term scars, manifested as a history of claustrophobia or an inability to form trusting relationships: recent research points to the remarkable resiliency of children, after far worse experiences than having been briefly shut in a dark playhouse. And no problems had been uncovered when, eight months after the study, the researchers interviewed the mothers in their homes to determine whether, among other things, their children had exhibited signs of regressive behavior, such as reverting to bed-wetting or the bottle. "The attitudes of the children, as recalled by their mothers, 8 months after the test, ranged through more or less casual acceptance, remarks about not liking 'that kind of playhouse,' thinking it was 'a lark, and bragging about it,' showing

great pride in having earned money (\$5 a child was given to recompense parents for transportation expenses, baby sitting, etc.), curiosity about the whole thing, and resentment at 'a dirty trick.'"

Rather, I wondered whether there was a correlation between the children's behavior in the playhouse and the types of adults those children grew up to be. If so, did it reveal something essential and unchanging in a person through time? The children, every one of them, even the most inept—*especially* the most inept—had contributed long ago to the common good, but in doing so they were anonymous. What were they *known* for? The apparently fearless four-year-old boy who "came home with a happy expression as if he'd been to a party": Does he have stories to tell, like the time he ejected from the cockpit of a fighter jet? The boy of the same age who called seven times to "Woman!" to let him out, making very little attempt to do so on his own: Does he have a long-suffering wife? Or maybe the playhouse functioned as a crucible, though not so much proving the children's mettle as forging its development: I like to think that the child who knocked politely on the door and said "I'm ready to come out now" went on to open door after door for herself.

The Grave on the Wall

A grave is an opportunity
for a rift to be imposed upon the portraiture
a room brightened loose from the ground
fallen away with the grave
an opportunity for a rift to grow down the portraiture
of sisterhood
elapsing the walls
breasts thickly wooding the steel towers of portraiture
representations of experience
grow experience
like egg dye increasing
in space
a rift growing down representations of feeling
overwhelming the air of monk eggs
representations of an opening towards which
to flail
monk eggs
poaching quietly
in a bowl
a grave is an opportunity for a rift to grow down

The portraiture is coming to life
to relinquish the walls
for a riser of graves
an air of monk eggs poaching quietly in a bowl
replaced by monk eggs
poaching quietly
in a bowl of boiling water

reflecting curls, thorns behind curls
a platter of deer cut from deer traveling the river where naked
we listen
to the poaching of eggs
fur clarifying the glaze of a field
black pond at a distance of fifty yards
is black grass at a distance of five feet

Which would you rather entrance?
black pond of old friends, black grass of new enemies
new vigor confusing old vigor of being
both generous
and also an asshole
there is nothing confusing about being an asshole
alone, The angels say
keep it simple, The angels say
keep it simple, The angels are sawing through the pith of a newborn
not necessarily bad
though not necessarily
good. One has to get there
one has to elevate oneself into the placidity
of a beige and monkish egg
on a napkin
slipped gently into a bowl
poaching quietly on a miter of flame
one does not have to be husband
husband does not do anything
lays like a beige and monkish egg
on a napkin. He knows English
he can speak English

the flame fancies his black-stockinged feet
the flame fancies his black-stockinged feet
good thing he knows English. Good thing he speaks English

An imperial glow swallows white from a black pond
pulled in on the moon
a battlement pulling in on the moon
a chief standing down the clotted hood of Empress nursing a milk leg
chemical blue eyes drawing black pond into question
let her sparkle as she wants
let her sparkle the wet grill as she wants
to become outside herself
the evidence of herself, signature of a victim
in abeyance before the resin of the clotted hood comes off
flustering fireworks of a nighthawk caging a round of rooftop plants
soiling the lovemaking of subalterns
on the powdered leaves of the roof
to join the freeish in the field

The moon rains down
negatives of super darkness. The field would have been chosen
the field would
have to have been
chosen. The field would have had
to have been
chosen
loving wrongly as is loving wrongdoing
away from erroneous brightness
but it wasn't dark flowers
burned out of a schoolgirl's light
blouse. Time passes, becomes more distinct, more

intense, engraved
into the pigmentation of mecca, unfinished
silence makes one feel unlike
the permanent people of this world
I myself am not one of them

The Grave on the Wall

Someone said some presence is growing some prick
out of some shadow
Some prick I mean some prick
some one did not want me to see
exactly what
some of them were made of somehow
I dove into the splay of blind mammals anyway
at night within the forest
Felt they tasted of Bad Enemy earth
wrung wet with gunpowder

My mouth is a white heart
small for some grapefruit
medium for some orange large for some grape
right for some prick
A horn blowing particles of ground coffins stuffed with grapefruits and oranges
eaten alone late at night
spilling onto the floor like some man
with his legs whipsawed off
must have been more than some woman I worship I imagine
the sound of the young male domestic
outside in the forest
perplexing some bodies withstanding depressions
Still want to hide
Meanwhile they are marching

The Grave on the Wall

Black Flower, then—
I immediately lost the rest
I had been waiting
to push my hands through the wake
of a modest life, and the life
increasingly immodest

A long extract of a blind subterranean root
crushed between Bad Enemy and
a brilliant white thigh. Bedizened
with disappearance, exile says, so early

Pushed through the walls of a blank room
to find you wandering dread
New oyster, and sickness
streaked with chemicals rinsing the brilliant white thigh
Syllabi, Black Flower—
Exchangettes charm a flock of white
proximity to late night gagging

sounds. I can truly split
but Midori, how should I
do it? Eight
petals grow along the ceiling
Each blade, each petal a face
hovering the air, though I do not speak Japanese

When I was your age I hid
under the table

at the opening of the workbooks
Maybe I would find a sympathetic body
feed its derelict hemispheres
nightly, to me, wide sleeves
lofting every final embrace, moving slowly, as
though not true. Now I am sitting here, killing you

Mutt-Face Meets Himself

Joseph Scapellato

Feeling puny, the cowboy drove his truck through moonlight to the Mexican biker bar. He was a grubby Anglo with fat cheeks, the owner of a lean and knobby back, and he gunned along the country road with both windows down because neither could roll up. Every car he passed was packed with women. Some singing, big eyes pinched. His heart sputtered.

He hadn't been in a spell but the biker bar had stayed the same, stinking something fierce of bleach and lemons. Dark wood, dull light, rancheros howling. Everybody carrying on like they came from no place in particular, like they had no story other than the one their bodies were saying right then and there with a mess of leaning, dancing, and laughing, with a mess of empty cans and bottles.

He took a stool and met his face in the mirror behind the bar. A mutt-face. Framed by handles of booze and running neon: splotchy, chewed-up, smeared by the dopey grin he couldn't quit. He tugged his cowboy hat lower.

His orders kept the bartender moving. He had decided to drink himself big, so big that the bar cranked up and revolved around his bigness. So big that nagging things inside him, mostly memories, pretended to be puny. The bigness in him got bossy. It changed breeches.

Go on now, said the bossy bigness. Take a look-see.

He turned to his right and saw a porky gal looking back, her lips like tomato halves, her cleavage like a canyon. Fill that canyon, said his bigness. The bar whirled behind her, flashing with female bodies. Bikes roared. Her face, a field aglow with makeup, was changing. He stared into her changing field, listening, imagining—filling up with bigness.

Then the biker beside her stepped up, the size of a jukebox, his eyes as dead and ugly as the Rio Grande, and the cowboy's bigness drained. The biker put on a pair of sunglasses like he was loading a pistol. Suddenly lonesome, the porky gal looked away.

The cowboy returned to his can of Tecate and added salt. He did not feel big. He felt the shoulder-tap he knew was coming, and when he turned the biker slugged him off his stool. So many legs, some long and naked, and the biker, calm, was speaking, repeating himself. They stomped the cowboy's hat. Someone uncapped a saltshaker and poured it on his face, saying, "*Que sabroso*," and they dragged him out the door and kicked him, but not enough to crack his bones.

He just lay there, feeling the moon on his neck. The door closed, muffling the laughter of women. Why you smiling at my woman, the biker had said. The bigness had no answer because the bigness skipped town and jumped the border.

When the burning in his eyes went out he pulled himself up and toward his truck, parked against a patch of prickly pear. Got no friends in there, he thought, meaning the bar.

Got no *friends*, shouted his bigness, from across the border it had jumped. It sipped a margarita, matter-of-factly. Women, neither.

The cowboy wiped gravel from his cheek and had himself a long look in the rearview: the irascible open-mouthed grin, the grin that was there whether he was puny or big, soused or sober, delusional, down in the dumps. The grin one saw instead of him. And now some broken teeth and a busted lip.

He wrenched the rearview off the windshield and tossed it out the window. After several tries his truck started, wheezing.

The moon had risen from the mountains. Swollen and low, it lit the valley. On the way to his crummy rented bungalow on the rural fringes of Mesilla, the cowboy bumped over the Rio Grande, smelled its sour and curdled reek through stuck-open windows. The smell was sad, so deeply sad he thought for sure it'd kill or shrink his smile, but he touched the corners of his swollen lip and found them raised, idiotically defiant—a defiance without ground, without a resistance to properly define it, even. How about that. Sighing, he turned onto his country road and accelerated and smashed into a pecan tree.

The windshield folded closed, like a book. The moon came in and had its way with all the shattered glass, twinkling merrily. His nose dribbled blood. When thinking came back he thought: On purpose? Dogs were barking, hungry.

Then his door swung open. A crooked abuelita in a black dress snatched his

hand, guided him out. She led and he followed, wobbling. Her grip was strong and dry. She didn't walk, exactly, she waggled her rump and floated, tugging him past a dried-up yard and blooming barrel cacti and withered scrub oaks and old standing engines, spaced out in her yard, looking like bird baths.

He watched her waggling rump and pretended she was fifty years younger.

A woman, clucked his bigness, before returning to the foreign bar.

Inside the adobe home the light was hard and orange. She took him through a sitting room cluttered with skinny shelves and curios: suffering saints and virgins, prayer candles, smiling suns and moons and skulls. From the carpet rose a thriftstore stink. From the walls, meat and cumin, tacos.

She sat him in the dining room, in a fold-up chair at a fold-up table. She floated, without clacking, across linoleum and into the kitchen. He dabbed his bloody nose with a sunny-colored cloth napkin. Plates clinked. Portraits adorned the walls, broad ones with fancy frames, spaced out in sequence. They had as their subject the same woman through time, from a self-assured sixteen year old to an alluring, busy thirty-something, ending on a pocked and silvery specimen of late middle age. The skin on the faces hardened as the cowboy followed the portraits from beginning to end; then softened as he backtracked, traveling through time with his gaze. Only the eyes and mouth were consistent: fierce, harried. The fierceness came from being harried. The mouth unsmiling, an iron bar.

The cowboy realized that these were not photographs, but paintings. He also realized he had lost his hat. "Nuts," he said, because his hair was thinning, and his hat was how he hid this fact from himself. The hat was a Stetson, which made him a cowboy. But that wasn't true, and boy, did he know it.

The abuelita reappeared, cradling a bowl with hands as big as oven mitts. In the bowl was a steaming hill of chile con carne. His place was set: fork, water glass.

He blinked hard, hoping to herd together his senses. "Thank you," he said, "this is a generous gesture, but I tell you, it's unnecessary. If you lend me your phone I'll use that phone to phone a friend and hitch a ride, and be on my way."

She shook her head, which was how she let him know she knew he had no friends. A motorcycle ripped by outside. He was still very drunk.

"Truck's a friend."

"Come," she commanded.

He ate, hardly pausing to chew, and even cracked the knucklebones to slurp marrow. Soon the bowl was empty and he was full, feverishly warm. When she cleared his dish he tried to stand to help her. He couldn't. He'd been tied to the chair with twine.

She sat herself at the opposite end of the table, staring at him in the way that old folks have of trying to turn what they see into somewhere else, somewhere they've been before, way back. Her face was like a horrible rock that sort of looked like a face.

The mutt-faced cowboy wriggled with his bonds. A pair of hands clamped to his shoulders, heavy ones. Even through his busted nose he smelled bleach and lemons and knew the man behind him to be the biker that had broken his teeth, the biker who had covered his ugly eyes with sunglasses.

The abuelita opened her mouth and her voice was like a knife across a stone: "You were smiling when you were born, dogface."

"Please don't call me dogface."

"Dogs obey," she said.

"Man's best truck. Friend."

"Come."

He ate his napkin.

"Mira."

He stared into her breasts.

"Caca."

He crapped his pants. "All right," he said.

The biker undid his bonds.

He stayed there, got used to it. Every morning he filled the old standing engines which were, in fact, birdbaths for grackles. He dusted the curios on the shelves, straightened the portraits, and peeled potatoes. At night he slept on the porch swing out back near the chicken cages and would dream of beautiful *senoritas* wrapped in immodest shawls made of darkness. Their lips shining, they'd touch his skin, join their bodies to his. At the end of these dreams the lights would go on and the shadow-shawls would disintegrate and the women

would stand revealed as women from his family, sisters, aunts, and cousins, naked. It was embarrassing, but he woke with erections.

The abuelita fed him well and did his laundry. When he ate, she watched. Sometimes she licked her lips, and he was amazed that she had retained such powers of salivation. But he remained polite. Her tongue glistened, ashy gray.

Every day after lunch the cowboy would lay out on the same swing and have a nap, aiming to dream of *senoritas* he didn't know. But he never dreamt during naps, and when he woke in the late afternoon the biker would be standing beside him, smoking a cherry cigarillo and wearing shades. Dogs over the fence behind the chicken cages would be barking madly, keeping at it all day, because they could. They never said anything to each other, and on account of the biker always wearing shades the cowboy wasn't sure where the man was looking. At the Organ Mountains? The range was rocky and huddled, purple at the closing and opening of day. The peaks were like a bunch of ugly women.

They're not a bunch of ugly women, said the bigness, they're teeth. People been eaten, there.

But the cowboy could now ignore the bigness. All this time he didn't think about his stomped Stetson or his thinning hair. He never thought about his dopey grin because there were no mirrors in the abuelita's house, only painted portraits. He didn't even think about being puny. Lean, satisfied, he spent time just considering, easy-like, how every day was made of parts and how every part followed the other. Then he'd fall asleep.

One month went by. After a lunch of *enchiladas*, the cowboy woke from his dreamless nap. A drag of a day, the mountains looking tired and dusty. Overworked women. The biker standing by, smoking, and for the first time he offered the cowboy a cigarillo.

The cowboy sat up, the bony knobs of his back rutting against the swing-slats. His face felt like the mountains looked. "Why not," he said, and realized those were the first words he'd said out loud in a month.

They were also the words he pretended to live by. An awful sadness poured into him, taking the shape of the Rio Grande, surging in its sick and clotted way, all bigness on the far bank, impossible.

"Why you smiling at my woman," repeated the biker.

"At *everybody's* women," said the cowboy, "come from a family of them—moms, aunts, sisters, cousins, spinsters, ladies, widows, a fine and loving family, feeding me and dressing me and making me out to be something big, saying I could have anything and be anyone. Be anything and have anyone, and so forth and suchlike. And you know how that can get." He licked his lips. They were sweet with artificial cherry, dry with hot smoke. "So I got to leaving Georgia. Was fixing to be anyone and have anyone without them, and the women I knew gave me blessings and bank accounts and pieces of pie for the road. Next thing I know I'm turning my back to weepy goodbyes and blasting through Alabama and Mississippi and Louisiana, and landing in Texas, buying boots and a hat, talking different, working orchards and farms, nuts, tomatoes, tripping through canebrake, tearing my breeches, and always every night phoning up my family women so they can feel good reminding me: *Be anyone and have anyone, boy!*" The cowboy laughed hard and short, like a man who had stepped on the face of death. "And now I'm in New Mexico. Picking pecans. Making up my life with all them womenfolk out of earshot."

The biker nodded his huge head, without a doubt looking at the mountains. He offered the cowboy a second cigarillo. And because the cowboy had just lied like crazy, lies on top of lies on top of lies, puny, blatant, true-blue lies, this action struck the cowboy as the kindest thing anyone had ever done for him—the manful, wordless offering of a smoke, no questions, no calling-out—and the cowboy was crying when he said, "I can't light this goddamn thing."

All the dogs had shut up. The biker helped him light his second cigarillo. "Why'd your woman look so lonesome," asked the cowboy, trying to cough the thickness from his throat.

The biker pointed to the swing where the cowboy had been sleeping and waking up in shame. "That's where I was born," he said. He pointed to the rotten fence, the one that screened the silent dogs. "That's where *mi madre* died." He holstered his pointing hand in the pocket of his leather jacket. "This is where I decided to buy my first bike."

"I get you," said the cowboy, weeping hard, "you're just like me but you're nothing like me, to boot." His face sagged, but still smiled.

"Nothing like you," corrected the biker.

The cowboy pulled at the corners of his mutt-faced mouth, tugging them down. It had no effect.

"Ask *mi abuelita*," said the biker.

The cowboy went inside and asked the abuelita how to stop smiling so much. She'd been stirring a pan of ground beef.

She took off her apron and put down her wooden spoon. Not smiling, she took him by the hand and led him out of the kitchen, past the portraits, to her bedroom. The room was black and shuttered, one red candle blazing. She pushed him firmly to the bed and puffed out the flame.

In the darkness she became a gorilla. He'd never felt so puny in all his life, and as the bed squealed beneath them, all his family women filled a hall inside his head, a hall he rushed right through because they didn't care where he was going. They really didn't. He went on weeping. She was hooting in his ear.

Then he understood he'd been visiting the abuelita like this every night while half-asleep. All the señoritas had been her. What's more, it'd been pretty good. He wiped his face and renewed his efforts.

"*Adios*," she said when she'd led him back to the front door.

She was smiling. He wasn't. But he felt all right, considering.

He walked to the pecan tree that had caught his truck, where the vehicle waited, crumpled. He brushed the seat of glass and dust. Someone had gotten drunk and left a mound of cans on the mat. A breeze hissed through the shattered windshield and touched his lips, not his teeth.

The truck felt old, older than the abuelita. Maybe because there was no mirror to meet himself inside of.

To his surprise, it started.

Alone: On Two Types of Solitude

Peter Selgin

Two years ago my wife left me. We had been together twenty years. Her move was sudden, but not, in retrospect, unplanned or without warning. Her father died, and she had recently turned fifty. Later, friends would describe these as reasons and even portents. That I was away didn't help. While she tended her dying father in a Las Vegas nursing home, I was drafting a novel at a writer's colony. When not writing or swimming in a lake across the street, I careened my Honda Civic along leafy winding Berkshire roads, blasting the same three Beatles songs over and over again on my CD player. The songs were "Ticket to Ride," "Yesterday," and "Help."

Now I'm on my own, alone.

Alone. Note how the word breaks between syllables into article and noun: a, as in one, or a single case out of the multitude; lone as in *loner*. When all else fails turn to etymology. Alone: c. 1300, contraction of Old English *all ana*, "all by oneself," from *all* (all, wholly) + *an* (one). Similar compounds found in German (*allein*) and Dutch (*alleen*). Definition: by one's self, apart from or exclusive of; single; solo; solitary; applied to a person or thing.

The word "alone" itself rings hollow, a two-syllable word where the two syllables deplete rather than fulfill or complement each other. See: *lone*, *lonely*, *single*, *solitary*, *solo*, *alien*. Only. Exclusively. I. Am. A. Lone. Alone: "In bad company" (Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*).

I write this on the shore of another lake, Lake Sinclair, "the cleanest lake in Georgia." I've come here to fulfill a one-year visiting writer appointment at the college in Milledgeville. But I've also come here to be alone. I've rented a house right on the lake, a modest A-frame with an L-shaped loft where I work and sleep, and where my desk faces a wall of triangular windows that look directly out past some pine trees at the lake.

Though I've been here less than a week, already I have my routines. I swim twice a day, across the inlet and back, three hundred strokes, at dawn and dusk. Mornings, into the sunrise; evenings, into the sunset. Afternoons, when the sun is too hot, I go out on the dock and just look at the lake.

There are neighbors here, or anyway there are other houses. But so far except for a passing water-skier I have yet to meet or even see another human soul, and I'm glad about that. I don't want company here. The lake is enough company. It's why I chose to live here and not in town. After thirty-two years in New York City, I've had enough society to last me the rest of my life.

Though the lake is dotted with mostly weekend cottages, through my window I see only trees and water. The distant shore is lined with pine trees, the homes there hidden. It could be a lake in Wisconsin, or in the Klondike. A geography of solitude: that's what I see from my desk. I've seen many such geographies in my time: the craggy islands of the Aegean, the frozen fjords of Norway, the sun-starved villages north of the Arctic Circle. But this one belongs to me; it's mine. Unlike the solitude that swept over and nearly drowned me back in New York when my wife left me, that forced solitude that took up with me like an unwanted lover, this one I have chosen for myself.

Here, at last, my solitude and I are happily wed.

Centuries divide my solitude from that of the first historical (Christian) solitary, Paul of Egypt (3rd century B.C.), who, at age sixteen, to escape the Decian persecution, fled to the Egyptian desert at Thebaid to spend the rest of his hundred-and-thirteen years in a cave. The man to be known as Saint Paul was but the first in a phalanx of ascetics who fled the chaos and persecutions of the Roman Empire to dwell in the deserts of Egypt. These "Desert Fathers" were the forerunners of all monks and hermits (from the Greek *eremos*, meaning "desert" or "uninhabited," hence *eremitic* or "desert-dwelling"). The desert drew them not only for the protection it afforded with its caves, but because it provided the perfect landscape in which to practice the skills of self-discipline as exemplified by Jesus's fasting. Living in the desert forced them to renounce worldly things and by doing so brought them closer to God. Later

monks who followed them there (notably Anthony the Great) introduced more formal aspects into the hermetic lifestyle. These included prayer, chanting, and fasting. These rituals in turn developed into cenobitic monasticism (read: “communal deprivation”) and flourished in what we today call monasteries.

But apart from saints and holy men, solitude has its proponents. “The wise person will flee the crowd,” wrote Montaigne, “endure it if necessary, but given the choice, choose solitude. We are not sufficiently rid of vices to contend with those of others.” In perhaps his most famous essay, “On Solitude,” Montaigne invokes Lucretius, urging us to “purge our heart[s]” of those impurities imposed by society. “We must take the soul back and withdraw it into itself; that is the real solitude which may be enjoyed in the midst of cities and the courts of kings; but it is best enjoyed alone.” In advancing the virtues of solitude, Montaigne makes no case against the company of others. He merely puts companionship in its place, arguing not just for the benefits of solitude, but for it as a necessity, an antidote to too much companionship, society as a means of avoiding or ignoring the kind of solitude that nourishes the soul, an organ fed by the act of contemplation, and for which no other form of nutrition will suffice.

But contemplation depends as much or more on deprivation as on nutrition. Like those plants that grow only in sandy soil, or those spiny fish that thrive only in the darkest ocean depths, the soul thrives not just on what feeds it, but on what it is denied. With the possible exception of Mr. Capote, no soul ever thrived at a dinner party. And what are bars, nightclubs, and restaurants but places designed, often with great cunning, to draw the fires of introspection with liquor and loud music? Add to these time honored distractions recent electronic innovations, and even when alone today we no longer find ourselves in solitude. We zap our interior lives and put off the inevitable confrontation with ourselves. Why? We’ll go to our graves clutching Blackberries and cell phones. If technology is companionship, then leave me alone.

Do I equate myself with Paul, or Anthony—let alone Jesus? I’m no Saint, nor am I great. Yet there are places where my solitude intersects with theirs,

ways in which, to borrow from Tolstoy, “all happy solitaries are solitary in the same way.” First, we spend a lot of our time alone. That, of course, is the primary requirement, the foundation on which all of the other attributes of asceticism are built. In his *Outline Teaching on Asceticism and Stillness in the Solitary Life*, Evagrius Ponticus (345-399 A.D.), a close observer of the Desert Fathers and one himself toward the end of his life, catalogued the ascetic practices of hermits.

I need only to run down Evagrius’s list of recommendations for hermits to see how closely my own practices align themselves with those of Archimandrite, Athanasius, Anthony, and Augustine:

1. *Keep to a Sparse and Plain Diet.* Extravagant foods tempt desire. According to Evagrius, “If you have only bread, salt, [and] water, you can still meet the dues of hospitality.” And even without these things you can still make a stranger welcome. For me, the bread is usually vacuum-wrapped packets of Fitness Bread off the shelf at Kroger, my new supermarket, thirty minutes from here by car. This bread I normally eat with peanut butter for breakfast, and for dinner with a mound of vegetables—Swiss chard or broccoli—sauteed and steamed with a dash of soy sauce over caramelized onions. I like how, no matter how impossibly high I pile them in the pan, the leafy vegetables steam down to a modest bowl full. When in need of protein I’ll add a piece of fish or a turkey leg (I actually like eating around all those gristly tendons and sinews). The rest of my hermetic diet may be summed up in three words: espresso, hot, milk.

2. *With Regard to Clothes, be Content with What Is Sufficient for the Needs of the Body.* From the knees of my corduroy trousers the wales have long since been rubbed off. By now most of my cuffs and belt loops are frayed. The splendid cardigans that I bought for (and then inherited from) my dead papa are pulled in so many places it must be hard, around the holidays, for strangers to resist hanging Christmas bulbs off of me. I am not truly poor, just too lazy to shop and indifferent to fashion. This was brought home to me one summer when,

while visiting a friend in Rome, I was admonished for wearing white socks with leather sandals (to, of all places, the Spanish Steps: even Saint Anthony might have drawn a line there).

3. *Do Not Have a Servant.* Back in the Bronx, my cleaning lady came every three weeks. She emptied and cleaned my espresso pot, stacked my loose coins and crumpled receipts on my dresser top, dusted, vacuumed, removed the expired food from my fridge (see #1), and generally tidied up (no windows). But since I gave her five hundred dollars to assist in her husband's battle with immigration authorities, I didn't consider this a violation. Then again, Evagrius warns, "Even if you think that taking a servant would be for the servant's benefit, do not accept it." Now I have no servant, just a landlord who mows the grass.

4. *Do Not Associate with Those Who Are Materially Minded and Involved in Worldly Affairs.* This I find easy, since materialists don't interest me. I find them boring. Maybe this is because, materially, I haven't done that well for myself, but mostly for lack of trying. Far as I'm concerned, money is the booby prize one gets for having nothing better to do, exemplified by the financial wizards who brought us our current economic mess. For the record I forgive their shallow greed, but not their ineptitude.

5. *If You Find Yourself Growing Strongly Attached to Your Cell, Leave It.* Back in the Bronx, I was fond of my apartment, with its view of the blue rainbow bridge and turbulent waters. I like it even more here. I look out at the lake and I'm happy, or anyway, content. And since I'm equally fond of my work, writing, I can easily imagine staying here day after day, with no distraction other than a swim now and then, or a paddle in my aluminum canoe. I do not miss people. When the phone rings (rarely), I'm annoyed at first, and even when the caller is someone I'm glad to hear from, after five minutes I've had enough: I want to go back to my solitude, to my sanctuary. Sometimes I have to force myself to step outside, to walk down to the dock and look at the lake and take note of the world. If I don't do so, come nightfall I'll have cabin fever, and go to bed

depressed. We needn't enter social situations to get our souls crushed. A set of walls can do the trick.

6. *Do Not Let Restless Desire Overcome Resolution.* The Desert Fathers had a word for it: *acedia* (or *accidie*): in the narrow sense, indolence, sloth, laziness. Not a moral condition, but a psychological one—a bane to monks, hermits, and solitaries through history, exposing them to sinful thought and action. Acedia isn't willful sloth, but a turpitude that endangers the best of intentions. When, weakened by listlessness, a disciple of Abba Moses sought his council, Abba Moses replied, "Go back to your cell and pray." Acedia weakens resolve and fills men with doubt. John Cassian described this condition, referred to as the "noonday devil," as a state of inertness incapable of bearing spiritual fruit. Physical labor was recommended as a remedy. Saint Paul wove baskets out of palm leaves; I paint, write, swim. Acedia plagues the novice more than it does the experienced solitary. As a child I was always bored—this in spite of having a twin brother at my disposal. I wonder now if my "boredom" wasn't acedia, if already as a child I wasn't experiencing a dose of the "dark night of the soul," if I wasn't bedeviled. Burton's melancholy, Kierkegaard's angst, Sartre's nausea, Camus's existential revolt, Mersault's alienation, my childhood fevers of boredom: are these not all acedia by different names? Whatever drives us out of ourselves (out of our cells), and away from integrity—that's acedia. It is the antithesis of discipline, its cure.

7. *Do Not Hanker After Fine Foods and Deceitful Pleasures.* "Eating with others," writes Evagrius, "carries the danger of being offered fine foods that provoke desire. Such invitations should be declined." Here in Milledgeville there are approximately three decent restaurants: one Japanese, one Italian, and a bar. So far I have been to the bar and the Italian place. I dislike eating in restaurants. As indifferent as I am to fine foods, I am obsessed with the quality (or lack thereof) of my surroundings. Thus I detest most restaurants, with their forced chic and volume as a substitute for mirth. I hate canned music of all kinds, and resent even more that to avoid it I must pay the premium exacted

by restaurants that don't offer it. (Do the rascals who shuck sound systems give kickbacks to establishments that agree to riddle their ceilings with loudspeakers?) Dim lighting annoys me, as do waiters who reach over your meal to pour your wine or replenish your ice water and busboys who hover vulture-like over waning meals. The "pleasures" of fine dining rarely seduce me.

8. *Provide Yourself with Such Work for Your Hands as Can Be Done, If Possible, Both During the Day and Night, So as Not to Burden Anyone.* Plaiting reed baskets was the preferred occupation of the Desert Fathers, the busy work that best fit Evagrius's criteria. I plait essays and stories out of words and sentences. Isn't it the same? In their time the Desert Fathers would entrust some disciple or agent to take their baskets into town to sell them at the marketplace, and return with provisions of flour, salt, and other humble staples procured with the proceeds. My marketplace is more amorphous, as are my proceeds. The baskets I weave from words get sold mainly to small press publishers and even smaller literary journals for equally diminutive reimbursement. My paintings also sell at prices modest to a fault. This too would have suited Evagrius, who tells hermits not to haggle: "When buying or selling you can hardly avoid sin. So in either case be sure to lose a little in the transaction." Done.

Have I made my solitude too appealing? But let me not kid you or myself by pretending there's nothing nasty about it, especially the kind imposed against one's wishes. When unwanted, solitude can be frightening. Two years have passed since, yet I still wake up some mornings filled with the shaky memory of how it felt to learn that my wife was no longer my wife. Friends worried about me—with reason. Asked, "How are you?" I told the truth, that I felt as if I'd had my right leg amputated without the benefit of anesthesia. I cried. Alone in the shower with the lights turned off, my tears mingled with public water. I kept saying to myself, "She's gone," but how can a verb, any verb, do justice to a negation? She simply and emphatically *wasn't*. Before I worked up the resolve to toss it down the garbage chute, the half of a broiled acorn squash

left over from the last meal she'd cooked for us grew a furry mantle of mold. I lived automatically, a robot attending obligations while contemplating bleak alternatives. My Bronx apartment was by the Henry Hudson Bridge: from my window a stunning blue rainbow of steel. Others had ended that way. I'd see the blue police boats at night combing the agitated waters with searchlights. What "alone" means at its worst: no damn bloody good reason to live. One may take cold comfort in the musings of Montaigne or Voltaire ("The happiest of lives is a busy solitude.") or Picasso ("Without great solitude, no serious work is possible.") or Goethe ("One can be nurtured in society; one is inspired only in solitude.") Such musings aside, we who spend most of our days alone know that whatever else our solitude makes us, we are bloody wretches, too. Aristotle hit closer to home when he said, "He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient unto himself, is either a beast or a god." John Billings, too, hit the nail on the head when he said, "Solitude is a good place to visit, but a poor place to stay."

No matter how often and convincingly I tell myself that I have chosen my "new" solitude to replace and obliterate the one forced on me by fate, the fact is that I chose only its location and other trimmings: the dock, the lake, the canoe. The solitude is in me, put there partly by a wife who did not want to be a wife anymore. It is nothing to brag about. I fell into it as one falls into a ditch. And let us not lose sight of that nose-picking wretch, of the last time we changed the bedclothes, of beans eaten cold from a can, of towels redolent of bordellos, of used socks re-rolled and replaced in the dresser drawer, of the secret fingernail clipping repository behind the couch, of the caged frightened beast with his back to the sweating wall. Nor should we dismiss those sublime moments when, padding in socks and sweatpants from room to room, we are amazed by just how many rooms there are, and how empty they yawn—as if no one lives there, not even he who pads there. Like the proverbial tree, with no audience to bear witness to our lives, we neither flourish nor fall. Only to the extent that we touch others do we live in the strictest sense of that term, in the sense that we enjoy life to its fullest, otherwise we—along with the inspirations, revelations,

and inventions arrived at in solitude—merely *exist*. Perhaps in reading these words you complete the circuit of my life. But one way or another, to be lived a life must be shared.

Before ending this essay, I must invoke one more solitary, the greatest of all, and without a doubt the most wretched, the prototypical Noble Savage and Beautiful Loser: Diogenes of Sinope, who made it his life's goal to "deface" societal mores and customs, rolling his bathtub/home along the streets of Athens and barking at people like a dog. Diogenes who, it was said, forswore all material comforts, who on seeing a peasant boy drink water from the hollow of his hands, smashed the wooden bowl that was his only possession. Having heard that Socrates defined man as a "featherless biped," he stormed Plato's academy grasping a plucked chicken and proclaimed, "Behold man!" When Alexander came upon him gazing attentively down on a pile of human bones, the founder of Cynicism explained, "I'm looking at the bones of your father but cannot tell them from those of a slave." When a stranger rebuked him for masturbating in the Agora, he replied, "Ah—if only I could ease my hunger as readily by rubbing my belly!"

I evoke Diogenes here to show that the solitary wretch and the prophet may be one and the same. No less a figure than Alexander thought so. Legend has it that Alexander, thrilled to meet the fabled Diogenes, asked if he might do the philosopher a favor. "Yes," naked Diogenes replied. "Stand out of my sunlight!" Diogenes made a virtue of his "doggish" behavior; indeed, the word cynic derives from the Greek *kynikos*, the adjectival form of *kyon*: "dog." Diogenes maintained that those who lived artificially—that is, according to the standards of a society based on hypocrisy—would do well to study the living habits of dogs. True (he pointed out), dogs are not especially contemplative, but neither do they engage in small talk or covetousness. Nor are they petty. Like the dogs he emulated, Diogenes barked at suspect mankind, and in so doing exposed society as a regressive farce. In Diogenes solitary wretch and prophet were perfectly united: saint as bum.

Wretched or saintly, my solitude brings me a step closer to eternity. In this

we solitaries are all prophets. The societal outlines that limit others blur, turn porous. In solitude the useless ego dissolves, opening us to the infinite. Birds sing louder, the sun shines brighter, every thunderstorm turns us into King Lear. A spider web speaks volumes. Solitude is poetry; companionship prose.

“One does not find solitude,” Margaret Duras writes, “one creates it. Solitude is created alone. I have created it.”

And here, by this lake in Georgia, so have I.

Lives of Imaginary Saints

XII. Saint Psychagogo, *Patron Saint of Dying Words*

So that they would finally see,

Psychagogo shut her pen away.
She bent close to the desk,
then grasped her right eyeball
between thumb and forefinger
and squeezed.

The essence of her vision
leaked out slowly, dark-amber
and thick like syrup,
until, sparkling, it pooled
in the center of the paper,
a tiny star-haunted ocean.

She did the same with her left eye,
then breathed her ink into
a liquid web.

Each filament writhed and curled
into words, her perfect words.
Then, still moist, they seeped
more deeply into the paper, until
it grew swollen and heavy
like an animal
made of warm, wet dough.

From this emerged
a shiny horde of tiny winged things,
each the color of the ink from Psychagogo's
dried-out, useless eyes.

She turned her dimmed head toward the open window,
to feel warmth.

Imagination and Taste

1.

There are in our existence *spots of time* that with distinct preeminence retain or aught, or heavier ordinary intercourse our minds are nourished and *invisibly repaired*. The mind is lord and master; the obedient servant could scarcely hold a bridle. Sweating in sleep at what point first childhood I remember well. I led my horse and stumbling on and stumbling on. Tasha who had pale blonde hair and Amber squinting and laughing and I sat on the step *disjoined* from my comrades. The sun was out.

Last season in the snow with José who was a year older and Norma could not remember her phone number, pushed my face in the snow, last season.

The sun was out and *not travelled long*. Tasha's pale blonde hair and she beside me. There are in our existence spots of time. Jennifer, half-Korean with one greasy bang. I am going to sleep now and my heart is beating so loud like it will stop. I open my eyes and see the *pink light* of the alarm clock which is broken and reluctantly will turn a number, an increment of a minute, after many minutes with a soft sounding flip. The radio is on and it announces, KLEN light FM. This is so I don't get scared. I mounted, and we journeyed toward the hills.

Mother has the television on and it is warm in the house. My sister comes home crying. Are scattered everywhere. Eating wet rice.

Mrs. Mansell is not mother. Mrs. Billstad is not mother. Mrs. Billstad is pregnant and her belly swells and swells. The round of ordinary intercourse our minds and the sun. I remember well.

On the step sitting, Tasha's pale blonde hair she sits. The sun is out. Amber is laughing and squinting her eyes. Tasha is not mother. Some unknown hand

mouldered down the bones. Tasha's pale blonde hair and pale blue eyes and pale skin pulls down her skirt and panties. Inside there there is a pale wrinkle, a wrinkle in her white skin between her legs. Amber is laughing and squinting her eyes and Tasha looks down and then at me with her pale blue eyes. I led my horse, and, and, stumbling, stumbled on.

Tasha is not mother. Amber is not mother. José is not mother. Norma is not mother. Norma cannot remember her phone number. Norma's family has no phone. I know my mother's face even when other ladies are in the parking lot. My mother is smiling.

Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought, I am sleeping in the pink light of the broken alarm clock and KLEN light FM is on. I think of the white floors of convenience stores, gas station floor tiles where the white of ceiling lights are bright squares like *a beacon on a summit*. The air is so dry here and my nose is bleeding. I can't forget Tasha's vagina.

An ordinary sight; but I should need colours and words that are unknown to man. I can't forget Tasha's vagina and I know that God doesn't like this. Tasha came back from the principal's office crying and I had fallen on the playground and hurt my hand. Mrs. Hoffman is helping me to pray in her living room. I can't forget Tasha's vagina and I know that God doesn't like this. He doesn't like me to think of Tasha's vagina when I pray to him because he can see my thoughts. It was, in truth, an ordinary sight. God is, after all, like me.

Amber doesn't like me. Tasha doesn't like me. José doesn't like me and he is pushing my face into the snow. Jennifer is half-Korean and I am Korean. In ESL, the kids say "how do you say 'crayon' in Korean?"

The female and her garments vexed and tossed. I am sleeping in the pink light from the alarm clock. Amen. I wake up soaked in urine.

2.

Awake all night
in the nauseous cold: drinking.
A small scratch with its slim red
and a needling rain when it is finally light.
You are creeping into a different tone
when we go up to the bookstore to wait,
riding the curve of land with the
sawdust smoke in my throat.

I guess even childhood was an assault
and maybe because of that I shouldn't apologize or
expect apology. All the blonde-skinned girls
up and down playgrounds with their squeals.
They are in love with white boys with brown hair
and call their taunts from the dry air.
Some time and I'll be beat up after school
or in the bus, crying through the air of a short fall
before the earliest cold and finally winter.

I left out the part
about reading Eugene O'Neill
with my hand in your panties.
There, the windy broken-up barns
black with holes, and high grass
in the tired hour between Ithaca
and Binghamton.
Carlos was the first one to notice the snow,
while we were at work,
and I looked up from filleting the chicken.

The meat of chicken is pink and wet.

Yeah, and watching the black girls at the pool
in their suits and tight braids. The lugubrious cops
sweating in their tight black shirts, tight piggy shirts
and chlorine, the smoke of grills.

Sleep is the fruition of all stories
the only way to find me out against all these miles.

As a child I would sit in the mud with the garden hose on low, watching the trickle of water cut the dirt into river beds, and then collect further down in a frothy puddle, the sea from which all life springs. I'd imagine that God would see the world like this. There was nothing I wanted more from childhood, or life that is, than a layer of removal from the interactions with people that are always a little sad, to look at life happening like a reader reads a story. I guess I have no sense of tragedy. From this perspective, it is very easy to write about anything.

Portions of this poem—especially the title, opening paragraphs, italicized portions, and some aspects of the narrative—quote, contemporize, rephrase, intercut, and echo Book Twelve of William Wordsworth's The Prelude. Full text of The Prelude is easy to find online.

THE WORK OF DAWOLU JABARI ANDERSON

Got MLK 1 (2006)	
latex, acrylic, and ink on paper, 72" x 48"	169
Got MLK 2 (2006)	
latex, acrylic, and ink on paper, 72" x 48"	170
Just Do It! (2006)	
latex, acrylic, and ink on paper, 72" x 48"	171
Twinkle Twinkle Little Tar (2009)	
latex, acrylic, and ink on paper, 72" x 48"	
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The Avenging Uncle Remus (2007)	
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The Grips of Wrath (2009)	
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The Trial of Madam Ethiopia (2007)	
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The Verdict (Variant Cover) (2008)	
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The Cheating Chief Wahoo (2005)	
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Seoul on Ice: The Bugout Beatdown (2009)	
latex, acrylic, and ink on paper, 72" x 48"	180

The lion and horse illustration used for "Wild on the Field" (page 49) is also the work of Dawolu Jabari Anderson: Portrait of James Baldwin (2009)—latex, acrylic, and ink on paper, 15" x 11", from the Menil Collection, Houston.



GOT MLK?

GOT MLK?



BLACK HISTORY MONTH



JUST DO IT!

GULLAH SCI-FI MYSTERIES

ONLY
1¢

FEATURING

AUG

FROM
GEORGIA

MIAMI

E

TO
GALAXIES

**BLACK
TRIPLE
DARK
MAJESTIC
VIRTUOUS
TARBABY
?**



**TWINKLE ★ TWINKLE
★
LITTLE TARBABY!!!**

GULLAH SCI-FI MYSTERIES

Featuring

10¢
DEC
#7

M E



UNCLE REMUS

...ain't feeling too Zip-a-deel
No, Suh, Reckon a chip dun replaced
ol Mr. Bluebird that was on his shoulder!

GULLAH SCI-FI MYSTERIES

FEATURING

JULY

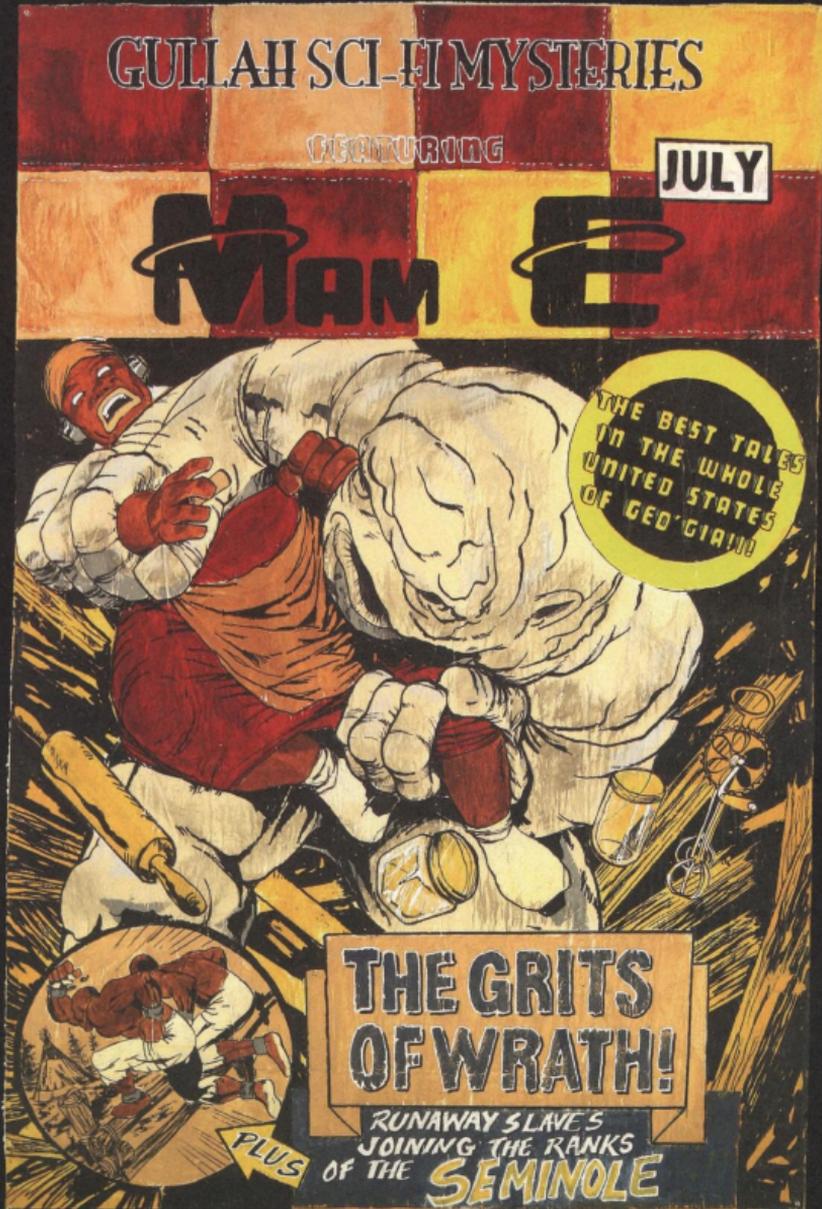
MAM E

THE BEST TALES
IN THE WHOLE
UNITED STATES
OF GEORGIA!!!

THE GRITS OF WRATH!

RUNAWAY SLAVES
JOINING THE RANKS
OF THE **SEMINOLE**

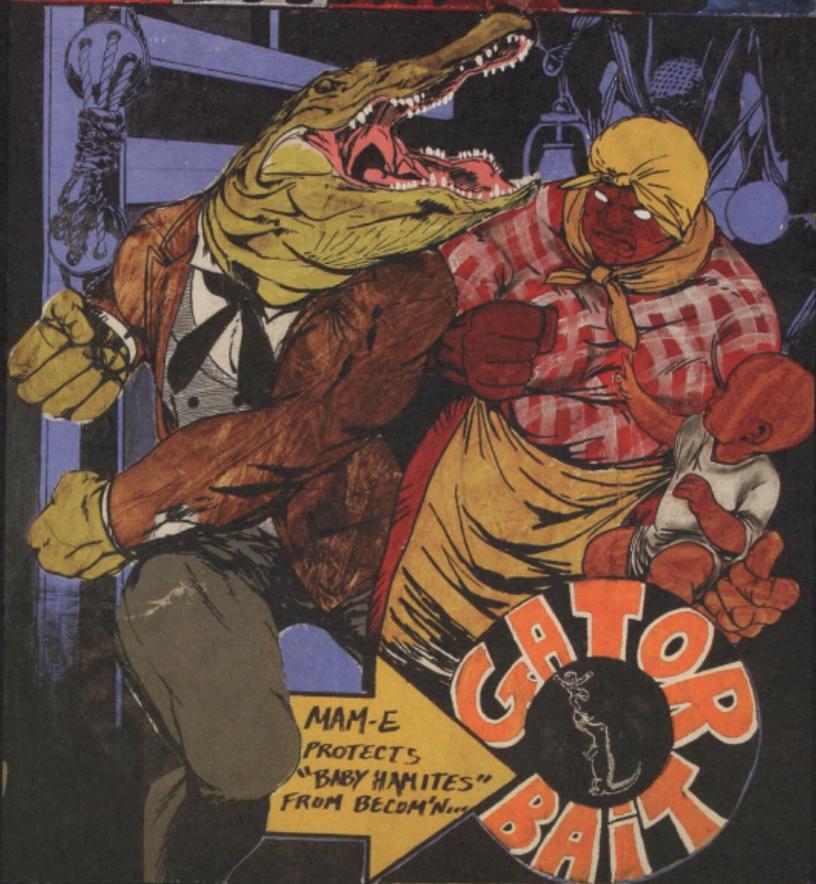
PLUS



GULLAH SCI-FI MYSTERIES

FEATURING

MAM-E



MAM-E
PROTECTS
"BABY HAMITES"
FROM BECOM'N'...

GATOR BAIT

GULLAH SCI-FI MYSTERIES

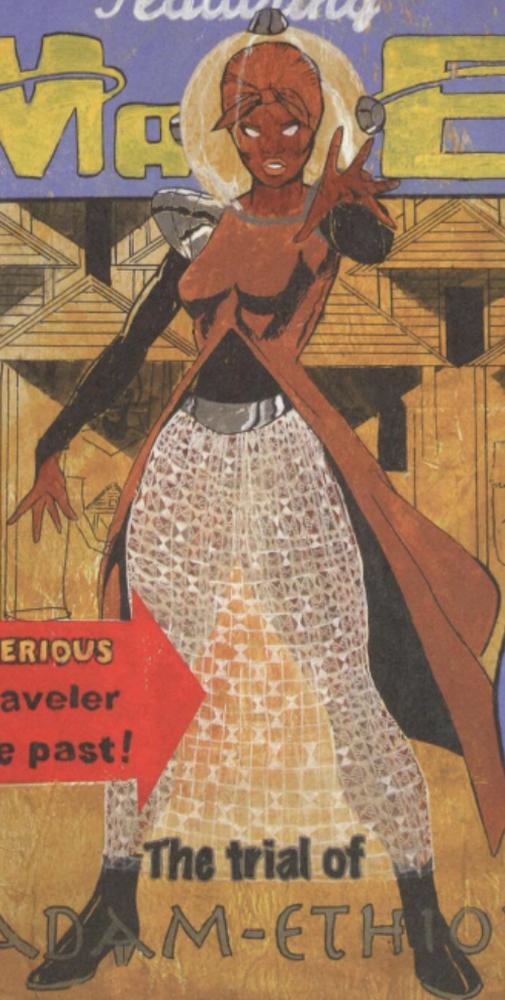
Featuring

MADAM E

70¢

FEB.

#33



**A MYSTERIOUS
time traveler
from the past!**

**Try 100
years
from the
past!**

The trial of
MADAM-ETHIOPIA

GULLAH SCI-FI MYSTERIES

Featuring

MAM

M.E.

10¢

MAR.
#34



M.E. against M.E.

GULLAH SCI-FI MYSTERIES

FEATURING

MARIE

I'VE BEEN ORDERED TO
ESCORT YOU BACK TO
THE BAN-DOONG SOLAR
SYSTEM FOR JUDGMENT.

I'D RATHA BE TWIX
TWO SCRAP'N
BOBCATS! YOU 'OL
HEATHENUS FOVL
PHILISTINE!

THE VERDICT

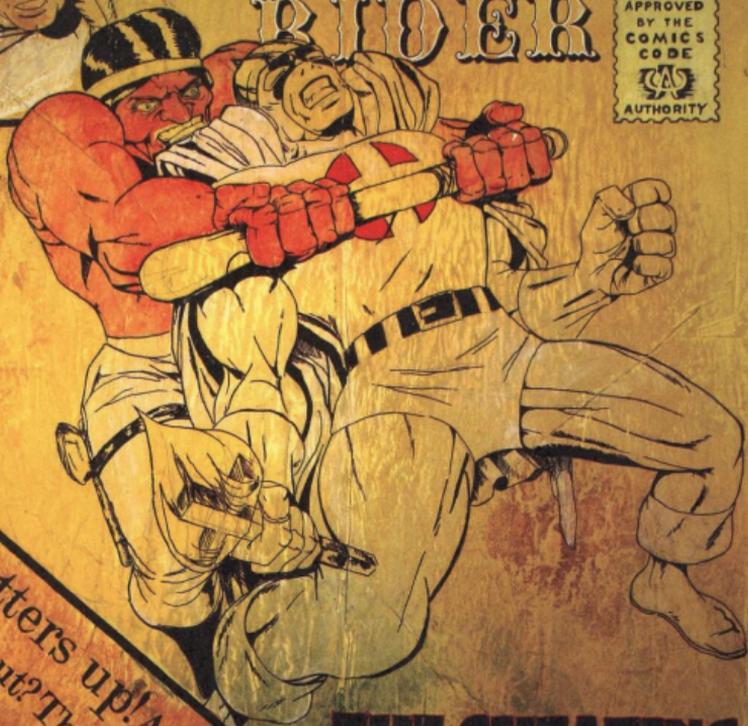
GEECHEE
VISION

VARIANT COVER

DW Griffith Presents

THE NIGHT RIDER

APPROVED
BY THE
COMICS
CODE
AUTHORITY



Batters up! A scalping in the
dugout? These ain't innings,
they're endings!
AND HOW!!!

THE CHEATING BRIEF WAHOO

COMRADS OF THE EAST FIGHT FASCISM



SEOUL ON ICE



APPROVED
BY THE
COMICS
CODE
AUTHORITY



THE BUGOUT
BEATDOWN!

Double Issue

Kurt Mueller

The cover of “Gullah Sci-Fi Mysteries, featuring Mam E,” issue #7, introduces readers to “Uncle Remus,” a storming, snarling behemoth emerging from a forest of flower shapes, his oversized hands clenched with rage. This Remus isn’t Joel Chandler Harris’s jolly slave, the eponymous minstrel-like narrator of several collections of African American folklore.¹ Nor is this the Remus re-popularized by Disney with Mr. Bluebird on his shoulder; this Uncle Remus, as the caption reads, “ain’t feeling too Zip-a-dee!”²

He also isn’t really the star of his own comic book. The cover image is not actually a cover but a single, poster-sized painting on treated paper: *The Avenging Uncle Remus* (2007), by Houston-based artist Dawolu Jabari Anderson. Anderson spins Uncle Remus anew as an Incredible Hulk-like abolitionist, cursed with W. E. B. Du Bois’s “Double Consciousness” and wielding a ring from Saturn that endows him with powers of mind-manipulation.³ He is an uncertain entity in a galaxy of similarly subverted super-stereotypes—an alternate reality illustrated by Anderson as a series of episodic pictures of oversized comic book covers. With a sharp, ironic wit, Anderson reclaims demeaning ethnic characterizations and an unjustly attenuated Black History, re-imagining them as fresh and nuanced narratives.

The center of Anderson’s cosmology is Mam E, whose gingham shirt, prodigious proportions, apron, and kerchief make her a clear incarnation of the “mammy” archetype familiar to *Gone with the Wind* and Aunt Jemima branding. Like Remus, Mam E’s plantation alter ego was visited by Emerciana, an extra-dimensional Saturnian scientist monitoring the egalitarian advancement of Earth, and a personification of ancient African wisdom. Madam Ethiopia, as Emerciana is known “on Earth,” refashioned Mam E’s “instruments of servitude (broom, iron, washboard etc.)” as conductors of kinetic energy and social change.⁴ In Anderson’s dynamic, freeze-frame compositions, Mam E (anti-slavery but pro-stability) squares off against the anarchist Remus and Jezebel-like Emerciana. In Anderson’s universe, simple and straightforward identities and reader identifications—hero and villain, good and evil, us and them—are rendered as open-ended questions.

This ambiguity extends to the multiple temporal contexts Anderson engages with each image. His comics creatively appropriate characters and dialects from the tales of Reconstruction Era America, while also incorporating elements of twentieth-century science fiction. The series title offers as much: “Gullah” refers to the African-American inhabitants of the Georgia and South Carolina lowlands, communities known for preserving African linguistic and cultural traditions. “Sci-Fi,” meanwhile, embraces “the

phenomenon of African-American artists that have expressed some form of escapism by means of space travel, e.g. Jazz musician Sun Ra, Stevie Wonder, and Parliament Funkadelic.³ Anderson's comics simultaneously look backward and forward while acknowledging a precarious present—a history still being formed.

"Mysteries," furthermore, connotes just such narrative suspense and the potential of the unknown. Following Anderson, the word can also be an inflection of "my stories."⁴ Viewed as such, the plot lines developed by Anderson further a storytelling heritage. Besides shared subject matter, the crossover is formal. Like an oral tradition, comic books imply shared authorship, and require audience assistance in visualizing a "text." The fact that Anderson's comics are only covers can be understood as a sendup of the limited dimensionality of stereotypes, but they can also be read as prompts to be completed by the viewer.

Anderson's prompts become direct addresses in another series of poster-sized works entitled "Negro Week"—the real-life predecessor to today's Black History Month. On poster-sized paper, Anderson depicts young girls in sundresses expressing amazement as they grasp token-sized, haloed Martin Luther King Jr. and Michael Jordan idols. Accompanying slogans, spinoffs of Milk and Nike advertisements implore one to consume African American History in a gulp, or to slam-dunk it. Anderson's sardonic message: we're being sold a cursory image of Black culture and progress. Generally, advertisements (like comics) rely on vivid images and abbreviated text for seduction and accessibility. Anderson's works, as pop art, at once celebrate the broad appeal of these vernacular forms while caustically criticizing their regular intentions and results, namely a market that furthers inequality. In this duplicity, Anderson's works reveal their own subversive alter ego.

1. Joel Chandler Harris invented Uncle Remus in 1876, eventually writing eight collections of tales, largely borrowed from African and West Indian Anansi stories passed down by American slaves. The stories have been criticized as cultural theft, as well as for promoting white paternalism and the stereotype of the black entertainer.

2. In 1946, Disney released *Song of the South*, a live-action and animated feature film adaptation of the Uncle Remus stories. A song from the film, "Zip-a-Dee-Do-Doo-Dah," won the 1947 Academy Award for Best Original Song.

3. W. E. B. Du Bois described the experience of an African American as one of "Double Consciousness," an awareness of a two-ness between how one saw oneself and how one was perceived by society; the conflict of choosing between African and American identities. See "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Gramercy Books 1994).

4. See the "Gullah Sci-Fi Mysteries" blog, <http://gullah-sci-fi-mysteries.blogspot.com/?zx=8fa0ac3078re8fca>.

5. Unpublished statement by the artist, "Understanding Gullah Sci-Fi Mysteries."

6. *Ibid.*

Upon Us

"I think he's basically a person,"
said the young waiter to the older one.
They were folding a large stack of napkins
at one of the restaurant's empty tables.
A plastic trash can lid plunked
onto the concrete in the parking lot
outside. The older waiter pictured
a mass of indiscriminate people
half a world away, screaming their brains out.
"Could I have a sip of your water?" he asked
the younger man. "I just think," said the young
waiter, handing over his glass,
"you can't see the painting if you're in
the painting, and I can't see the painting."

Honest

Pock-marked ditherer. Clouds and tables
on the window's lens. Clouds fan out
and compress against the planetary edge.
There are bees in the screen and cold cats
in the yard. The red sedan our neighbors
insist upon negotiates the back alley.
Obsequious dilettante. The trash cans
abide behind a curtain of chain-link.
Leaves resting at the shore of the garage
shake at times and then fall. The bushes
stripped and needing water, the grass
scuffed by an oblivious season.
Insolent fop. Fatuous pedant. Knock-
kneed flunky of ardent twaddle.

Unctuous

In the evening, you may arrive at any equation you like
to run jumps in the film between
one discrete experience and a total loss of insight
into your schedule of maneuvers,
the hourly insistences and looming plates
that would seem to have almost nothing to do
with the larger surprise one hopes to experience
after a few years, even if your surprise
would have to be faked a little,
given how desperately it was planned.
But it is a surprise when viewed against
the backdrop of your brilliantly conceived hedge
composed of concessions to fate and to others
whose need for you is without regard to your plans.

Trial Separation

Let me undo the braiding.

Though clung to the smaller phases
of the moon—I'll have to reach beyond
you, past the finch & riddle.

The string will unwrap fully,
place one end in your hands
and tie the other to a piece of sandstone
at the bottom of an ocean you named.

—Hasn't this gone on for too long?

Makeshift glow, steel-lined.
Let me loosen each story, now
past the sunken shore.

But if the waters won't hold you
chase the strange out—
fussed tinsel,
the croon of tulips splitting open—
Take a knife to it.

Wind, stray. There is no more straw
to feed the hearth with.

Belle Epoque

The mistake was mine—to think
the cob was just a cob,
the pen just a pen.

Then, to consider streets as streets
that could only land on the long, languid thruway.

Such a monster space and wasted
on the harvest of cold peaches and men.
All the wrong crops.

And those winds crying?
Couldn't have been a ghoul.

Now—as the rush of her burlesque legs
climbs the subway stairs, pushes glass
revolving doors, checks her own reflection

in a bakery window—to err
on the side of idiom seems arbitrary.

All I see is white—always diving
into the lake, always breathlessly
shaking the ink off her light feathers.

poem of the girl and the flower

I sweetly hold your weight like the breeze on a flower
an angel will descend for your form the morning sounds the swallows of the trees
like when the ring of your voice falls to the patio
on the shore of your skin there is a grown song
I turn over my question the geography is sentimental
immersed in the pond your open smile repeats
the Eiffel Tower at your side a geometric flower for pure poets.

surrealist poem of the elephant and the song

Orthopedic elephants, at the beginning, will constantly become apples
Because pilots love cities lit up like flowers
Music woven into winter coats
Your mouth fountain of ascendant gestures
Warm palm trees around your word, itinerary of easy journeys
Take me like violets open for sun

Townie

Roderic Crooks

At the Deadwood Inn, the woman on the bar stool to my right whistles when I tell her I'm from New York City, then starts in on a long, rambling spiel about the five seasons of Iowa that leaves me unclear as to what constitutes the extra season. A football game is playing on a set above rows of multi-colored, premium bottles lit up sapphire, chartreuse, and mandarin from underneath, but this woman cannot keep her eyes off of me. She says, "So you visiting then?" She points her drunk, glassy eyes at me while the guy at the seat on my left mumbles about the ineptitude of whatever franchise is on the television. I can't tell which side is ours or if they are winning.

I tell her that I live here now, that I've taken a job in town and wait for her to turn her attention back to the game, or to the man on my left, or anywhere but at me. She keeps her chin turned up and her gaze locked, so I add, "At the university museum." I hope this helpful detail will satisfy her curiosity and send her back to whatever she was doing before she told me I didn't look local.

Instead, she whistles again. I figure all this whistling must mean she feels sorry for me, being so far from home. I have never been this far into the American Heartland and begin to fear that all women in the bars of the Midwest will be this friendly. The way this lady keeps staring at me with her mouth open makes me feel like a unicorn, magic and impossible. I don't know what it is about me that has this effect on the woman, if it's that I'm a shade of brown she's not used to seeing or if it's my clothes, or something more basic, something so obvious to everyone else as to be invisible to me.

My new coworkers sit at a table a few feet from the bar and as hard as I try to ignore them, I keep straining to listen in on their conversation. The kid who works at the security desk, Ben, is talking about a trip to London with his girlfriend during Thanksgiving break, over two months away. This kind of planning strikes me as excessive, presumptuous even. Who knows what could happen in two months? In sixty days, we might wake up to find that England no longer exists, or has declared war on us again, or is simply missing. The most terrible

things are happening even as we sit in this bar, drinking our cheap liquor. Less than thirty days ago, as an example, I had a home and someone in it who loved me, but now I have neither. Take your eyes off what you love for one second and it can disappear.

Martin, the guy on tech crew who showed me a secret hammock mounted in the rafters above the loading dock, has tickets to Paris. Hearing all these romantic vacation plans infuriates me. I bite down so hard the pressure makes my ears ring. Nancy comes up behind me and puts her hand on my back. Even with all the smoke in the bar, I smell her, the heavy rose-like scent of some drugstore perfume.

Nancy is the only one at work I like. I taped the postcard of the Hawkeye State she gave me on my first day to the wall of my office. My job is to sift through boxes of old, useless things that have become lost in the museum's collections. No one can tell if they are broken off parts of art or garbage. I dust them, photograph them, then put them back in their boxes. I spend entire days in my little office reading magazines and napping.

Nancy smiles at me, and the woman next to me, now on my left because I have turned my stool around, at last stops staring. Nancy says, "You doing all right here, kiddo?" I think she must be pushing fifty, but I haven't asked. The makeup on her face forms a flat death mask of Maybelline color that she painstakingly retouches throughout the day, penciling on eyebrows in startled-looking arches. It gives her face a pleasant, naïve quality, like she is constantly in the process of being amazed, but there is something sad in her eyes. She has an ass like a bread truck, so that when we walk around in the museum, I have to slide behind her to let people on the other side of the hall get past us. Nancy has to pretend not to notice I have dipped out of her peripheral vision and then popped back in to accommodate traffic. She says, "Are you thinking about Paul?"

I say, "I wasn't, until you said it." I watch the ridge of muscles between her *trompe l'oeil* eyebrows bulge out. She would be scowling, if she could.

She says, "Sorry. You looked so unhappy over here. Why don't you join us?" She sweeps an open palm out in the direction of the table like a stewardess showcasing an escape hatch. The people on the side of the table that can see us

look up and smile without knowing what they are smiling at. I let Nancy stand there for a long time, until her little grin dies out gradually and she lowers her hand down to her side.

Finally I say, "I'm all right, Nancy. It's a little hard for me to be here. I'm homesick, is all." To me, Iowa is simply a brown square smack dab in the middle of the map I looked up the week before I came.

The man on my right, who used to be on my left, says over his shoulder so quietly that only I hear, "Love it or leave it." I look over to him, not sure if I heard what I think, and see that he is wearing a shirt with the logo of the Kum-n-Go gas station on it. He squinches up the side of his face I can see, makes two quick clicking sounds with his tongue, then tips his glass at me.

When Nancy goes back to the table to rejoin our work friends, I say I'm too drunk to sit with those assholes. She looks around to make sure no one overheard, then slinks back to the group. I turn my stool back front-ways and watch the guy next to me in the mirror behind the bar. He looks back and for a while, we study one another's faces in the second-hand light of bar neon. He's younger than I thought, late twenties maybe, which is already old in a college town. The pale hair sticking out of the sides of his hat would be blond in daylight. When I shake the last of the ice out of my empty drink a second later, he grabs an empty pilsner from the row of glasses the bartender has assembled near a caddy full of maraschino cherries and slides the glass over to me. He fills it from his pitcher without saying anything about the terms of this invitation.

A girl with a tiny dog in her purse walks behind us at that moment, down the aisle between the bar and the table with my coworkers. The guy spins around on his stool and reaches out to pet it. The stupid little thing jumps right at him and he catches it in the cradle of his arms. It licks his face. The girl, who looks too young to be in a bar and too dumb to care for a pet, snatches the dog back and slurs an apology. He holds up his hand to stop her and says, "That's all right. Animals love me. Everybody loves me."

When the girl leaves, I tell him that when I was a kid, we got a dog from the pound. They warned us he was a biter and showed signs of having been abused, but I picked him anyway. His legs were so short and his body so long, we figured

he was part Weiner, but you could have named any breed and it wouldn't have been entirely off. They say people look like their dogs.

Listen, I tell him. This dog had no understanding of the word "obedient." He refused the leash. He bit every man that ever knocked on the front door of our apartment: the landlord stopping by to pick up the rent check; a cop coming to give us a ticket for the expired tags on the car; my father dropping in to wash his clothes when he got out of the halfway-house. I called this dog Buddy.

Six years after we got him, Buddy bolted into traffic on Lenox Road and a livery cab clipped him and kept on going. I carried him home in my arms and he wheezed and coughed up blood the whole way. I made him a bed on the sofa in the living room and called my mom at the bar she liked to drink in, next door to the one where she worked. She promised she'd be home right away to take him to the vet. By the time she came, well after last call, the dog was dead. I held his face in my lap even after his ribcage stopped moving. There was a stain on the sofa from his blood, and for a long time, whenever I saw it, I felt like I was noticing it for the first time. I thought of Buddy when my eyes happened to run over that spot, how he whined when I put him in the kennel, how he walked me to school in the morning. That's what it's like when you miss someone that much: it takes months before you know he is never coming back.

When I reach the end, he holds up his splayed out fingers and wags his hand at the wrist as if he were hailing a taxi. He says, "That's a sad fucking story, man." The bartender comes over and refills our pitcher. The guy fills my empty first, then his. He picks up his beer and sucks down the whole thing in seconds. Then he curls his lips over his teeth to clear off the foam. He says, "But it sounds to me like that dog was an asshole. You should really let it go."

Later, he tells me his name is Jimmy, by the way. When he stands up to go take a piss, I am shocked to see how small he is, maybe five-seven. Most of these Nordic college girls out here are taller.

We drink together until bar close. One by one, my coworkers take off without making eye contact, except for Nancy, who says to call if I get in any trouble. Jimmy takes me to an after hours at the house of some dude he used to work with at the gas station and when we go in, he warns, "Nothing good ever

happens in this town after two in the morning." He asks me for a twenty, which I cough up unquestioningly. Ten minutes later, he brings me to the bathroom and we do a few lines together. Even the cocaine in Iowa tastes worse than at home. When the party breaks up, we walk on the rusted-out train tracks and trellis bridges I have never before noticed, all through downtown, over the river, and out to the edge of the city.

I live behind a strip mall in an Eisenhower-era complex, a horseshoe-shaped, two-story surrounded by a vast parking lot scarred with craters and potholes. The only road in curves sharply and dead-ends in a rundown park. There's a sign sticking out of a bramble of thorn bushes carved with the words "Mormon Winter Park."

The dingy one bedroom I rented over the phone looks out over the blacktop and a patchy lawn abutting the park. Inside the two rectangular rooms in the unfurnished apartment, the floors are peel-and-stick, the walls made of fallout shelter cinderblocks covered in lead-tinted paint. I own half-sets of almost everything—dishes but no silverware, chairs without a table, cases for pillows I don't have anymore.

Jimmy does not seem to mind the living conditions here. He kicks off his shoes at the door and heads right through to the bedroom. We strip and climb onto the air mattress I bought at a camping store. It sags so low from our combined weight that I can feel the floor beneath us. The mattress is a twin, but when I wrap myself around Jimmy's smaller frame, we can both fit. I look out the window into the park and see a stream of smoke coming from the woods. Jimmy's eyes are still open and I ask if he sees it too. He closes his eyes, yawns, and says, "Forget about it. It's just the Mormons." His breath slows immediately and he starts to snore.

We stay in bed all day the next day, until it's time to go drink again. When he gets up to leave, I ask for his number, so I can call him later. He says he doesn't have one. "Relax," he says, "I know where to find you." Off the top of my head, he might be the only person in the world of whom this is true.

• • •

Paul nagged me for months to apply to jobs out of state, to quit my job as a technician at the Brooklyn Museum and find something far away so we could clean up and start fresh, as if all you had to do was snap your fingers and everything about you would be changed and made orderly. The only place that took me was the museum at the university. On the Friday afternoon they called, I told them I needed a week to talk it over with my boyfriend, but mostly I was stalling to see if I could find a reason not to go. Iowa, Ohio, Idaho. In my mind these places were one, an endless tundra dotted with shitkickers and slaughterhouses.

Two days later, I woke up on the floor next to our bed a little high still, but feeling good, rested even. I knew I would be hung over later, but there were still enough chemicals in my blood to keep me from hurting. The skin around my eye felt tight and I realized then that I couldn't open my eye. In the mirror on the closet, the skin there looked puffed up and about to turn all kinds of ugly colors. I figured Paul must have hit me, because we'd fought before. I couldn't remember exactly how it happened, if I said something to set him off or even if I had it coming. I found him on the couch, and no matter how loudly I yelled or how hard I shook him, he wouldn't wake up.

His mother met me down at the emergency room at New York Methodist. She bullied the doctor into letting her see Paul and asked all kinds of questions about the long term effects, treatment options, and payment plans, as if she were comparison shopping for a dishwasher. It never occurred to me to be so demanding. After a few hours of this, she finally acknowledged my presence by saying, "I think it would be best if you left now." I wanted to tell her that speedballing was Paul's thing and not mine, but what was the point? It was easier for her to hate me than to admit what her son was.

Days later, when he came home, he stood in the living room and held his hands at his sides while I hugged him. He pressed the tip of his finger on the edge of my eye socket, right where the bruise started and said this would never happen again. It took me a second to understand that he meant he was leaving me, not that we weren't going to hit each other anymore. I agreed it was probably a good idea for us to quit, that eight years of drinking, drugs, fighting, making up, and doing it all over again was enough. That night he went to an NA meeting

in the basement of a church and slept over at his mother's house. Within a week, I had made the arrangements. The day I left, I kept waiting for him to show up and announce that he had reconsidered, but at the end there wasn't even a kiss or a handshake or anything. When I deplaned at the runty airport in Cedar Rapids, I expected him to be waiting in the terminal with flowers.

• • •

At the Halloween party thrown by the girl from the office across the hall from mine, I am the only one not wearing a costume. These kids I work with. They're all nice, but they have to be at least a decade younger than me, maybe more. Their display of good will and faith in the future makes me feel old and ruined, even though I'm only thirty-four. They all look so hearty and sincere.

Except for the costumes, this party is the same party I have been going to every night since I came to town. It moves from house to house, but I keep seeing the same people engaged in the same conversations. You can tell time by what's on the stereo. Hip-hop means last call. A pretty white girl from Human Resources tells me I have to get the dancing started, I guess because I'm the only one at the party who is not exactly white. She says it like that, You *have* to dance and so I dance with her in the living room, shaking unenthusiastically under the bright lights with the same dozen people I see almost every day looking on. I don't even like dancing.

I walk out onto the porch to have a cigarette. Wind cuts through the pillars of the covered terrace, so fast and strong you can hear it whipping down through the trees. The temperature has dropped thirty degrees since the afternoon. I pull my shoulder blades up towards my ears, flatten myself against the house, and smoke with the cigarette pinched between two shaky fingers. A girl with dreadlocks that look like they stink comes out a second later with a bulldog pipe and offers me a hit. I can tell from her straight teeth, her messy clothes, and the brand-name sandals that she comes from money. We pass the weed back and forth a couple times and bullshit about how it might snow soon and how much longer the beer at this get together will last. I keep forgetting her name. I have a bottle of Old Style in my hand and a can of beer in each of my jacket pockets.

Jimmy walks up from the street, wearing only a tee shirt and some jeans. He rubs his hands over his thin biceps and I feel colder looking at him. He trips climbing onto the porch and walks into the bubble of light formed by the single bulb over the door. The lids of his eyes droop down and his mouth is slightly open. It's only been a few weeks since we met, but I feel like I've been waiting forever for him to come find me.

He waits on the top step, then before he even greets me he says, "Do you think I could hit that real quick?" I start to tell him it isn't mine to share, but before I can get a word in, he walks closer and says, "C'mon. Be nice." He puts his arm around my neck and tips forward like he might fall over. I look at this girl Cindy or Mindy or Candy and squint my eyes and suck through my teeth, the way you do when you see a wound that looks like it hurt. I stuff my hands in my pockets, next to the beers, and fold my jacket over Jimmy like a bird closing its wings.

She packs the bowl again and while she tamps a little pinch into it, she says, "This a friend of yours?" She thinks she knows already, so I don't say anything.

Jimmy says, "Yeah. I'm his new boyfriend." He staggers forward, crunching the toe of my shoe with his. His left hand slips inside the opening of my jacket and he puts his other hand on my stomach, under my shirt. The hippie girl gives me the weed. I hold the bowl for him and light it so he can smoke, his face inches from mine. He blows the smoke out into my eyes and whispers in my ear, "I told you everyone loves me." I hold him there, feeling the heat from my body seep out through my skin to warm him and think how good it is that someone has found me.

He steps away and I offer the bowl back to the hippie. When I reach over towards her, Jimmy claps one of the beer cans in my pocket between his palms. I hold my hands up as if I were being frisked while he fishes it out. He tries to tell that joke about not having to tell a lady with two black eyes anything because you already told her twice, but he is so completely ripshit that he keeps screwing up the punch line.

The girl can see the joke is not going to end well. She tells me she's going inside to find her girlfriend and get away from all this misogynist crap. Jimmy looks her up and down and says, "Why don't you do that, you fucking dyke?"

What kind of fucking hippie are you supposed to be, anyway?" He grins as he says it, but his head is stuck out far over his neck and drifting side to side. I worry he's going to fall over.

The girl screams that she will kick his ass and puffs her chest out. She's swinging her arms around and yelling. He eggs her on, steps closer to her with that silly, stoned expression. I plant myself between them and put both my hands on his chest. I say, "I think it would be best if you left."

He leans in close to me and murmurs in my ear, "I wish you would hit me, you fucking faggot. I wish you would." Then he slaps my hands away and stomps off the porch. He walks all the way to the end of the block. When he gets under the streetlamp at the corner, he flips us off over his back without turning around. The hydraulic gasp of carbonation escaping from the can hisses from his direction.

That night, after all the other guests have gone, I sit on the couch in the living room and tell the girl whose house it is how lonely I am. I accidentally knock over a leftover beer on her coffee table, spilling it on the rug she has bought especially for the party. She says, "You have to go." When I reach the corner, I flip off her house with both hands and yell out into her street, "You fucking bitch."

I pass through downtown on my way back home. The bars have recently let out, spilling drunken undergrads from every doorway onto Dubuque Street. None of them are dressed up as anything anymore. They have all lost most of their costumes and are parading around in mismatched props, fairy wings and tiaras mixed up with toy guns and smudged grease paint. They must be immune to this wind, having grown up in it. The constant display of health here is stunning. I have never encountered a people so well fed and polite, so happy. Except for Jimmy, who is staggering towards me with that same ghoulish smirk plastered on his face. He says, "What took you so long?" and falls into me. I know I should be mad at him, but in this moment, I feel something like relief.

We cross the river by the museum. The bridge has a sign that, as a warning, shows the date when a person last died from jumping or falling. Jimmy runs ahead of me, leans out over the railing, and shouts, "I'm going to make them

change this fucking sign." He plants his feet up on the bottom edge of the rail and holds his arms out in front of him, his fingertips reaching out over the water.

I say, "Are you planning on jumping or falling?" I grab his belt and pull him back from the edge. He takes me on a shortcut near the big dorms. From the top of the hill, in the acres and acres of parking behind the hospital, I can see smoke coming from the park behind my apartment building again. It looks like a curtain of silver fog rolling across the open fields, swallowing up the scenery as it spreads.

• • •

I get tired of him borrowing my clothes all the time, so we swing by the place Jimmy sometimes stays and pick up his stuff. We go in the middle of the afternoon, when the guy who lives there won't be around to hassle Jimmy about the rent he owes. All Jimmy's things fit in one carload: a couple garbage bags full of clothes in the backseat, some books on the floor, a busted ten-speed hanging out of the trunk. Jimmy says when he gets off paper, he'll look for some other state to live in. I don't contradict him, even though he never does anything to finish his parole or pay off his fines. Every time we see a cop he gets skittish.

A few days later, Jimmy and I are together in bed, the remnants of a twelve-pack on the floor next to the air mattress. Jimmy picks up the phone and hands it over—Nancy calling to say she just got home from break. She laughs when I tell her who has answered. She says, "Well I hope you're being careful. He sounds like trouble to me. You don't know where he's been."

I let her laugh at us for a while, and then I make an excuse to hang up. When I get off the phone, Jimmy, who has been listening to the whole conversation, says, "I hope you had a good laugh, you dick. I guess your fat friend thinks she's better than me because she's got some stupid job that no one gives a shit about." He picks a plate up off the floor and stabs his cigarette into it.

I try to calm him, to pull him back down into bed, but he swats my hand off his shoulder and says, "Keep your fucking hands off me." He slams the rest of his beer, gets up and goes into the front room. He comes back a few minutes later,

grabs the rest of the beers and stands in the doorway. He says, "You think you're too good for me. You act like you're so together, with your job and all that stupid bullshit. But you're a fucking mess up here." He taps his finger on his temple a few times. He bangs the front door shut on his way out and I suppose it's going to take a lot of apologizing to talk him down.

That night, I cave in to Nancy's complaining and we all go out to dinner together, the three of us, Nancy, Jimmy and me. Nancy is big on introductions. She wears a dress and even more makeup than usual to the restaurant, which is full of boys and girls who look as if they are playing dress-up. Jimmy forgoes the food altogether and pounds three whiskeys before Nancy's appetizer gets to the table. He gets antsy, maybe because we have been holed up for so long, and he's smoking like a factory. Nancy complains and coughs unconvincingly, so Jimmy grabs his drink and plops down over at the bar to finish his cigarette.

Nancy folds her hands in her lap and stares down at the floor. After a few minutes, she says, "He's a real charmer."

"He's nervous," I say, even though I don't know this to be true.

She drops her hands into her lap and says, "What the heck are you doing? This guy's a loser. I mean, look at what you're throwing away." She holds up one hand to count, and successively loops the index finger of the other hand around each digit as she counts off my good points: "You're smart. You're good looking. You've got a decent job. What's so bad about your life you want to let this guy ruin it?" She leans her head far back as if to examine something on the ceiling. "You could have any guy you wanted."

I want to explain to her that I do have the one I want, but instead, I say, "He's not so bad, once you get to know him." Across the restaurant, I see Jimmy order himself another drink. When I look back at Nancy, she is shaking her head.

She says, "Every time someone is nice to you, you act like they're crazy." She waves an imaginary pen in the air to summon the check for our dinner.

We drop Nancy off after dinner. She kisses us each on the cheek and turns off the porch light as soon as she gets in. Jimmy and I head over to another bar. I meet a girl at the cigarette machine and for a while, we chat about music or politics or drugs, or maybe all of these things at once. By the time I excuse myself to find him, a half-hour has passed. I catch up to him at the pool table, as a guy

a head taller than Jimmy jabs a finger into his chest and tells him he better shut his fucking mouth. Before I can get over to separate them, Jimmy nods at the guy, takes a step back, then swings at him. The guy dodges out of the way easily, then pops Jimmy right on the bridge of his nose. The crowd pulls them apart. I drag Jimmy out the front and around the corner to the alley by the wrist. Even though I'm irritated with him for fighting, I admire his willingness to take a punch.

Next to a dumpster out back, he shakes himself free and shoves me. I fall back against the wall and hold my palms out towards him. I say, "Easy, easy." He has his fists up again.

He clenches the front of my hoodie and pulls my face close to his. He says, "You love it, don't you, you sick fuck. You love to see me get hit, don't you? Since you're too much of a pussy to do it yourself."

I say, "Jimmy, I'm not going to hit you. I won't do it." But even as I say it, I ball my fists up at my side. He's begging for it.

A group of big and fratty boys approaches from the other end of the alley. Three or four of them have on baseball caps with the brims turned to the back. They look like mannequins, all of them perfectly proportioned and dressed in variations of the same outfit. It's hard even to tell how many of them there are, exactly. Jimmy and I stand closely together, his hand still on my sweatshirt. He unclenches his fingers and spreads his palm out over my chest. We wait there together as the group, abruptly quieted, passes us. One of the boys in the pack says, "Fucking faggots." We watch them make their way down the alley, the sound of their laughter bouncing off the concrete and brick.

Jimmy backs up and looks down the alley the way the boys went. He turns his face towards me and I wait for him to say something. His jaw moves, like he is trying to work something out. He spits in my face.

I wipe my cheek with my palm and when I look back up he is already halfway down the alley. When I get home, I lumber through the apartment with the lights turned out, kicking the clothes and papers on the floor out of my path. I consider tossing all his things out, but it seems so ambitious at this hour. I fall asleep on top of the covers with my clothes on.

He comes back late and climbs into bed with me. I wake up when the door opens, but don't move. I hold my body stiffly, but he crawls onto the bed on all

fours and pushes his forehead into my shoulder until I roll over. He presses his back into my chest and pulls my arm around him. I hold him like that while he cries.

The next morning, I wake up before he does and make the coffee. He comes out, still in dirty clothes from the night before, the bridge of his nose plump and deformed. I ask, "What happened to you last night?"

He sits down on one of the chairs in the kitchen part of the front room. The chairs are spaced out around an imaginary table that I have never gotten around to actually buying. He says, "All I remember is being on the bridge. I wanted to jump off it and make them change that fucking sign, but I came back home to say sorry first. I guess I passed out." He exhales loudly, puffing out his cheeks, then says, "Sorry."

I sit down at one of the other chairs, and say, "Jimmy, listen. You keep trying to get me to fight you, but I'm not going to. If you get like that again, I'm going to have to get rid of you."

He nods. He pulls his knees into his chest and rests his heels on the edge of the chair. He stretches his tee shirt out over his knees and ducks his head into the little tent he has made. I wonder if he'll wait for the bruise on his face to heal before he starts in again.

• • •

Twenty minutes into Martin's Christmas party, at his tastefully appointed and seasonably festive home on Brown Street, Jimmy tells Martin's wife that she should lose weight if she wants to wear those leggings. I grab our coats from the bedroom before the shocked silence ends. I shoo Jimmy out the door without apologizing to Martin or his wife. Jimmy drapes his coat over his shoulders like a cape and charges off, to a bar, I am sure. I ask him why he got so nasty so quickly this time and he says, "Who the fuck cares? You hate those people as much as I do." Before I can get in another word, Nancy calls out from the porch and I jog back to see what she wants.

She meets me in the yard in front of Martin's house. There are three steps

down to the sidewalk. She stands above me and says, "You know, you really can't bring him to places like this. People are getting mad." This is the second week of December, but already the air stings my skin like rubbing alcohol. Nancy is out here in a holiday sweater, her arms folded, foot tapping the sidewalk.

I say, "I didn't really want to come anyway. I didn't want to be rude and skip altogether." I look down the street in the direction Jimmy has gone.

She says, "So you're going to keep this loser and let him drag you down?" She sounds tired.

I shrug and say, "No, it's not like that." I button up my coat and put my hands in my pockets. I wait for her to give up and go back inside, but she keeps standing there in that homemade sweater. The light comes from behind her so I can't see her face. I say, "I don't know. I guess he's what I'm used to."

She comes down onto the sidewalk and makes me look her in the eyes. She says, "That's bull. You're not the only one who ever had it bad. I guess you were too busy thinking that we are all a bunch of hicks. Some of us had lives before you got here, you know." The smile she tries to muster for me comes out as a twitch in the corners of her mouth. She says, "Not everyone here is as provincial as you like to think." When she walks back up to the house, she hugs herself tightly, and it occurs to me that the sadness I have always perceived in her is not for herself.

I catch Jimmy at the closest bar to Martin's house. He is already arguing with some girl inside, his voice audible over the jukebox. I stand close to him and wait for him to finish. After listening to him rant, I butt in, "Jimmy, can I talk to you a second? Outside?"

He says, "Give me a minute," and holds his index finger up to my face without looking at me. He rips into the girl, even though they have obviously just met. He looks tiny and sickly. I watch him reel off his points and browbeat this girl with his faulty reasons, until I can't take it anymore. He looks so weak all of a sudden, so frail.

I say, "Jimmy, listen. I'm going home and I want you to leave tonight." He looks at me for a minute, as if he is not sure what I said. I let it sink in, and then I head for the door.

He runs after me. He says, "Fine. Fine. You've made your point." When I don't stop, he trots ahead and blocks me with his whole little body. He whines, "You can't throw me out like this. Give me some notice or tell me what's wrong or something." He holds my elbow and digs his fingers in. I can't tell if his eyes are wet from being so drunk or if he's going to cry. He says, "You can't fucking do this."

I say, "Or what?" I pull his fingers off my arm. I look at him, all pumped up and ready to fight, but I don't feel angry. I tell him, quietly, there will be no fighting and no making up and if he wants to get melodramatic about it, he knows where he can find a bridge to jump off. I leave him there on the street, his complexion red from the cold and drink.

I think he's going to follow me, but he says, "Goodbye," in a breathy voice. I don't turn around to see the look on his face. I hear the words again, drifting over from somewhere behind me, oscillating from ear to ear.

He doesn't come home at all that night. The next day, I go to work, but all day I expect a call. I tell Nancy what happened and she says, "It's about time. Now you can get on with your life." I feel better, until I realize going back to my life means shutting myself in my office and dusting bits of rubble with a sable brush. I keep hearing that pitiful, desperate "Goodbye." I can hear it at my desk, coming in from the window.

I walk by the bridge on my lunch break. They have not yet changed the sign to commemorate his jump, but I am sure the adjustment is in progress. The brown surface of the water shows the direction of the wind in shifting flat spots and depressions. The shallow parts nearest the riverbanks are already frozen. I see Jimmy here at the highest part of the bridge, as he must have stood on the railing, put his arms in Olympic position, then jackknifed up, out, and over. The currents here are wicked, a whole cosmos of black holes waiting to drag a body under. I swear I can make out his discolored face down there, smiling up from the river grass. That afternoon, I watch the news expectantly, waiting to hear his name and see the sheriff pull the bloated corpse out of the ice and weeds.

After the late news, every time I drift off to sleep, I hear his voice again and feel him in the room with me. I am so exhausted after a few hours, that I ask him

out loud to leave me alone, to stop haunting me. I dream I see his face, outside the window, twenty feet off the ground. He grins at me and begs to come back in. Sometime around midnight, I toss the covers off, dress, and go out to a bar close by that Jimmy showed me. I need something to take the edge off.

He is sitting at this bar, dressed in cowboy boots and a flannel shirt. He leans heavily to the left, as if he might slip off his seat at any second. It takes a full minute after I sit down next to him for him to see me. There is a scabby patch on his cheek, the kind of scrape you get from having your face on the pavement. He leers at me for a while, then says, "You look terrible. Have you been crying?" I flag the bartender down and get to business.

After we have finished our last round, and the bartender has put up the chairs and turned on the lights, we walk back down the strip, the lights of all the stores turned out for the evening. When we get close to my apartment, in the park, I can see smoke again. Two distinct plumes rise up from under the canopy of black trees, spreading out and disappearing as the columns rise to meet the nighttime clouds. Jimmy tells me when the Mormons came through here on foot just after statehood, before the transcontinental railroad, a group got stuck out there in the woods, just a few hundred yards from the Iowa River. The fifth season in Iowa is winter, a winter so premature and unrelenting it must be counted twice. When that first killing frost set in, they knew they were too loaded down to make it over the mountains in time. They dumped everything they could possibly live without, but with the snow already falling, it wasn't enough. Half of the men over sixteen decided to stay behind, while the rest of the caravan, lighter and more agile now, made a break for the Great Salt Lake. Most of the stragglers died out there in the snow, all those boys huddled up together, checking every morning to see who had gone in the night and who had lived. The city fire department knows now not to take the reports of fire in the park seriously. The country dirt is lousy with them, marooned Latter Day Saints, deathless and inconsolable in their yearning for the ones who left them.

Farewell to Aurora

Hand in hand or sometimes with one of their arms over
The other's shoulders, they walked between the double rows
Of the plane trees. A couple again for just a few days. He wore
The shirt with the pattern she loved. She gave herself as only she could.

Her auburn hair in highlights newly cut. Nearly autumn.
The leaves in the gutters scuttled in the breeze. Soon the rails
Would sing an aubade to the station. Past Aubervilliers,
Flatcars and ridelles idled on the siding. Their emptiness
Cheered her for departure with thoughts of their possible cargo.

Aubade Again

And you get up and I get up and we go to work.

And I get up and make oatmeal for us to eat before you get up and we eat and go to work.

And you get up and as the sun rises purple and red you go swim in the chlorine buoyancy in the steelbeamed arena and I eat and we go to work.

And you get up and turn the heat on and drink herbal tea and wish our walls were thick and I feel the breeze of your waking and get up and we go to work.

And you get up and drink herbal tea and I get up and drink coffee and I am fortified and you are healthy and we go to work.

And I get up in the cold dark and write about your elbows and your lips when you sleep in our bed and you get up and ask how I slept and I say well and you and you say well and we eat our bowls of oatmeal and go to work.

And I get up thinking of weeds greening the winter garden bills by nine for the mailman to send into the papery swirl groceries last night's dishes the dust blown on the heated air filling our hallway and you get up and we decide pasta tonight and eat raisins with our oats and go to work.

And you get up and I get up and I think your hair looks like it did ten years ago on the ferry to the trailhead through the Queen Charlotte Sound and I try to tell you and you are congested and don't hear me and I don't say it again and we go to work.

And you get up and we don't have to work and I want you to stay in bed and you go swim in the steelbeamed arena and I get up and I write about you.

And I get up and watch you sleep and at the appointed time touch your hip and you get up immediately and smile vaguely and we eat and go to work.

And you get up and go to the bathroom and come back to bed and I get up and go to the bathroom and come back to bed.

And I get up and you get up and while we eat oatmeal together we read in silence and then we go to work.

Vision of Men Washing Windows at Night

*Let there be a landscape of open eyes
and bitter wounds on fire. —Lorca*

T T T_s

slide down and down. A landscape of open eyes
and bitter wounds on fire. Streaks
striate, shudder, incandesce, disappear:

now the building seems a lacquered shield, a geode
split, a famous corpse butterflyed
under glass, an epic scene in a shallow tray,

now an aquarium and these men the algae eaters,
now an interior which must be cleared
from within—

then they are gone.

In Sotto Voce

for how long the crimped remain
and grope in the simultaneity
a keepsake, a timbre, a means
we will drift in regardless
snagged in thick weeds
to be put down again, to be instant
and find a hand outstretched as if
wicks of the knuckles were
hastened by their disfiguring
this is one of the more realistic ones
note its bulbous phosphorescence
and the train cars, the people
I am forgetting the particulars
moving across a vast slick surface
through filmy curtains
to say yes of course, my hand
against the abrasions of the clock
now look at you, you are entire
I will tackle sensations with strange barbs
I will put cream on my lobes
and vast the warp of the record
when my feet were nearly gone
half-white alloy of the usual prop
I, a tiny mark on your knee
slivered offering in my hand
the bottom was drenched
the pastor says you cannot

all that, and the faint promise of
those white deer
and the place where I was raised
spitting in the wrong direction
the last time I saw her
an osprey: the sign says pardon
so I was up to my shins in it
a harbinger of half-light
I left my body to look for
flew over the crude sky
pleated on the bias
the left hand descending, softly

Playgrounds of Being

Awake at three, snow falling in the dark,
I breathe cold air in, warm air out.

Insomnia sounds like someone twiddling
the radio dial: inter-spliced commercials,
Mahler, rock and roll, female and male
persuasion, argument and song.
Ha-ha! Here I am in a delicate hush
listening instead to the stations
of the self, the substance-less sounds
of my own being obliterating the world.

And what if tonight is the last night,
the grand finale, the nevermore?
I lie here wondering if the yearning
to be awake is a yearning to disappear.
Sometimes I'm afraid of the ever-flowing
river of the work, afraid that to ask
a single question forever is to be a stone.

One of the dogs yips and sighs in sleep,
then settles into breathing that makes
the sound of a hammock longing,
longing, the soft complaints
of wood to rope, rope to wood.
Why can't the mind bear to stay
in the beauties that surround it?

Over and over I lose myself,
invent myself again. I must be
a multitude of lost inventors.

Inside me, the snows of sleep
begin to drift, erasing my footprints
and the paw prints of the dogs.
The little engine of thinking sputters
and dies in the great silence.

Some people will say that these words
make a dull clopping. I hope they sound
like horses on the road—plainspoken.

Parlor

I arrived In hopes of remembering
This ugly thing I have
With stickers Stuck to what I know of pockets
And Blow Pops The treasures they keep hidden
A newfound sweetness Poured from her loosely
Lined lips On her deathbed I was afraid
It wasn't true That I hated her
Every moment Dismissive
With a yo-yo Flick of the wrist
I clung to Stories bound in leather
The old woman Wearing the wolf
Who understood I could love
What I hated Most
Was my mother The world I hoped to touch

Harmony Neal pity

The brown blanket scratched into my shoulders and neck and kept slipping off as I negotiated drags of my cigarette in the parking lot of a mom-and-pop convenience store somewhere on an empty stretch of I-24, just past Paducah. It was dusk and there was no neon in the dirt-caked windows. I didn't want to stay too close to Bambi's silver station wagon, but there wasn't much room to pace between the small gravel lot and menacing pine forest. The three inches of snow on the ground was just enough to soak through my leather skate shoes. I paced, asking myself why I'd agreed to come down, incredulous she would make me stand outside in the middle of nowhere. There could be rapists in the woods. Chainsaw serial killers. Sawed-off-shotgun rednecks. If someone threw a potato sack over my head, she probably wouldn't notice.

All I'd needed to do was cough, and I could have stayed in the heated car. If Verissimo had known I was with Bambi, he would have gotten off the phone. I hadn't realized that my vow of silence if Verissimo called included a tacit agreement to get out of the car. But with what I know about my mom, I should have guessed.

I wasn't surprised when her phone rang and she snapped, "Don't make a sound," before answering. Happy for a chance to not be engaged with her myself, I watched the icicles hanging from the evergreens as we sped by. I was surprised when she veered onto the next off-ramp, which had no signs for gas stations or restaurants, pulled into a poorly lit parking lot, and violently motioned me out of the car with a death glare when I dared part my lips. I almost spoke anyway, then didn't, grabbing the blanket from the back seat, returning my own death glare, which she ignored. I gave the passenger door a good slam.

Verissimo oversees concrete crews that do work for places like Disney, Universal Studios, and fancy resorts across Florida. He works eighty-plus hours a week and is available strange hours, since Disney cannot have people pouring and shaping concrete while the parks are open, since everything Disney is always magical and never mundane.

Bambi craves Verissimo. When his special ringtone sounds, the world stops. Waiters are told to come back later, movie theaters are evacuated, body parts are left unwashed and dripping. She wakes while pretending she wasn't asleep. I can only imagine the lies her groggy mind must concoct to explain the confusion in her voice, "Hello? Huh? What? Oh... no... no. I wasn't asleep. No, don't go. No. I'm not sleeping. I was just... trying to figure out this crossword puzzle. Do you know a four-letter word for 'gastropod'? No? Ok. So, how are you?"

After eight cigarettes, I was finally allowed back in the car.

I spent the trip looking out the passenger window or gripping the steering wheel, listening to Bambi talk. She's a talker. My ex-fiancé once described it as "no unexpressed thought." Perhaps this is what being an elementary school teacher turns you into: a babbling machine. The data suggest that you can't just tell students to do something, you must explain how you do things, how you reach conclusions, your own thought process.

She mostly talked about Verissimo and how he worked too much and how much she loved him and his name because Verissimo means "truth" and my father was such a horrible liar. I gave small pieces of advice where I could, but mostly muttered "uh-huh," "yeah," "for real?" and "right?"

When we reached Bambi's triple-wide trailer in the retirement community where I'd once spent the uncomfortable summer before college, when I wasn't even sure I wanted to go to college, the house was as I remembered it: sand yard patchy with weeds and fire ants, sink hole that had been filled in with trees that were now rotting and caving in, cigarette butts and miscellaneous trash peppering the sand, mildew breeding on the brown siding, creaking wooden steps leading into crumb-and-hair-covered carpets you should not tread on without shoes, yellowed wallpaper from years of my father, brother, and me smoking inside, kitchen floor coated in dirt and crumbs and sticky splotches. My grandmother was watching movies and playing Super Nintendo in her room at the back of the house, only coming out to make salads and refill her 42-oz insulated Coke mug that surely had mold growing under the lid and in the straw. My younger brother was cocooned in his room, talking to people online, smoking cigarettes and pot.

My great grandfather was lying on his side on the living room couch, holding my beat-up baby doll, waiting to die, with his wife in a blue, faux-marble urn on a table behind his back. Bambi's master bedroom was decorated in burgundies and pinks, with dusty candles, knickknacks, and photos of her parasailing, snorkeling, and riding rollercoasters at theme parks lining every smooth surface.

We left for the Keys the next afternoon, but not before Bambi had packed her station wagon full of beach chairs, umbrellas, towels, water shoes, coolers, sun block, bottled water, snorkeling gear, and her six-person tent (even though we planned to stay in a motel). I crammed one bathing suit, a couple changes of clothes, cigarettes, and a few books I knew I wouldn't get to read into my backpack. It was Christmas Day, but that's really beside the point.

It's a four-to-six-hour drive from Lake Wales to Key Largo, depending on traffic. There isn't much of anything from Highway 60 to Yeehaw Junction, just the usual expanses of dirt grass and evergreen forests, with occasional trailer parks visible from the highway. Once you hit 1-95, billboards sprout up, mostly pro-life admonishments and ads for outlet malls and trucker strip bars. You skirt Miami, a baffling city with crud-encrusted palm trees, then you're stuck on U.S.-1, a sad, one-lane highway with occasional passing zones, hoping no one in front of you breaks down or causes an accident.

Traffic crawled down U.S.-1 while Bambi mourned the inevitable. I finally asked, "What are you so afraid of? Do you really think people will know the difference? What do you expect? Little men in fanciful hats to run out of the bushes, pointing and laughing when it hits midnight?" She laughed and agreed that wasn't likely.

I woke up the next morning sweating under a scratchy, cigarette-burned comforter in a crappy motel near Key Largo, woozy from too much driving and fast food. It was D-Day, and I needed to put on a good face. We were scheduled for a scuba-diving course at John Pennekamp State Park the next day, something I had no predilection for whatsoever, but had to take, like a rabies series. Bambi decided on breakfast then kayaking in the Gulf of Mexico at Bahia Honda State Park since it was only a ninety-minute drive south.

When we reached Bahia Honda, the palm trees were all curving down, fronds flapping wildly. A construction paper notice greeted us outside the weather-stripped grey wood rental/concession stand: "Due to weather conditions, only experienced kayakers may rent boats today." I pointed out the sign to Bambi, who smirked and shrugged. Inside, the woman repeated the sign's assertion, and my mother assured her we were experienced. The woman looked at me, so I grimaced and shook my head, tempted to verbally confirm, no, we're not experienced, I've never been in a kayak, haven't been in a canoe in a decade, who knows when *she* was in one last, and I don't want to go out into an angry sea with a madwoman.

I kept my mouth shut.

We carried the kayak to the beach, but then my mother remembered something important she'd left in the car, though it's more likely she went to call Verissimo. I sat down on a splintering wood parking block to smoke a cigarette, bright red kayak next to me, feet in the white sand. A wetsuited Frenchman, who'd been windsurfing, pulled into shore and carried his board over to where I sat. He wanted to know if we were experienced. I assured him we were not.

"Well, if you're going to go out, paddle south, against the wind. That way, when you get tired, you can let the wind and tide bring you back in."

I was embarrassed, but had to ask the crucial question. "Which direction is south?" I never learned north, south, east, and west. If I think really hard, I can sometimes figure it out, provided the sun is highly visible. My ex-fiancé tried to teach me once. He put "N" "S" "E" "W" on post-it notes on the walls in my office. Before the day was out, I'd quit noticing the squares.

"That way, away from the island. Paddle out that way, against the wind."

He skipped towards the concession stand, and I shoved my cigarette butt into the sand. Maybe I wouldn't die on my mother's fortieth birthday after all.

When Bambi returned four cigarettes later, I told her what the Frenchman had said, and she agreed with the plan. But as soon as we got out a ways from the beach, she spotted the island due north and wanted to go explore.

I squinted at the island, "No way, dude, that ain't what the Frenchman said."

"Come on, it's not too far away. We can make it." She tried to point the kayak towards the island. I paddled against her.

"No."

"Come on. It's my birthday. I'm telling you, we can make it over there in no time. What're you afraid of?" Was she taunting me?

"Getting too far out and being too tired to get back in. Look at us. Besides being inexperienced, we're both a good thirty pounds overweight. It's a terrible idea." She pulled her oars out of the water and pouted.

I looked at the island, looked at her, looked at the shore, and decided that if your mom wants to jump off a bridge, you might as well. I sighed. "Fine." She immediately perked up and placed her oars back in the water. I couldn't let her off that easy, "But if we get too far out, *you're* bringing us in."

"No problem at all. I'm not afraid."

Maybe my mother wasn't afraid of kayaking, but she sure was scared of a number. Forty, forty, big bad forty. That is perhaps one of the biggest differences between us. I'm afraid of practical things like being an inexperienced kayaker who blatantly disregards the advice and warnings given to us by people who know better. My mother is afraid of intangibles like being forty. I don't see forty today being all that different from thirty-nine yesterday. I suppose I can almost understand the distaste for forty when one is forty going on fifteen, but still, a number doesn't really affect anything other than mammograms and colonoscopies.

Growing up, I thought my mother knew everything about everything, since that was how she presented herself: no arguments. She had me in church at least three days a week, and there were a few nonsequential years she home-schooled me and my brother because the public schools were ruining our good Christian souls. But over time, all of that changed. By high school, I refused to go to church. I knew my father was an alcoholic. I knew my mother had painted a false reality to live in. I knew more than I wanted to know.

Then came the years of insufferability. I couldn't stand the sight of my mother and her delusions or my drunk, failing father. I hung out with friends and listened to alternative music and cursed. I skipped school. I drank. I pondered the meaning of life in the way only a teenager can do. I did drugs. I tried meditation, then ditched it; existentialism, then ditched it. I never joined a school of thought, terrified of blindly repeating someone else's bullshit like my mom.

After high school, my family moved from Southern Illinois to Florida. I hated everything Florida. I hated how the buildings, roads, and land looked dirty and dry. I hated the endless processions of retirement communities, particularly the one where I had to live. I hated that I never once saw anyone but me and my grandmother reading books.

I went to college to get away from my family and Florida.

My parents split. My mother started clubbing all the time. Five nights a week she was at Downtown Disney, shaking her groove thing at 8-Trax in Pleasure Island. She didn't drink. She just danced all night. She lost weight. She started seeing Verissimo. She stopped talking about God. My perceptions of her changed. Instead of a holier-than-thou, born-again, I'm-always-right and you're-always-wrong asshole, she was a woman whose life had never been what she wanted. A young girl who'd never had structure in her life, bounced back and forth between an alcoholic mom and spoiling grandparents. A girl who foolishly married a drug person, who felt compelled by God to make her marriage work. A girl who somewhere along the way got the idea that marriage meant a house and car appeared overnight, who thought she could protect her babies from the harsh realities of life by sequestering them from the rest of humanity and only letting them out for religious functions. A woman who at forty was finally coming into her own, trying to learn about relationships and how to be happy.

I was trying to be sympathetic.

I try to keep a lid on things, try not to say when I'm annoyed, when someone is asking too much. I give until I'm dirty and dry, but once the scales tip—

After twenty minutes of paddling, I turned back to my mom who was squinting in the sun, a goofy smile on her face. "Bambi, that island is as far away as it was when we started." There was no break in her smile, no sign of recognition. I looked around her toward shore. Now it seemed far away, the people two inches tall. How could the shore be so far and the island still equally far?

"Bambi!" She looked at me. "We're not getting anywhere."

She put on her Mommy/schoolteacher voice. "Just keep paddling, we'll get there soon enough."

I sighed. The whole thing was a stupid idea, but it was her birthday, and I'd come down from Illinois to spend her birthday with her how she saw fit. I'd been relieved she wanted to go to the Keys and not do another Disney vacation.

I paddled and paddled. Pity turned into annoyance. It was my last year in college. I'd planned to spend winter break lying around my apartment, reading books and maybe working on my honors project. That chance was gone.

I hadn't read more than three chapters of a book since leaving Illinois because opening a book and placing it squarely in front of your face is not a cue my mother can pick up. She'll talk anyway, beat on your eardrums until you give.

The best part of kayaking was that my mother lacked coordination to the point that if she tried to carry on a conversation while paddling, she'd probably fall overboard. After days trapped in earshot of my mother's incessant musings, the silence was beautiful. The vast and salty Gulf of Mexico quieted my mundane thoughts, made me peaceful and small.

Peacefulness gave way to achy limbs. The intelligent thing would have been to turn around before getting tired, but that didn't occur to me before my biceps started to burn. Bambi wasn't smiling anymore. Her eyes focused on the distant island while her breath came in short pants that synched with the rotations of her oars.

"Mom, I'm getting tired, and that island is as far away as ever. I bet the damn thing is an easy twenty miles from here." Having no real sense of distance, I was being decidedly hyperbolic while staying within the realm of what I imagined to be possible. The island could have been two, twelve, twenty, or two hundred miles away.

"Well, you're right, it really doesn't seem to be getting any closer." Finally. We could turn around and call it a day. I wanted to be dry and alone.

With the wind at our backs, I hadn't noticed how ineffectual my mother's paddling was, but as soon as we turned, I sensed that my paddling was propelling us and hers was doing little more than making small eddies in the waves. We weren't making much progress. I paddled harder for a few minutes, then paused to rest my arms. We immediately lost ground. Shore was at least a half-mile away,

by my very sincere estimate. I pushed down a panic attack. Lifting weights every day had to be good for something. I could get us in. After a frantic burst of my oars, we were still far from shore.

I turned to my mother, who was happily dipping her oars in the sea, perfectly unaware that she wasn't contributing to our forward motion. "Damn it Bambi, we're a half mile out from shore. I have to paddle my hardest just to keep from losing ground. I'm worn out, and you're not helping." She laughed. An open-mouthed, full-throated *ba ba ba ba ba*.

I snapped. "You think this is funny? We could die out here. Why the fuck didn't you listen to the Frenchman?"

Bambi laughed again, rolled her eyes. "Calm down. You always exaggerate. We'll be fine, just keep paddling."

So I paddled. I paddled and paddled and paddled, then turned to look at the island, which finally seemed closer. I looked back at the people on shore, inch-tall blurs lying in the sand or playing volleyball, oblivious to the plight of two idiots out at sea. Behind us loomed the great expanse of nothing that was the Gulf of Mexico. If the current took us out, we wouldn't even hit the island, we'd glide right by on our way to die thirsty deaths.

I freaked out.

Stopping my oars, I turned half around, straining to keep my voice at a reasonable level and pitch. "We're going to die, and it's all your fault, with your stupid turning forty, and stupid wanting to kayak when we are totally inexperienced, and stupid wanting to see the fucking island after the *experienced* Frenchman told us not to. *We are going to die*. Who knows how long it'll take anyone to notice we're gone? It's still hours before the kayak has to be back. We could be in the middle of the Gulf by then."

She laughed once more, and I wanted to smack her with my oar. "Calm down, Harmony. We'll be fine."

"We're not making any progress."

If we can't get in ourselves, they'll send someone after us. We're not in danger."

I shoved my hand into my wet shorts pocket and pulled out a soaked lump of thin cardboard and tobacco bubbling out of cellophane. "FUCK." I allowed

my voice to slip nasty and snide, but I would not allow it to grow unreasonably loud or high-pitched. "Yeah, you sit there all smug and sure. Are you nuts? Are you totally crazy? What makes you think someone will *necessarily* come and get us? Who knows how far away we'll be before someone notices we're gone? Why assume anyone will notice at all? All it would take is one idiot employee to not notice a kayak hasn't been returned. And even if they did notice, how long would it take someone to find us? Will they send helicopters? How easy will we be to spot? Idiot tourists die, mom, they *die* sometimes."

During my tirade, I hadn't been paddling, and we'd lost ground.

"You're being stupid. Of course someone will come help us, but I don't think we need any help." She resumed paddling. With her solo efforts, we didn't even tread water, but instead drifted incrementally back toward the island.

She was totally nuts. I lost control and yelled, "Oh no no no! It is *you* who are stupid. If we don't do something, we really could *die*. I'm not saying there is a good chance of death, but at this point, there definitely *is* a chance. Goddamnit."

I waved my oars at the three-quarter inch people on shore, hoping someone would note my distress. I screamed for help, but the words violently rammed back down my throat in the salty wind.

I had an idea.

"Look, my arms are too tired to paddle anymore, but I've always been a strong swimmer. I'm going to jump out of the boat and pull it back to shore."

Bambi became serious, nostrils pumping double air, Mommy-speak turned to high. "No. Don't get in the water. If you get out, you might not be able to get back in."

"Whatever. I'm the only one here who can do a damn thing." I jumped from the kayak, toppling Bambi into the water with me.

Okay, it was a stupid idea. It took me a minute to get the boat righted, and I tried to get my mom to climb back in, but she didn't think she could. She couldn't balance. She tried again and again. She'd get her waist onto the edge of the boat, then slip back into the water. I held the boat steady and went around to her side.

"Here, I'm going to help you get in."

"No, I'm getting too tired."

"Just try again, I'll help you."

When her ass hit the air, I held the boat with one hand and shoved her as hard as I could with the other. She made it into the boat. I swam to the front, grabbed the point, and started swimming furiously.

Nothing happened.

I angrily treaded water with the boat, my swimming as ineffective as my mother's paddling. After five minutes of futility, I heard my mother's tired voice behind me, "Give it up, Harmony. Get back in the boat."

Without turning my head, I responded the only way that seemed appropriate under the circumstances, each word crisp, low, and clearly enunciated:

"Go fuck your self."

There were other times I'd thought I might die. Riding the rusted and electrical-taped Zipper as a preteen at the county fair. The time I'd gone inner-tubing in the Black River in Arkansas with friends and got separated, my canvas shoes tied too tight and cutting into my ankles—I'd pulled my inner tube from the water and started walking along the thorn bush shore, sure that was quicker. The winter when my best friend Bethany and I got drenched playing in the snow and then only had a room heater to cramp around, shivering, sure I'd never get warm again. But those times, I never *really* thought I'd die.

This was different. This time my reason said death was a possibility. I agreed with my mother that someone should notice we were gone and come save us. But I didn't have blind faith they would.

I wasn't even old enough to buy alcohol.

I finally agreed to get back in the boat. Treading water in waves, even with the boat to cling to, was getting to be too much. The first time I tried to get back in, the boat flipped and sent my mom toppling. The woman has no balance. After a few botched attempts, I got back in the boat first and pulled her in after me. I was looking for my oars to wave at the half-inch people on shore when I heard angels singing. I knew it was angels because it sounded exactly like the buzzing of an engine. A little fishing dinghy was heading our way. I waved just in case.

The two men inside the boat suppressed their laughter. My mother took the rescue as our due and refused to be embarrassed at all, insisting we could have made it back ourselves. I shook my head, watching them tie the kayak to the boat, glad I wasn't going to die. They gently towed us to shore while I let my muscles relax. The boat's name was lettered in the back, but the beginning of the word had worn off to only a faint outline. There it was: pity.

We still had to drag the kayak back to the rental stand, where I glared at the woman who'd rented it to us. She cracked a joke about our rescue, so my mom reiterated that we could have gotten back just fine ourselves. I dusted the sand off my shorts onto their display of expensive lighthouse clocks. I was cold in the heat and the Gulf salt was drying out each of my pores. My mom was chipper, asking if I wanted to eat at the concession stand or find a restaurant. I wanted to pop her head, but it was her birthday, and I wasn't going to die, so I suggested finding a nice place with fresh seafood, which she loves and I won't touch.

I announced there was no way in fuck I was going scuba diving, but I'd be happy to take pictures for her.

We pulled into an unpainted, bleached-board restaurant and perused the menu. Bambi ordered a lemonade, but I only wanted water, and lots of it. I could see the worry creeping back into my mom's face, the anxiety about being old. She ordered lobster and crab and clams and other slimy things. I ate Caesar salad. The waitress was very nice, and while my mom was "in the bathroom"—outside trying to call Verissimo—I explained the fortieth birthday fear and fun, so when Bambi returned, the waitress brought her a slice of key lime pie: *real* key lime pie, which is a faint yellow color, not green at all.

My mom shared her pie with me, and winked: "Well, you're right. Unless the little men in funny hats come out on the way back to the motel, I'd say no one knows I'm forty, except you, me, and the waitress."

The next morning Bambi bustled about the motel room, excited about scuba diving. I was sunburned and worn out. She acted like I'd never said I wasn't going with her. I was firm: no way, no how.

"It's such a good opportunity. Most people never get to go scuba diving."

"No. You already tried to kill me yesterday."

"You're such a drama queen. We didn't even come close to dying."

"I don't want to have that conversation again. I'll read while you're under."

I took about thirty pictures of her selecting and tugging on a wetsuit. I took a few pictures of the weathered brown instructor with shoulder-length streaky blond hair who was the epitome of "surfer dude," and some of her classmates, who were mostly middle-aged, pudgy tourists. I wondered why "Scuba Diving Instructor" was never on any career aptitude test in high school. Maybe it is an option along the coast, but it wasn't in Illinois. I tried to imagine all of the really cool jobs in the world that most people have never even heard of. I couldn't think of any.

They rode in the back of a truck to the water's edge. I followed in my mom's station wagon, getting out of the car in time to snap photos of my mother being helped down from the truck by her instructor. I couldn't imagine walking around in a wetsuit and fins, lugging air tanks on my back, breathing through a tube. Nope, I was a wuss in the first degree, but there went my mother, fearless. They lined up to go down, and my mother was one of the first to go in. On her way down the ramp, she turned for a moment and waved before disappearing into the water.



BETWEEN THE TWO OF US,
a severed feeling pools.

AGULF COAST FEATURE
IN COLLABORATION



Vulgar Optic

Christine Hume and Kathleen Ivanoff

I couldn't tell one red from another, which hand or face reddened first or for what reason. A tree cast up its sugars outside a strip joint, another ripened its cherries, another was cedar, mahogany, rosewood. Part of one winged away. I couldn't decide which red to be: fire, ochre, ruby, or rash. They looked the same in one light, and when I reached out to a red moon, I remembered an egg I once dyed to give to a bride who needed an iron fist for a best wish. Red is hardly ever still warm in the bed, for us to gaze on together as a single set of eyes. If I lay in it, I can't tell which stars are red-shifting, how far away or how fast. The stars were a rash on the night sky. I spent my summers scratching in daylight when I couldn't see them, and when most nights I didn't look. Whole galaxies moved away. Little by little, each expanding thing sucked me into a mute desire to explode, to rain down iron oxide. Smear it down the skin, to become the first color, to become separate, like shame. Because shameful, I become passionate. Because I hear a person trespassing or walking away. Because anemic, I see the iron I crave. Because I look in the mirror, see myself alone when what I need is knives, guns, grenades, the whole burning forest. I can't see anything but a red dog running out of it.

• • •

Look below you. She promised once we submerged, to lift us back into the mumbbling air. *White Noise. A fountain of foam and salt from the Dead Sea.* Each child ahead of me climbed the high-dive ladder and jumped and went under and was brought back. *I wait here for the white horses of Thrace.* I wait looking down over the edge. She waits with arms outstretched, bathing cap smooth and smiling. It wasn't that I didn't believe her. When I began to cry she said Okay, but next week. Next week, I would jump.

In the hours before my next swim lesson, the safety-boy carried me back to school and the janitor drove me home and my father came home from work



early and went through red lights on the way to the hospital and a mean nurse X-rayed my leg and the girl in the bed next to mine screamed and screamed while they gave her rabies shots in the stomach and they put a cast on my left leg all the way from my toes to the top of my thigh with my knee slightly bent and I came home and my mom said I could pick what I wanted for dinner but she didn't have any macaroni and cheese we could have it tomorrow, and they gave me a pain pill and I lay down in bed and no one would make me jump now, would they?

Finally I let go of the pent dread and relish my private victory. *It is tight as an eggshell, this paradise of longing trapped in a plaster cast. A frost of salt glitters my skin like satin spar under loopy floss.* The next day I don't wake up until everyone is walking home from school and I am visited by a boy from my class who wants me to be his girlfriend. I am still in my nightgown when he comes into my room. It is three in the afternoon; I don't want to use my crutches. There is a deep ache under the cast and I am worried because I don't have any underpants on. These are things that itch.

The bleached sky turns the sea to a mirror of nothing. This absence never happened. I don't remember the drowsy cloud pageant—the tin soldier waving at me, his heart opening up like a door in the sky. The hole of that staring withered the moon to a lozenge, an aspirin. I swallowed the lump of blank light and since there was no sugar, made the cake with detergent.

My father brings home a long plastic fork-like thing to poke into the cast tunnel because I want to scratch my itchy leg. It doesn't reach very far. *She says: Nothing, nothing like a souvenir Venus. The echo scorches moths, paper, kneeling.*

I lay in bed and feel the itch flare and the pain throb sometimes so much that I cry but I'm haunted by my aunt's stories of how my dad was in the hospital with TB for nine years and he never complained and I am only six and don't really know how to understand being in the hospital for nine years except to

keep quiet. I have often described living year after year with untreated clinical depression that you are trying to hide as having two broken legs and, too bad, but you have to run anyway. Of course you can't, but you will it. White-knuckle days, teeth-grinding nights. Must at least try and *appear* normal. It works. Most people don't really notice. They just think you have a bad personality: pessimistic, stuck up, cold, bitchy, unfriendly, and perhaps lazy. No one ever thinks, *she must be scared and lonely*.

You see, I am ready to explain this place to you. I want to tell you, no one saw the cave flowers or the lumps of white gypsum sewn in my coat. No one saw her replace me with an alloy of milk ash and starch. The moon sneaks up—a white fist looming. No, it is a thin white scar embalmed in salt.

• • •

You were watching the sun setting through the leafy oak in your back yard, when a pale girl in a red dress came through. Like a blood stain, she came through, like a chum bloom in gloomy ocean frequencies. She had the red eyes of a photograph you took of me when I wasn't looking. At least not looking at you. In the photo, I am digging clay, wondering what could live inside it, my jeans rolled to my knees that peered out at the light shaking itself off. Like darting eyes full of red emptiness. Coral-snake eyes, mole-rat eyes, the eyes of crows during copulation, millions of worm eyes. Tiny scarlet eyes of cicadas digging themselves out of the earth every seventeen years. Eyes like targets, because you have the ability to make anything a target. Blinking, we shut ourselves in twenty-three minutes every day.

• • •

Time is an illness too. It yellowed the Polaroids, the rabbit's foot, the ceiling in your room. The nurse doll came with her own soap. You scrubbed till numb. Water must be at a rolling boil for chrysanthemum blossoms to unfurl into tea. Watch the glass as it steeps, and you'll remember why amnesia heals.



Why do you think Mary was slapped from the sky? Stuffed into a cut dove? To escape a mass of dull words while you were still sleeping. While you were sleeping, they draped white sheets over the sofas as if our sitting there was murder. You woke up to a bewildering white wilderness, its tinges slipped toward memory: the magician that pulled a whole parlor of furniture from a handkerchief, a white tablecloth snatched from under cutlery and glass.

* * *

Her entire apartment was red—carpets, curtains, furniture, the kitchen cabinets lined with hot sauces. Entering it took some breath. Her little glassy-eyed dog greeted me with abandon then drifted around like a locket of smoke. While dog-sitting here for the shrink, I discovered she had written a book called *Mood Swings*. Red's vibrating electromagnetic field—the cochineals, cinnabars, and vermilion—buffered me from a sunless winter in the city. I was inside a fire that needed no stoking, a fire that smelled like flora, where my eyes seemed to be hiding. I dyed my hair fire-alarm auburn, making a stain on her porcelain sink for which she later scolded me. My boyfriend could not stand to come over; he said he felt swallowed. He said he is not a boner machine. I slipped into one of her red robes and read my own sentences. Red erases read, and reverses the vertigo of habit. Rimbaud says "I" is red, "smile of beautiful lips / in anger or in the raptures or penitence." "I" is, after all, a mixed bag of ambivalences, as attracted to linguistic confusion as "red" itself: a somber red ocher from Sinope on the Black Sea begat the medieval color sinople, which could be either red or green. Living two months in that red apartment, though I felt simpler, I became saturated and ascendent. My body seemed stretched, gravity-resistant, like a figure in a mannerist painting and making the most of it. Matisse says "A certain red has an affect on your blood pressure," and I will add: a fleet of reds speeds your lungs, stings your nose, hollows bones. I walked the blind dog three times around the block three times a day; I sat in the red rooms and rarely left. When I did, green followed me, burst forth from a secret germination. Grassy snowbanks piled around verdant buildings as I walked through the mesmerizing green stream of

faces. After my excursion, I unlocked the little red door to my temporary Mars. Here was my booster shot, far exceeding the basic daily requirement. I became a chronic user of red.

• • •

Cures for Claustrophobia: 1) Walk on the Ceiling. Hold a mirror so it reflects up, then look down. You will see a vast plaster landscape. The clarity of this new room is thrilling. Listen to Hillman: "Believe it or not, there is more color in the alchemical desert than in the flood, in less emotion than in more." Tour the house this way: walking on the simple ceiling. Be careful to step over the door frame and then circle the chandelier—an unrivver and glass bush in the inverse world. Once utterly relieved of furniture, laundry, and internal clutter, find a prism. 2) Cutting White. Take out a knife, and cut the prism. You will see a rainbow, but this is only the trick shadow of white. Inside white, its blood is invisible—a zero so perfect, it has no form.

• • •

Cut your head when you hit the floor above. Cut the ceiling, no one gives a damn. Cut the ceiling back: cardinal, cardinal, rose contusion. Cut into twilight. If red is the shadow side of light, as Aristotle says, cut contiguous transitions. Twilight bleeds two series of red alchemies. First reds derive from a hundred newly discovered reductions. The sky parades frontiers that finally darken: dazed by its own mute duplication. You need a red light to read a map at night. A bit of rosy cellophane over the bulb. Fireweed along the road you drove home. Second reds wake and escalate. Red stretches itself through these hours; there is little to say. Red is the color we fall into when we run out of words: we refract, anger flares up. Red is a word to be looked at, not to be smeared all over the ass. Not to be a scarlet trumpet, swollen and waiting. Nothing is as hot as the inside of an animal. Gunshots at sun-up. Cut to: This is why I never called. Pour the sloe gin. Do you want me to tell you what it



means? Between the two of us, a severed feeling pools. Now that I know, I hear you say. As if it could matter.

• • •

Newly dead, Ghost hovers in our garden at night. Ghost has a new hide, shining revirgination of silver. My child's skin glistens from fever, relieved of the dull cloth of thoughts. Ghost shrinks to the size of a sugar spoon. Now open the sound of grief: "deep white" muffled in script. My child grew a face of solid pearl. In the garden, giant yew hollows are jammed with nests, lined with white horse hair and Phosphora. I count each egg. Ghost flickers: trick moon, black tooth. When it's almost winter, our dark garden dreams of swallowed seeds. I polish each one. Each seed is a mirror that lost its ghost. They lift in the wind—swept—then tumble out of time.

• • •

My two-year-old daughter is in the cart as we wheel through Women's Clothing on the way to Kitchen, when she says, "I smell something." I ask her what. "I smell somebody's penis." She delivers the red sentence, sharp and clear, all over the aisles. Red is primary, yet it is also the color of corruption. "I smell somebody's penis," she says it again and louder, each time as I am almost jogging now. "I smell somebody's penis." She is a singular red dwarf star, as old as the universe. She is a siren. "I smell somebody's penis." She is bleating high voltage through white shelves. "I smell somebody's penis." She Cassandras and I am as much not-believing as I am not-dreaming. I'm telling her father that evening when he says "but a penis doesn't have a special smell." Bafflement dilates. Later, after I relay the story, several women volunteer: Maybe she was smelling cleaning supplies or detergent. The red smell of cleaning and dick belong to a mother, but they are not the same smell. That idea of red, which we form in the dark, and that impression which strikes out eyes in sunshine are not the same. Half lifted from David Hume,

half corrected, that red sentence belongs to somebody. The idea of penis is half formed in the cave of closed eyes and half in the shriveled light. Somebody's penis could be everyone's, yet the plural of penis is penes: just "penis" with an accent. We must pretend we are faced with the only one each time.

• • •

At the end of the night, cooks mop the floor with Clorox, scrub the blood off cutting boards, stack clammy glasses on dank rubber mats. Dishwasher hot, beer mugs exhale traces of musty water, lipstick prints cling red to rims. The whole kitchen humid and reeking sex.

The first time I swallow, I see a miniature *Mr. Clean* standing on my mother's pink toilet, arms akimbo, beaming with accomplishment.

• • •

I realized mid-year what their nickname for me meant. After my first day in a rural East-Coast high school, I evoked smoke. I was dead meat, I was sweet red meat, I was "Bologna Woman." At home, we were trying out the wood-burning stove, but not managing it well. Stove smoke filled our house with a thick, furry haze. Every morning I woke in a new territory choked by red fog. There was no map. Smoke-saturated, my clothes smelled like smoked meat in a town famous for its sweet bologna, in a high school where the *Future Farmers of America* was the largest club. I was certifiable.

This was a moment like childhood itself: the smoke-spun infinity carried a growing awareness of pending annihilation. After a little red hood was a living girl, slipped over a living girl. After I lived in the woods, I became "Red" when my history teacher said there was no talking to a communist. I ran through the tall ferns, turning my hair one shade of red or another, yet I was still not disguised. I was a fast girl on the track and in the back seat. Read: I was meat. A red-streak chasing down expecta-



tions, streaking through the woods in a windbreaker then, amazed-faced, I emerged no different. I came through, but was not changed. Read: "It takes all the running you can do to keep the same color. If you want to turn another, you must run at least twice as fast as that."

I had been red in so many ways. I lived victoriously between blushings—even thinking about blushing, I flamed out: a red light guiding you through smoky rooms, a safelight in which the photograph begins to appear. After I watch the black and white eyes take shape, I can no longer look back in color. After developing in a room so dark no walls were visible, my body's depths broke through my face. My circulatory system got stuck and no one dropped an eye from my boiling face. After each new school where I carried my amorphous shame out front, a slow blossom; after I could not be hidden; after it was unclear where I had been, or if I had been the target; the house at night filled with choking, another ugliness smoked out. After the person became the nickname; after the little hood slipped on backwards; I gave red its body back—adding reverse-avalanches, siphoning off especially the ability to speak—my head filling with blood again. I was feeling my own vivid illumination. I was a thing in the lap of a boy who inexplicably cannot, please teacher, come up to put his homework on the board.

• • •

Some one long Winterior, some low dark clouds daily pressing down, forehead down, no light no light. Some concrete sky, shallow but still and only TV lights blinking: not here, not here, not light, not here, no. Neck bent pressed head to concrete that long time sky flattened like old earth map long sitting on top of our heads pressed down.

An old idea, not departing. This is not the end of that. The lama calls it "continuation of discontinuity." Cold and dry and flatly pressed, this is no name for the soul.

After the ice storm, a diamond forest. It was Sunday. Trees groan and glisten. We gathered shattered branches, delicately slide off their shiny skins. Glass fingers, icicles to suck and sip, glamorous wands, or weapons for stabbing. The underground lake is frozen, untested. Our yard, and everyone else's.

A winter day, dark enough for lamps. Late afternoon, a wind came and when it parted the cloud, the sun was red and gold, slanted, far, dropped. One long look, a long burning look at the day it could not enter. The sky was deep, bright coral, peach and lavender clouds rimmed in light. It began to snow. Munificent furry flakes, soft and slow as bees. How long did that last? (The rose snow and light now long gone.) How long is your winter? And how innate?

• • •

Reach down through to the warm countries. Plunge your hands down and come back red. The octopus blushes while fucking if that's what you can call it. I don't care if you've had enough. If you are mewling with bloodshot eyes and strings of snot smeared across your ruddy face. If your collar and ears are soaked, shining with wet blubbering: you deserve it. You got your just desserts and your *shut up* at the equator. You wanted to rise up like ninety-nine red balloons. You wanted to be a balloon man, to float far away, but you felt yourself plunged down "as if underwater," you said later. Even a seahorse can change color.

At first you thought it was sunburn, then a shadow you could not swim out of. You thought color had been restored to cure you. As it did in the ancient world when red was actually at least five different bands of the rainbow. Then after watching someone else get hit, you surfaced and found that your feet were red. Whereas copper patinas and silver oxidizes, any other metal that stays wet long enough rusts. Thus you became red-footed, leaving reddish footprints wherever you went. Part of you stayed under, part of you surfaced, eyes alive and dead and moving out in dream of umber running under the undertow. The year One-a-Day vitamins hit the shelves, the pill's dye made the sewers run rubicund. Red runs vitaminated under us,



an underground lust running downriver, a buried river. There were plenty of pills, but none could help you now. When you finally drowned yourself, you dressed in red from head to toe, as is the custom, in hopes that you would haunt me.

• • •

Understanding this, in a cold spite, head now bloated, appearing to both you and your sister (an apparent incident of bi-location) I still couldn't let on to her about you; I kept my promises.

What good would it do now to back-story my way to a blank page? I can't feel you there, my fingers, white blinded. You call it a surface and I say it is bottomless.

But I saw him! You will say when the Medium's belly leaks milky ectoplasm. See: stars storming toward being. But why would you have a séance behind my back?

• • •

For the ceremony, I wore a red dress. And red shoes, which I had dyed to match, but they didn't. All reds are nearly unique, I told my grandmother. Might as well wear leather, she said. I said, it's traditional in China. She looked at me sleepily, as if I were a field thick with poppies. In China, she shot back, obituaries are written in red ink. What she wanted to remember and what she wanted to forget shuttled back and forth in a sanguinary churn. Blood is a genius—it's the body's social organizer and memory tank. It remembers the tides and its plasma maintains the sea's deep recipe for ions. Yet it is poised to clot, to become solid if need be. We stared at each other. I was stained in cochineal beetle blood, a riot of carmine lake, already fading, and long-ago fallen. I did not choose off-white, eggshell, or ecru; yet the bug blood used to dye my dress and shoes is natural. I want to tell her it's organic, but the word isn't there yet. We keep staring at each other hypnotized in a grenadine sheen, dreaming Pliny's winter tale of the dragon strangling the elephant who falls on him. They kill one another instantly, and when their blood runs together, cinnabar comes alive. My

grandmother snaps to. It is spring, and I am getting married. A leaf that absorbs red light turns green, it does not fall. Her focus falls on the white house behind me as she falls profoundly into herself, a vast blankness, as I am falling now in two, into halves, to halve and to hold, two hues skewed in relation, unmatched, untwo and apart.

• • •

North of the North Wind, Hyperborean sorcerers learn to read the wind as Augurs do the patterns of birds in flight. Sent to wander alone in the eternal arctic spring of the most Northern wilds, the magic is either realized or they are absorbed back into the landscape they were sent out to discern. The absence of even their own shadow eventually causes a thin crystal filament to sprout from the pineal gland, a process known as “distillation of the star map.” Once this is achieved, the usual ultraviolet eyes of the Hyperboreans turn utterly clear. An undifferentiated snowbound town becomes a display of wind-etched precision.

Contemplating potentials makes me lonely, bloodshot, a frothy thought.

They sawed off the cast and my leg was withered; etiolated as a basement fern. That same spring we opened our mouths to receive the live polio virus on a sugar cube—the body and blood of science. God must look like an X-ray—nothing to hide, but no sum either.

• • •

The mind takes place in blood. Its blood is a lit branching. Capillary action is a tree I climb to disappear. Climb into its shadowtunnels. Its ravines of wreckage. Sharp scrape of bark on bare feet. Climb into its green condensary. Of all the light refracted, red bends the least. Once I start seeing cherries, I see them everywhere like warm sores. *Your body is so responsive*: I recall his sentence, saying it aloud in my own voice. I have never eaten from a tree before. It is ridiculous. Red notes flying around the sonic aviary: I reach out, pluck one, even though I don't like cherries. Once it is



in my mouth, I worry that it might be poison. This is not the taste of cherry. It tastes animal; it buzzes and branches out. I think this is the taste of poison. I think to spit. It is savory, splendid, rich pouring into brain and ravine. I swallow, a slow realization that I have never eaten flesh. I have eaten canned food, and once a maraschino, revulsive as cherry schnapps vomit that flew out of my mother's mouth like a red ribbon unraveling night. My tongue rolls the pit around; I spit it to the ground, and do not wait until it hits.

• • •

My albedo dreams in the order they came:

Braided sweetgrass smoke curls white in front of me. It says *you have the right to remain silent.*

I'm looking at nothing, maybe peeling wallpaper. The filigree pattern begins to shift, and the Delphic Oracle appears. Then her roaring water voice, a crushing etheric wind inside my head: *Realize your reflection.*

Golden Girls actress Betty White speaks to me telepathically through porcelain tchotchkes. A cheerful deer with its back scooped out for a plant says, "*especially.*"

Enraged, you wanted retribution. The young guy was listening. He became upset enough that he transformed into the devil. He begged you to forgive him, then opened his chest, took out his heart and told you to eat some, which you did. The devil's heart is white, like ambrosia!

• • •

Someone dug up the uncorrupted root of all color. Someone put the root in her mouth to suck colors out one by one. "What made me white, that makes me red," someone said. A white queen is an imperfect thing, a prelude to the complete and infinite red

queen. In these times, success cannot accumulate. Sisters can be queens, but not simultaneously. Queens can be either male or female. If a queen writes your name in red, you will be called back, if briefly. Red pigment in facial sexual appendages, however, indicates he lacks parasites. Yes, facial sexual appendages. Yes, he lacks parasites. That doesn't mean he lacks a taste for blood. Vampire finches sip the open ass wounds of blue-footed boobies. Given the chance, candiru, a one-inch catfish, will swim up your urethra to suck your red-blooded bladder. It cannot be called back in a séance. It has nothing to say to you anyway. As an oxpecker plucks off ticks, it gulps down a shot of blood from the tick-hole. The red queen rises. The others swarm her, licking, carrying off the divine bit by bit. Once they taste her, they know what they are. They know what she made them.

• • •

'She's in that state of mind,' said the White Queen, 'that she wants to deny something—only she doesn't know what to deny!'

Tonight's moon has cat's ears. A foggy prehensile tail slips into the tree. The background frog songs spring. During the greeting ritual, White's Seahorses change from their usual somber coloration into far brighter shades of cream and yellow. Deep in our brain, a seahorse organ encodes the association of sequences, incidents, the edges of liminal perimeters. Memory. An oxygen-starved hippocampus results in amnesia and disorientation. Dementia whites out the past in a limbic rift. Even the velocity of olfaction wanders away. The great red storm on Jupiter is shrinking. It used to look like a breakfast sausage, and now it is shaped like an eye. It is expected to become circular by 2040. The exact cause of its distinctive color remains a mystery, but one NASA scientist notes that the spot isn't always bright red; sometimes it's actually quite pale.

Here the White Queen began again. 'It was such a thunderstorm, you can't think!' ('She never could, you know,' said the Red Queen.) 'And part of the roof came off, and ever so much thunder got in—and it went rolling round the room in great lumps—and knocking over the tables and things—'til I was so frightened, I couldn't remember my own name.



The Third Mind: American Collaborative Poetry & Its Roots

Dean Gorman

American poetry collaborations are materializing, it seems, now more than ever. In 2005, *Indiana Review* dedicated an issue solely to collaboration and collage. In 2007, Soft Skull Press released an anthology entitled *Saints of Hysteria: A Half Century of Collaboration in American Poetry*. From 1997–2004, a group of young poets from the Seattle area calling themselves The Typing Explosion wrote over 5,000 public collaborations, a selection of which can be viewed on their website (www.typingexplosion.com). Many duos and trios have recently published full-length books of collaboration as well: James Tate and Bill Knott; Denise Duhamel and Maureen Seaton; Olga Broumas and Jane Miller; Matthew Rohrer and Joshua Beckman; David Lehman and James Cummins; and Marilyn Hacker, Tom Disch, and Charles Platt, to mention a few.

For the most part, though, collaboration is still met with resistance by mainstream journals and other institutions that support the literary arts. As Sierra K. Nelson of Seattle's Typing Explosion points out, "many grants which support writers and writing projects are either explicitly not open to collaborative writing or are geared in such a way as to make it very difficult to apply as a collaborative team"(6). Even more revealingly, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* doesn't include any listing for "collaboration," "chain-poem," "coterie," or "exquisite corpse" (which is perhaps the most prominently used and well-known collaborative form). Maybe collaboration resists definition. Maybe it resists *itself*. When so much collaborative work is created and enjoyed underground, through a private or semi-private exchange between friends or colleagues never intended for publication, how can we discuss a method of analysis or appreciation for it? When does a work cease to retain its sole authorship and where does collaboration begin? Why would we want to make this distinction in the first place?

It often seems that collaborative poetry is one of the few "genres" (a word I don't feel altogether comfortable using here) of literature that lacks, or turns

its back on, any sense of lineage. For one thing, collaborative poetry hasn't been made widely available, making such a lineage difficult to trace. "Because so much [of it] is published only in journals or small press chapbooks," the Soft Skull Press editors say in their introduction to *Saints of Hysteria*, "it exists mainly for those who truly research it" (Trinidad). But maybe that's part of what is so appealing about it. Collaboration has managed to maintain a certain distance—a lawlessness—in relation to the mainstream; it is the international waters of poetry, so to speak. The practice is at once ancient and fiercely modern, at once a nod to history and a disintegration of it.

Whether or not today's poets are aware of it, there is a long (albeit sparse) tradition in collaborative verse. American collaboration has been preceded, and often influenced, by European and Eastern practices dating back to the fifteenth century. The Japanese wrote linked-verse sequences called "rengas," which were usually comprised of a hundred stanzas, composed by several poets at a single sitting of about three hours (giving each poet roughly three minutes to write a stanza). They were extremely complex sequences with specific rules and codes—so difficult, in fact, that one practitioner of renga joked that twenty years of practice were necessary before it could be discovered if one had any talent (Princeton 1034). The opening stanza of the renga chain, the "hokku," later became the basis for the modern haiku style of poetry.¹

Skipping ahead a few hundred years, the French Surrealists of the 1920s—including Andre Breton, Louis Argon, Paul Eluard, Robert Desnos, Max Ernst, Antonin Artaud, Andre Masson, Man Ray, & Salvador Dali—wrote collaborations and played group writing games such as "exquisite corpse," in which players wrote in turn on a sheet of paper, folded it to conceal part of the writing, and then passed it to the next player for further contribution. In 1930, Eluard, Rene Char, and Breton composed the long cycle "Ralentir Travaux" ("slow down, work ahead") over the course of five days, mostly in a car, during a trip to Avignon.

1. In Western literature the term renga has since been applied to alternating accretive poetry, not necessarily in the classical Japanese form. Examples include Octavio Paz and Charles Tomlinson's sonnet-renga "Airborne," and P. K. Page and Philip Stratford's sonnet collection *And Once More Saw The Stars*.



The Surrealist experiments in collaboration had at least an indirect influence on the first group of American poets to really explore collaborative writing, the New York School. In the early '50s, virtually every major poet now associated with the school—most notably Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler—wrote collaboratively with one another. Frank O'Hara, the most social of the group, worked with painters Larry Rivers and Grace Hartigan on drawings and collages, on comic strips with Joe Brainard, and on "poem paintings" with Norman Bluhm (which consisted of O'Hara writing something while Bluhm drew or painted simultaneously in another part of the studio). Kenneth Koch also collaborated with Rivers, as well as with Alex Katz, Robert Rauschenberg, and others. Koch remarked, "One of the most wonderful ways in the world to be with someone's sweetness and brilliance is to collaborate with that person ... I like collaborating the way people like drinking—[it] is making a game out of real life" (qtd. in Lehman 77-78).

The second generation of New York School poets—which included Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Bernadette Meyers, Dick Gallup, Joe Brainard, and Anne Waldman—took the idea of collaboration even further, to the core of their aesthetic. While not technically a collaboration, Berrigan's *Sonnets* nevertheless implemented borrowed lines from friends and other poets. Fellow New York poet Ron Padgett remarked of the *Sonnets*:

Some lines were 'lifted' out of poems by Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and O'Hara, or from Ted's immediate friends, such as Dick Gallup, Joe Brainard, and me. It was of course not a matter of plagiarism—a term that sent us into spasms of laughter—it was a matter of using 'found' lines to create an entirely different work, & the intentions were, if I may use such a word here, noble... at that time we didn't speak English, we spoke poetry." (10)

Second-generation New York Schooler Bernadette Mayer may have been even more democratic in her ideas about authorship and literary property. In the late '60s and '70s she and others associated with the St. Mark's Poetry Project published several collaboration-focused journals including *Unnatural Acts*, the first issue of which was released entirely without attribution or editorial infor-

mation—the product of a group of people gathering at Mayer's loft, writing for eight hours, and then publishing the results. According to issue 2 of *Unnatural Acts*, these gatherings went as follows: each writer brought a page of writing that was traded, rewritten, and discarded, then selected one of the rewritten documents and used it as the basis for a new piece of writing. The participants noted the time at which their new work was completed, returned it to a common pile, and chose another page to begin the process again. In the end, the poems were arranged chronologically to produce the magazine's format.

The second-generation New York School poets, and those who followed them, were acutely aware of the difficulty of defining "collaboration" as a concept. In an essay concerning his own partnerships with Joe Brainard, poet and critic Bill Berkson describes the almost limitless breadth of the concept as follows:

All art is collaboration. You collaborate with your culture, your language, your reading. You collaborate with your peers, either directly (that is, you write together) or not (that is, by parallel creations you form the work that comes to be recognized as that of a period style, the art of your time). Competitiveness is a form of collaboration. Addressing an audience—conceiving an addressee, a reader or viewer, for the work—you collaborate with that shifting phantasmagoria ... Artistic collaboration is often a spontaneous extension of social life. ("Working With Joe")

Because there are two or more people involved in collaboration, communication isn't an option—it's a necessity. The writers first have to communicate with each other, then the reader. This creates some obvious problems, and may be the reason why so much collaborative work relies heavily on humor or eroticism. The problem, of course, is one of exclusivity—something that all poetry is accused of at times, and which (at the risk of getting all "Dana Goia" here) is one factor in poetry's slow decline in popular readership. If we assume that the most basic and primordial urge behind the act of poetry is the need to communicate, then how do we explain the obscure or esoteric nature of even our most lauded poetry from the last 150 years (think Pound, Stevens, Berryman, Dickinson, Dylan Thomas, etc.)? How do we explain the self-conscious and insular nature of so much confessional and post-confessional poetry? So when one poet must



communicate with another or several others, how can they also communicate with a reader? How can collaboration be at once private and public?

All poetry, in order to be successful, must co-exist in the public and private domains. And ultimately, I don't see much of a difference here between collaborative verse and so-called "regular" verse. The way I just said "regular verse," using it as a sort of retronym, seems a bad sign; the distinction seems stuffy, almost reprehensible. It implies a certain skepticism toward collaboration, as if it weren't a legitimate form—which seems damaging, and bad for poetry. If a poem is working, it should work without the reader knowing that it's collaborative. "[A] poem in some highly complicated form should hit you first as a poem," says Sierra Miller, "and once you're hooked, upon closer examination you might start to uncover what it is that makes it do that" (8).

One stigma of collaborative verse is that it's a fun and productive exercise, but that its results shouldn't be taken seriously as a contender for canonization. When Joshua Beckman and Matt Rohrer, at the urging of their editor, published a collection of collaboration poems called *Nice Hat. Thanks.*, they encountered some trepidation among their contemporaries. Rohrer comments:

So many people seemed to view us as if we were daredevils playing fast and loose with our reputations. It was only when it became public, or when certain people engaged with it critically, that we realized there was an overwhelming concern for authority or possessiveness—possessing a text that is. It wasn't even about the difference between publishing and performing; it was the difference between private and public. When we did it privately, people would think it was an odd or interesting way to use our private time. But when we filled our public time with it, people were skeptical. (Rohrer 3)

Even among the writers themselves, there is sometimes a level of irreverence towards the end goal of collaborative work. Anthony Robinson, in discussing a collaboration project he recently completed with his friend Andrew Mister, says: "When I was writing drafts of poems for *Here's To You* (the title of their chapbook), I'd send them to Andy, and in many cases, he wrote back: 'This poem is too good for the collaboration. You should keep it as your own.' This puzzled me a little bit, because I guess it did reveal that for some, the idea of collabora-

tion is stigmatized. Ultimately," Robinson continues, "I ended up keeping all the 'good' ones for the book, not for myself" (3).

I believe this ingrained, knee-jerk irreverence for collaboration is related to the largest issue at stake when we talk about collaborative work: the state of the individual. Joshua Beckman and Matthew Rohrer, when asked about this, respond:

The only thing that's lost [when collaborating] is a sense—probably an artificial one anyway—of individuality. What's lost is the feeling that I am totally in control. And losing control is fun. Yet what is gained is something that we, as writers, strive for anyways, that sort of communion with something greater. (1-2)

And this brings up major questions of how we, as artists and as critics, view art in the modern world. Can something be truly singular, or is it always built from what preceded it, what already exists?

T. S. Eliot, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"—one of the most brilliant and gut-wrenchingly divisive manifestos on artistic integrity—concludes that a work is never alone or singular, that it is always, in a sense, communal. "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone," Eliot says. "His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for content and comparison, among the dead." Eliot continues, "What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all works of art which precede it" (91).

Eliot, never afraid to make even the loftiest statements, goes on to explain what happens to the poet in that moment of fusion with the greater community: "[It] is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (93). Continual extinction: I can't decide if this as an oxymoron or a redundancy. Either way, it doesn't seem that accurate a description of the process of surrender. Nor does it help me to understand his notion of "value." If we are to attribute a value to something, aren't we automatically depersonalizing it? Eliot goes so far as to make



a scientific analogy: "The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum (which, combined with oxygen and sulphur dioxide, form sulphuric acid). It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but the more perfect the artist, . . . the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material" (94).

The romantic concept of the Individual, which survives in Eliot's argument even as he questions it, will probably never go away. Nine out of ten book-flap blurbs will still use the adjective "singular" to describe poetic voice or vision. Yet as we move further into an era of published collaborations from American poets, the idea of ownership should become less and less of a concern for those writing and publishing. Poets will continue to work together to create new forms and hybrid language, and journals and small presses will continue to unabashedly support these projects. I don't expect every meeting of the minds to be historic—far from it. If anything, I harbor some of the same stereotypes about collaborations as those readers, critics, and publishers who stand in the way of its mainstream potential. Yet I am optimistic of its future, its viability—its endless experiment. In these ways it is no different than any other form of literature, and therefore shouldn't be treated as separate. It is, after all, just poets making poems.

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“Good Warm Sad Blood Spilling Out in the Forest”

a collaborative interview with Heather Christle, Matthew Rohrer, Zachary Schomburg, Matthew Zapruder, and Gulf Coast editor Hannah Gamble.

The following conversation took place over email in the fall of 2009, although, as Matthew Rohrer articulated in a preliminary exchange, we would rather have been together in a hotel conference room eating Chinese takeout. Gulf Coast organized this conversation because it seemed, to us, that a new generation of surrealist- and absurdist-influenced poetry had emerged in the U.S., written by poets ranging from their mid-twenties to mid-forties and rooted in small presses like Wave Books, Black Ocean, and Octopus Books. But what does “surrealism” even mean, in American poetry today? We decided to ask some of the editors and authors associated with these small presses what they thought about the “surrealist” label and their relationship to it.

Hannah Gamble: When I first emailed the four of you about this interview, I indicated that I saw surrealism as part of your poetic lineage; much of your work employs surrealist staples such as dream logic, collage, collaboration, tragicomic approaches to human existence, and inventive syntax which tries to get at a usually-inaccessible kind of hyper-reality. How do you feel about your work being referred to as “surreal”?

Zachary Schomburg: I’ve noticed poets of my generation often feel a bit leery of labeling their work as “surreal,” and suspicious of others who call themselves surrealists. But maybe this is a larger contemporary issue of poetry labels in general—nobody is willing to strike a pose, in fear of becoming a poser. I do feel proud when my poems are called surreal, because I think that adjective is not far off. French Surrealism is something I studied extensively at the University of Nebraska, and it became integral to my writing. What the original Surrealists were doing is something I, too, am trying to do, so I feel I am a part of that

lineage. I'm certainly influenced more by them (and the Russian Absurdist perhaps) than by any other poetics. However, that label is far too simple. The process through which I write is entirely different from Breton's (or what Breton may claim), as are my politics, my philosophies, etc.

Besides, the word "surreal" has—in our broader, non-poetry lexicon—come to mean something much simpler: strange, unreal, weird. I've read too many poems that are labeled surreal only because they are not obviously confessional or sincere. I'd hate for the word to become a catch-all, one that has no recollection of Breton. In other words, if we're going to label something surreal now, those poems should probably resemble each other in some tangible way, or they should perhaps resemble the French Surrealists' poems in some tangible way. There should probably be a new word for it, and a new manifesto, and maybe this conversation can spark something like that.

Matthew Zapruder: Mainly when my work is referred to as "surreal" I feel a mixture of resistance and self-consciousness: Resistance, in that the term surreal is often used just to ghettoize any act of the imagination. It seems dismissive and unthinking, and the use of it makes me want to rescue its original definition, and think harder about what poetry is and could be doing today. Self-consciousness, because unlike me or anyone I know, the French Surrealists in the 1920s and '30s, led by Breton, were engaged in a comprehensive attempt to alter themselves and humanity. They were, for better and also definitely for worse, true revolutionaries, willing to throw everything away; their commitment was total. And, unlike me, they believed (at least in the early years of Surrealism) in poetry and art as more of a by-product (or maybe even excretion) of the activity of un-severing the artificially severed realms of the real and the imaginary, in order to save humankind.

I associate what I do as a poet, humbly, with surrealism, yes, but just as much with what in Wallace Stevens's terminology could be called acts of the imagination against the pressures of the real. The pressure of the real in everyday life is absolutely overwhelming today. We can barely survive it.

My friend Anthony just sent me a video of Tom Delay on "Dancing with the Stars." This is, I think, what would ordinarily in our culture be referred to as "surreal"—that is, a seemingly weird juxtaposition of two things that do not



belong together (in this case, a Republican douchebag with dancing). In fact, one of the judges even called Delay's performance "surreal." Actually, though, it's the opposite. His appearance on that program in leopard-print fringe, dancing the cha cha to "Wild Thing" and making eyes and pointing at the one gay judge (who cried out after the dancing was over, "you're crazier than Sarah Palin!") is not only predictable, but completely inevitable in that it follows exactly the wearisome and purely formulaic logic of a particular branch of show business: to take the most unlikely participant and get him to do something counter to his nature, for our entertainment. It's the oldest trick in the book, like having a chimp in diapers and a suit and tie pretend to go to the office (which is admittedly hilarious, but not surreal). There is nothing disruptive or consciousness-changing about something so predictable and logical.

I long for some old-fashioned sleep talking, lucid dreaming. The danger of course is once you start talking this way, it seems as if you are against "real life" in art, which of course could not be further from what I am actually saying. As anyone who has ever had a dream knows, nothing but the real is the material of dreaming, as it is of poetry. But it's just material. It's more a kind of freedom from tedious "adult" logic, resulting in deeper truth, to which I aspire.

For all their flaws, the original Surrealists seem like great heroes to me, and I do not feel myself worthy of being placed in that category, though of course I am secretly burning with pride that anyone would, even unintentionally, put me in the same sentence as the mighty wizard Robert Desnos.

Heather Christle: It is a new thing for me to have my poems called anything in particular, so that in itself is somewhat unnerving. I'm also unnerved by my failure to live up to the "total commitment" that Matthew mentions in his reply. I'm afraid that Breton is going to rise from the dead to scold and/or excommunicate me. Happily, when I am writing, Breton does not scare me at all. In the act of writing I feel that I am tapping into the same pool that my friends Jacob and Peret and Desnos liked to splash around in. And I imagine we all arrive there because of our shared modes of experimentation, some of which, Hannah, you mention in your question.

One difference, perhaps, might be a desire to entertain. I would like to be

making the kind of freaky noise that invites people to dance in the midst of their confusion. (This seems in line with seeking delight, but perhaps skids close to the vulgarity of bourgeois happiness and/or literary talent, both of which could bring down the wrath of Breton.)

Zach, I also want to echo your shout-out to the Russian Absurdists/the OBERIU crew. Their work in using alogical progressions of syntax and events, and especially the literalization of metaphor, has been just as significant an influence on how I approach writing and thinking as anything coming out of France.

Finally, I do honestly want to use poems to reach an unhinging of my consciousness, or at least an ability to recognize the hinges I've got. And the better I get at unhinging myself in my poems, the easier it is to discover and create the unhinged moments of my life. Then I am in the pool and extremely alert and happy. I would like everyone to come and play with us there.

Matthew Rohrer: I wish I'd gone earlier because you guys have all said so much, and so succinctly and well. I can only echo and cheer you on at this point, I'm afraid. I want to publicly agree with Zachary and Matthew and their hesitance about being called something that is so clearly defined and specific. I too am a huge fan and student of the French Surrealists and to me, the word "surreal" really refers to them—to those people actually, and to that time specifically, and to Paris, etc. I think we can all agree that the way our culture uses the word "surreal" is A) totally divorced from its original meaning (which is frustrating perhaps) as well as B) a way to avoid actually following the writer's acts of imagination (which is insidious).

I've seen James Tate at many Q&A events get really, really bristly when people used the word "surreal" in talking about his poems, and it used to confuse me a little. I thought: well, his poems *do* make use of so much of the Surrealists' techniques, how can he deny it? But later I came to realize that it wasn't that lineage he was objecting to as much as to the current misuse of the word, and the underlying implication that what he was doing was just wacky or silly or worst of all, untethered from the real. I feel that same bristling myself when people use that word about me. But they never do anymore. Now all my poems take place on my couch.



I think what I keep coming back to is the way culture uses tags or labels to instantly write off artists or artistic movements. We see it in the political arena as Matthew noted, and we see it in poetry too. And it constantly surprises me that otherwise intelligent-seeming people revert to these labels as if they actually mean anything, and as if they actually demonstrate some kind of perceptive thought on the part of the person who uses them. I can't help but think of Ron Silliman and his totally fatuous and ridiculous "school of quietude" tag, which he throws around like it means something. That kind of thinking doesn't expand us actually as people or artists. So I feel that our duty should be to challenge these simplifications wherever they arise. And I think when it's the word "surreal" it's even more important because of what's already been said—that what's at stake is the very definition of the imagination.

HC: I just wanted to jump back in for a second to say that it might be useful to mention Silliman's other problematic phrase: "soft surrealism," which he has used to label/denigrate Tate and others around him.

Silliman argues that "soft surrealism permits disruptions at the level of plot and character, but never at the level of poet-reader relations, where the power relations of writing remain unchallenged," which relies on this really macho vision of the poet as righteous aggressor (kind of like when we're supposed to go around "interrogating" things). So even within poetry communities, contemporary surrealist practices get a bad rap, which is unfortunate, and perhaps contributes to the uneasiness people feel with the term.

MZ: I'm glad, in a sort of exhausted way, that Matt brought up Silliman's tautological category of "school of quietude," and then that Heather mentioned his weirdly feminizing term "soft surrealism," because I think it points to another way that surrealism is misunderstood, in this case in the literary community.

Basing the "hardness" or "softness" of surrealism on whether or not it challenges "poet-reader relations" and the "power relations of writing," is not only ahistorical but beside the point. It's like saying, "I like grandma's meatloaf better than your meatloaf because your meatloaf is too coercive." Coerciveness may or not be an important value in meatloaf-eater relations, but it's not what grandma

or you were thinking about when you were making your meatloaves. Likewise, you can say “poet–reader relations” and the “power relations of writing” are the most important things to think about in every act of writing—I mean, that’s an opinion you can, tragically, have—but it wasn’t what Breton or James Tate or anyone else under discussion was thinking about. To filter surrealism through that idea is just plain foolishness, and not helpful, unless you are trying retroactively to raise the values of your own particular literary movement to an unwarranted position of transcendence.

Okay, but where does that leave us? Again, I think it is very helpful, as Matt wrote, to remind ourselves “what’s at stake is the very definition of the imagination.” If the purpose of poetry (ugh and I promise this is the last time I will write this) is to create “texts” (double ugh) that do not under any circumstances let “the power relations of writing remain unchallenged,” then the poetry one ends up with is a horrible fusion of shallow philosophizing and polemic.

Surrealism, on the other hand, provides us with an alternate version of what the poem can do, in my opinion a much more fun, powerful, playful one, full of potential and hope. At this point I do feel like I should quote Joshua Beckman: “Surrealism is old, so everyone should get some.”

MR: One thing you said, Matthew, about the critique of “soft surrealism” reminds me of a bigger issue regarding surrealism: people definitely reject the possibility of a poet today using the techniques of surrealism in the service of a “regular” poem. And I think that speaks to all of our poems—Zachary’s perhaps most of all. His poems are obviously using the techniques of surrealism, but they are by no means only surrealist. That’s true to varying degrees of all of our poems. And I think an analogy here will show how obvious and inevitable this is: it’s easy for us to see throughout the history of painting how Cimabue pioneered perspective only to pass it on to others, or how the techniques of the Impressionists were used by later painters. Is that evil? Is that politically reprehensible? Or is it just art history? I think different ages of poetry uncover different techniques and styles and bequeath them to future poets.



MZ: And one more thing, in light of what we have been talking about, and as a potential focuser: Mallarmé's famous response to Dégas that poems are made of words, not ideas, seems relevant here. He could have been talking to a lot of poets today, in all sorts of different "schools." The surrealist poets believed that words, like atoms, were full of unlocked potential. They weren't "using" words to communicate ideas, but playing with and recombining the material of language. I'd love to hear more from everyone about how you think of the material, the word, in your poems, and how that relates to surrealism; this seems to me, at least, like it might be important.

HC: Well, a radical, scary way of loving words seems necessary. Even if we sit down at breakfast every day with our spoons and our prepositions, we should not stop actually looking at them and being amazed and telling them about it. And if a word is lacking a spark then we should take that word on a vacation. Or we should introduce that word to an exciting new one and then we will all be more exuberant. Or we should eat them. So I am happy that play is here in the conversation. Hannah, I had mentioned this quote to you before, but I think it seems relevant here, so I will halfway repeat myself. In a letter full of advice, Max Jacob wrote:

I think I can safely tell you to avoid facile satire: satire blinds the way pride blinds. You don't get very far on the strength of having said: "Those idiots! Those middle-class philistines!" and so on, with variations. Take it for granted that everyone is quite perfect; it's very salutary to start from that lofty general assumption and then gradually lower the individual sphere by finding little blemishes in it... Great works of literature are premised on optimism. Since the nineteenth century there have been no great works, because of Flaubert and his stupid pessimism. Balzac was inclined to see genius everywhere, and so he was optimistic: although he is not an artist, his work is great on account of its optimism. Think about that.

ZS: The imagination doesn't seem like something that can be captured by language, but something that exists beyond language. Language's only involvement, then, in the imagination is by creating it, accidentally, somehow purely, through

the “spark” that occurs when words touch each other. New meaning may be out of reach, or inaccessible, without that spark. So words can be like a positive and negative charge, rubbed hard on the carpets of vastly different rooms and then brought together (my science is terrible, forgive me).

To bring us back to the original question of the modern surrealist label, I think it is important to keep that definition of imagination as an experience, entirely new, illogical, and impossible, that is born from language, but not one contrived by language.

At some point, if we’re trying to define this elusive beast, we should mention the manifestos. Breton classifies the surrealist image in about seven different ways that I can count, but the one most fitting to our discussion right now is that the image should have irreconcilable logical and linguistic contradictions. Also, speaking of language, he repeatedly talks about his disgust with Dostoyevsky’s overuse of it, his endless descriptions. Description can strangle the imagination, and a fire is much more likely to be sparked with fewer conductors/words.

Also: The term “soft surrealism” is quite troubling for a number of reasons, many of which have already been covered, and I’m glad we can begin to denounce this term in particular. It sets up a situation where Tate (since he is the example we’re using) is like a tamer, less complicated version of surrealism. It’s unfair and untrue. And it reminds me too much of the term “soft porn.”

HG: I’m really glad Heather brought up optimism; over the past couple of weeks I’ve been not unpleasantly haunted by the final lines of Frank O’Hara’s poem “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean Paul”:

and surely we shall not continue to be unhappy
we shall be happy
but we shall continue to be ourselves everything continues to be possible
Rene Char, Pierre Reverdy, Samuel Beckett it is possible isn’t it
I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don’t believe it.

Could you all talk a little bit about the relationship between optimism and cynicism in your poems and/ or the poems of others?



MR: Well, Max Jacob said it brilliantly in the letter Heather quoted. I see a lot of student poems that are snide or bitter: poems that ridicule certain bourgeois or mass-cultural things. And on the one hand, I can usually sort of agree in a general sense that mass culture is bad, or malls are alienating, or the suburbs destroy human potential, blah blah blah. But I think back to a very important moment in my own writing: I had written a poem in a park, watching a family, and the poem basically critiqued them for I can't even remember what now. It was supercilious, really; who was I to say anything about these people I didn't know at all? And my poetry teacher read it and said something like, "You want to watch out that you're not an asshole." And he was very serious, and looked at me with these penetrating eyes, and I realized this was a big thing for him, and for me. And then almost immediately I found myself drawn into a long apprenticeship with the historical Surrealists. I think they *are* very optimistic—so much of their interests were in human potential—the potential of dreams, of our unconscious, of all of the overlooked and uncelebrated things that make us human. It seemed to me like they really wanted to celebrate being human rather than critique it or box it in. And yes, as several of you have said, they were revolutionary, and no one is more optimistic than a revolutionary.

MZ: I think it's important to talk about the image. That was the most important thing to the surrealists, the focus of their poetic efforts. Their ideas about the image are both different from that of mainstream American poetry today, but also (paradoxically) highly influential to it.

In American poetry today there is a prevalent, if not dominant, view of the image that it should do at least one of two things, if not both. The first is to describe something visually. The second is to represent, metaphorically or perhaps metonymically, something "greater" or "more significant" than what is ostensibly being described. For example, let's say one is writing a poem about one's feelings about marriage, and a flock of geese might go in a honking ragged V plaintively yet somehow with mysteriously sure direction over your summer house (hey, I just made that up a little too easily, uh oh). That would be something we could see and experience in our "mind's eye," and also something that is significant, that represents, stands in for, elaborates, complicates what the poem is "about."

Surrealists, as Zach so rightly pointed out, had something very different in mind. They saw the image as a place where the real and the imaginary fused, the place where the writer, and then the reader, could actually physically feel and experience the actuality of surrealism. A bit like how ecstatic prayer can be a gateway to religious experience. Which is why the surrealist image should have, as Zach said, "irreconcilable logical and linguistic contradictions," though I think almost immediately the surrealists were much more iffy on the second part of that sentence than the first.

HC: Hannah, I think when it comes to cynicism both Jacob & Rohrer have it pretty well covered. Maybe I will add that it seems useful to look at everything and think "you must be joking!" in a kind of stunned, pleased way, rather than to look at everything and sneer or smile knowingly. But that's just the basics of attractive/hideous behavior.

It is hard to smile knowingly when you don't know how things are going to react to each another, which is why it seems better to leave those V-birds alone, or at least not to hire them with some kind of predetermined contract. Birds don't work. Images don't work. They collide and make a weird light.

I'm interested, Matthew, in your statement that "the surrealists were much more iffy on 'linguistic' contradictions than they were on 'logical' ones. Dean Young is a poet who engages in some of those linguistic contradictions, like in "He Said Turn Here," (from *First Course in Turbulence*) when he writes: "It seems like nothing / could change its color although / we couldn't tell what color it was, / it kept changing."

This feels like a moment of real collision, but sometimes I think that a linguistic spark is more beautiful to me than a logical one. (The best, I suppose, is to get both at once, or at least in quick succession.) Maybe the linguistic spark is so appealing to me because it is a phenomenon that is pretty unique to poetry, and I like to think that poetry is up to tricks that other media can't easily replicate.

MZ: I think, Heather, what I meant is that while they began with poems that were often an onrush of language with a lot of grammatical collisions, most of the French Surrealist poets ended up exploring the strangeness of visual imagery



in their poems far more than the possibilities of linguistic disruption. This of course is a huge generalization. But if you read Eluard or Desnos or even Breton (see "Free Love") they are not so much trying to tear language apart, as to maybe recapture or recount—and/or build a portal to—alternate states of consciousness through the image. This is my impression at least, so I'm writing this as a question.

I absolutely agree that the stumbles and cracks in language—if they feel authentic and true in the poem—are a great part of what can draw me so much to reading and writing poems too, because, as you say, they are "unique to poetry." I think this does have something to do with surrealism; I think the unfortunate or easy version of this is a smug nonsense speech that justifies itself by its very inaccessibility to a reader. Obviously that's extremely fucked up.

HG: I know that all of you have collaborated with other writers, and some of you even with visual artists. Does collaboration change the way you approach reality in your poems, and if so, how? And why do you think collaboration was so important to the French Surrealists?

ZS: I wonder if collaboration is almost an artificial way, the easiest way, even cheating perhaps, to get at automation. I'm not sure it's possible to get automatic and liberated language from a single sober functioning brain. But when two brains work without the knowledge of the other, strange contradictions—that one brain could have never come up with alone—can happen.

I agree with Matthew when he says that surrealist poets, including neo-surrealists whoever they may be (Is that term problematic? Does it matter? No? Okay.) are "not so much trying to tear language apart, as to maybe recapture or recount—and/or build a portal to—alternate states of consciousness through the image." Or, more specifically, I would argue that the way they do tear language apart is by using mostly mundane, common, familiar, over-used language. They tear it at its core, and not at its edges, without stretching it to its capabilities. The more familiar a surrealist's words, the more unknown they become, essentially tearing at the basics (like tearing math apart by saying that $2+2=5$). In his "Angle of Sight," Breton wrote "a well paved road / leads you to the edge of the unknown." The sublime moment can be sought only through the words the

reader recognizes so well that he/she forgets what they actually mean. Look at Breton's famous line, "Always for the first time." Both concepts are contradictory, and entirely simplistic (linguistically) to one another and therefore rendered illogical, but it is this exact illogic that forges a new, more mysterious kind of logic, a surreal logic. If the reader accepts the absurd concept of infinite first times, he/she must abandon the logical connotation of "always" and adopt a more abstract and emotional definition outside the limitations of reason. The reader must rely on his/her own emotional connotations rather than to submit to given cultural standards/definitions.

HC: I think that where Freud lived in the heads of the Surrealists is where cognitive scientists live in my own. I love to learn about the ways we process language and the world and then to make those processes apparent in a poem. That space was carved out in the first place, though, by Matthew (R) and Joshua Beckman. This is maybe a backwards way of getting at collaboration, but babies sometimes crawl in that direction first, so.

I am a little bit younger than these dudes, luckily for me, because by the time I was learning about poetry in college they were already out in the world making things happen, much to my glee and benefit. I saw Matthew and Joshua perform at the Enormous Room in Cambridge and immediately wanted to go home and make my poems this way, one word at a time, with friends. The moment when everything changed for me, though, was a few years later, after listening about a thousand times to *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*. I realized that I could, in fact, collaborate with myself. I could turn my brain on and off so that I only ever thought of one word or sound at a time, and could hear, like a chord, the notes of polysemy inherent in the morpheme. I wrote poems like that for a long time.

Collaboration still seems important for the way it allows us to attend to some of the principles of Surrealism. It lets you escape, momentarily, what can feel like the dictatorship of your own consciousness. It can help dissolve your artistic ego / belief in your talent. The painter Philip Guston once said (or wrote?) "When I first come into the studio to work, there is this noisy crowd which follows me there; it includes all of the important painters in history, all of



my contemporaries, all the art critics, etc. As I become involved in the work, one by one, they all leave. If I'm lucky, every one of them will disappear. If I'm really lucky, I will too."

The less we are "here" the more we get to be "there," even and especially when "there" is totally imaginary. So I think that collaboration helps us to disappear, not only in the moment of its occurrence, but later as well. It can teach your brain how to stay limber enough to reach beyond (or perhaps between) the language of reality.

MR: I also now feel like I can collaborate with myself! But what I think this really is is collaborating with the words as if they weren't my own. Which of course they aren't. I think now in the right mood I can view almost every word, or at least every line, as something "given" that I can collaborate with. Even if I wrote it.

And I guess the next step is to figure out how you collaborate with the given language. I think it's probably a combination of tearing up language and expanding upon it. I mean, sometimes you want to confound the given and sometimes you want to help the given come along to something even bigger and better than it thought it could be.

I guess I would be surprised if I found out most poets didn't at some level think that what they were doing when they write is a form of collaboration.

ZS: *Nice Hat. Thanks.* was my very first favorite contemporary book of poems. It felt so exciting to me because it seemed so liberated and uncontrolled, as if the poems were receivers of the language around the poets and not the creators of those ideas/languages. I've since gone on to love Matthew R.'s and Joshua Beckman's individual books as much as, if not more than, that collaboration, but it is clear to me that those images from the individual books are more controlled than in *Nice Hat*. By "more controlled," please know I do not mean less successful—just that they're less open to the accident. But to complicate this further, it's not simply the accidental that defines surrealism. Rohrer's *A Green Light* feels quite surreal to me (and is easily on my Top Fifteen list of all-time favorite poems); I learned more about how surrealism is supposed to feel from those books

of his than any of the French Surrealists. Perhaps that feeling has something to do with humor, and how to give it to people so they can hurt their own hearts with it.

HG: I'm wondering if you all have read Calvino's essay on "Lightness" from his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*? There, he says, "If I had to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose [this] one: the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity, he has the secret of lightness."

How do we approach the real world through language and image to get at something extra-real? "Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness," Calvino writes, "I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into the irrational. I mean having to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification." Lightness, Calvino indicates, is the ability to examine the real world from a new angle so that the world becomes unfamiliar to us.

So... Question 1: Could you talk about lightness/heaviness, humor/hurt in the poems you love and try to write?

Also, fill in the blank: "If I had to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose this one: _____."

MR: Here are my two answers: The poem "Famous Flames" by Ron Padgett is always what I think I want to write when I sit down to write, but two things occur to prevent that from actually happening. One is that I remember he already wrote it. And Two is that some kind of "heaviness" or "hurt" as you say creeps in.

What I love about this poem, and Padgett's work in general, is probably a lot of what we've been talking about—surrealistic techniques. But Padgett is not a surrealist, I don't think he or anyone would seriously call him that. But what I've always loved about his poems is the movement. And this, as we've mentioned a lot in these exchanges, seems to be one of the defining things the Surrealists bequeathed to us. The movement in this poem is so light it's easy to miss it on the first reading. I've always thought of his poems as moving from A to B to C to D



but that by the time you're at D, it bears no relationship to A at all; that each step is connected but that the overall movement seems wild and almost haphazard.

So I want that energy and lightness in my poems all the time, and I try to actively do that when I write. I think that relates to what I was saying about "collaborating with myself," which is, after all, something I learned while interviewing Padgett.

But like I said, something else creeps in. The "heaviness" or the "hurt." Maybe it's that I can't bring myself to be as utterly carefree as Ron. Or as truly beholden to chance connections. I think this half-ability to write the poems we sit down meaning to write is what we all do—we love some books and set out to write like them, but what we actually do is write the books that fit in between those books on the shelf.

I think if I had to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose this one: small groups of people gathering in their apartments reading poems to each other. What I mean is: A lot of moaning has been moaned about the lack of cohesion in poetry today (like there's no more Merwin or Stafford or Bishop whom everyone agrees is "the best!"). All the little groups of poets have their "best" poets. That seems not only fine to me, but natural and inevitable under Late Capitalism (gasp!). And they're not just reading poems to each other—the poems are exciting and energetic and wild like the Padgett poem and the surreal (and Surreal) poems we've been discussing, but they're also sincere. They're real to people, too. They are hopefully not afraid to say something, and to want to reach out and connect with people. I see that everywhere in the poems of my contemporaries, whom I love.

MZ: I don't have so much more to add to Matt's amazing answer. I can't think of a more auspicious image than his. When I am trying to explain what it is I love so much about poetry, I always come back to this Wallace Stevens poem, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," because it is about that very thing, people reading together. The poem ends "How high that highest candle lights the dark. / Out of this same light, out of the central mind, / We make a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough."

Being there together is enough. Yes. Hannah, your ideas about lightness and humor are aspirational to me, definitely. There is a word, *sprezzatura*, that I think means what you are talking about, but it has always struck me as maybe just one part of what poems I love involve, the other being the *duende*. What Matt calls the heaviness, or the hurt. A kind of identification, compassion, or sorrowful humanism—a sense that all our souls (or whatever they are) are permanently dented—drives me to experience art and also to make it.

Something funny and very cool happened to me the other day. My brother works at the internet radio station Pandora (he is the music librarian), and every once in a while they have free concerts at lunch for the employees. Last Friday Glen Tillbrook from the band Squeeze was there, and my brother called me at the last minute and invited me to come see the show. I have loved Squeeze for a long time, with a not-even-guilty pleasure. The songs are the exact opposite of surrealism: Every song was “about” something. All the words were in service of a scene or concept or idea. The rhyme was all very clever, the melodies and chord progressions sophisticated and well-organized. Pure craft. No wildness or experimentation or parataxis or the yoking together of unlike things in the image to disrupt anyone’s consciousness. And absolutely deeply moving and beautiful. I loved every second of it, and got very teary at times, and it occurred to me at the time, thinking of this conversation, that there is room for everything along the spectrum of dreaming and reality, or whatever illusory binary we want to think about, as long as it is human and good.

The Surrealists developed techniques and ideas about poetry that were absolutely necessary, visionary, and revolutionary. I remain in awe of them. But I am not a surrealist, not because I in any way reject what they are saying, but because I locate myself, messily, somewhere between the aspirations of surrealism and those of writers who believe that life, human activities, emotions, experiences, memories, history, politics, and culture are all elements of poetry too. That poems need to be something other than automatic writing and disruptive images, that they can have a subject, and be “about” something, without inevitably betraying the nature of poetry, is something we can learn from the great Surrealists, like Desnos. And carry it forward.



HC: If I had to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would blindfold myself and go for a walk with a friend and point at areas until the friend said yes and I would choose that thing. (And wouldn't it be funny if I were pointing at a small group of people reading their poems to each other in an apartment?) I suppose I want to say that everything feels awfully and equally auspicious. That's the nature of prophecy and poetry, I think, that as soon as you look at a thing it swells up with meaning and significance. Or "lights up." And that is also where the hurt comes in. That meaning is all in our heads, and the distance between the intensely physical belief in the significance of what we've seen and the wild meaninglessness of the world as it proceeds without regard for that belief seems designed for the specific purpose of heartbreak. To keep living (and writing) as if unaware of the wild meaninglessness is the saddest happiness on the planet.

Funny how Stevens always shows up when you need him, perhaps especially when he gets to interrupt surrealists—I'm thinking now and often of "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts," and how devastated and amazed and edified I am by these lines:

And to feel that the light is a rabbit-light,
In which everything is meant for you
And nothing need be explained;

I know that I am shifting light from weight back to illumination, but the two are sisters really. If we can stay nimble enough to catch the light when it's about, and pretend what we need to pretend with great ferocity, then that will be enough to go on for a while.

I've been talking all this over with Chris DeWeese, who reminded me of something Russell Edson said: "Why should we have to be surrealists? Breton didn't invent our imaginations." At first, my reaction to the idea of applying a surrealist label to contemporary poetry made me bristle, made me want to say "But that was practically a century ago now! We are doing all kinds of new things!" (I hope this is true.) What Russell Edson has helped me to realize is that we are actually participating in something much older than Surrealism. That

makes me feel lit up and airborne and oceanic. (If I add gritty to that list I will have covered the four elements, so I am going to do it.)

ZS: For me, the auspicious image for the new millennium may be my mother's face. But only as I stare at it—really, really stare at it—for a long time while it twitches and moves, without the worry of her seeing me look (maybe I am behind a mirror), until it's ugly, until it looks like a stranger's face, until it looks more like a pumpkin, or a twisted pumpkin tree, until it makes a kind of mom-death, just hot flesh and cheekbones, the death of me and the death of home. That is where poem-trees come from—they don't come from real trees. What is a real tree anyway? Or I sometimes think of that scene from *Flight of the Navigator* where the boy returned home after a short walk in the woods (turns out, unbeknownst to him, he was abducted by aliens for a few years) to find another family living there, and all the furniture had changed. And when he found his family they were all so much older than him. His younger brother was a man. Maybe it's about being untethered from reality, being let go from reality, from family, from home, from self, in the moments of making a poem. Meaning is like blood. Heather even said that when you look at a thing, it swells up with meaning. She also said something that has echoed in my brain for days now, "To keep living (and writing) as if unaware of the wild meaninglessness is the saddest happiness on the planet." The wild meaninglessness. We can't live like this, aware of the wild meaninglessness. We can't just stare in the mirror until we become trees. Matthew said there is room for everything along the spectrum of dream and reality as long as it is human and good. It is probably good to remember that poetry isn't supposed to be anything. A poem is not necessarily more surreal according to how far it sits on the dream end of that spectrum, but perhaps more surreal if it confuses the spectrum, if it confuses hurt and light, meaning and meaninglessness, just good warm sad blood spilling out in the forest.



“To Know Is Not Enough”

Carrie Oeding interviews Eula Biss

Eula Biss is the author of The Balloonists (Hanging Loose Press 2002), a collection of lyric essays, and the recent volume Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays (Graywolf Press 2009), which focuses on place, race, and class in the three significant regions of Biss's life: New York City, the Midwest, and California. Whatever you would expect from this summary, you will not find it in Biss's essays. Biss writes about teaching, working, and living in these places in such a way that each experience seems steeped in an understanding articulated best in her essay "Relations": "What exactly it means to be white seems to elude no one as fully as those of us who are white." Biss's honest uncertainty of what to conclude gives her a humble yet incisive perspective on race in America, as when she writes, "perhaps it would be better if we simply refused to be white. But I don't know what that means, really." Ultimately, the essays from this latest collection shape the historical and autobiographical through earnest exploration. Biss doesn't write from the periphery of narrative, but rather explores how narrative dictates our lives, through the ways we look for it and the ways it fails us. We don't live the stories, and we don't live outside of them: we live with them. To paraphrase Phillip Lopate on Montaigne, Biss, like Montaigne, allows herself to "enter the tangle and make her way through to what she actually thought about it, not what she was supposed to think."

Carrie Oeding: In the beginning of your essay “Land Mines,” from *Notes from No Man's Land*, you write, “As adults, I think we can admit we do not always love children ... Sometimes we are afraid of them, and sometimes we hate how vulnerable they are.” Reading this essay, I’m reminded of the ways adults stave off vulnerability. Particularly in creative nonfiction, does writing present you with more or less vulnerability?

Eula Biss: There’s a paradox here—I feel uncharacteristically invulnerable when I write, but my writerly persona is full of vulnerability. This is not incidental. Yes, a certain unstaved vulnerability is characteristic of who I am as a person, but in my writing I consider vulnerability a tool. A vulnerable persona can be instrumental in an essay, particularly an essay that is working to avoid the pitfalls of righteousness.

CO: *No Man's Land* focuses on place as much as race. Or, rather, it denotes the relationship between place and race in the U.S. I'm interested to hear whether you worked on most of these essays after you'd left their place of origin.

EB: Yes, most of these essays were written after I left the places they are about, with the exception of the essays about Chicago. And those essays were significantly more difficult to write.

CO: Since *No Man's Land* engages so much with race issues in America, I wonder if you've written any essays since its publication that resonate with these pieces, after Barack Obama's election and during the displays of racism that appear in protest to his policies?

EB: I was revising this collection during Obama's campaign and I remember feeling dismay at one point because the national conversation about race in that moment felt so misguided, so atrophied, so impoverished. Almost everything I heard about race on the news was silly or stupid and I began to worry that my book assumed some basic understandings that just didn't exist in this country yet. So I revised my book around this problem, but I haven't written an essay about Obama.

CO: In "Three Songs of Salvage," an essay in *No Man's Land*, I love the detail and the act of saving pamphlets from distributors on the street. It made me a little disappointed in myself for being someone who shakes her head "no thanks." Do you maintain other collections? If so, how do they filter into your writing process?

EB: I've moved too often to indulge in much collecting, but I have a slight impulse in that direction. I limit myself to flat things, mostly—religious pamphlets, newspaper photographs of disasters, and letters I've found on the street. Those letters are still waiting for their moment, but the others have found their way into my writing. And the impetus for the works that were organized around the religious pamphlets and the disaster photos was a desire to release, or repro-

duce, the inherent poetry of those documents. I was always saving them, moving them from one place to another, with that end in mind.

CO: Are there certain discussions about essay writing that you find unfortunate? Are there topics—or ways of approaching topics—that writers and critics of the genre overuse?

EB: An unfortunate but probably inevitable reductionism abounds in most thinking about genre; the variety I find most offensive and least productive is a tendency toward binary thinking and false dichotomies. The idea that an essay must be either narrative in nature or lyric in nature, for instance. Or the even more disturbing suggestion that we read nonfiction either to receive information or to experience art. Why not both? I've always found the literary essay exciting in part because its both-ness, its between-ness, its insistence on that cyborgian space Donna Haraway writes of, arguing for “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction.” And in a time of information-noise such as the one we live in at the moment, art that works with information—art that has the capacity to organize information and analyze it and recast it and interrogate it and contextualize it—has great subversive potential and social relevance. Of course some artists feel that social relevance is at odds with artistic relevance, but that's another absurd dichotomy, full of cowardice and blind to history.

CO: What questions do you think we should be asking creative nonfiction?

EB: How about a riff on Montaigne: “What do we know?”

CO: One of my favorite sections in *No Man's Land* is from the essay “Goodbye to All That,” which is about living in New York City but primarily spending time in the boroughs. It is a response to Joan Didion's same-titled essay. You say, “I have at times been mystified by Joan Didion's ability to tolerate certain myths while she so fiercely and effectively destroys the foundation of many

others. But I know now that it is very difficult to dismantle one story without replacing it with another. The romance of narrative is hard to resist." It nailed Didion for me. I wonder if you think essayists swerve too far from narrative out of mistrust?

EB: Oh, I don't know! Essayists do all sorts of things for all sorts of reasons. I imagine there are some writers these days who resist narrative more out of disdain than mistrust, and who have come to associate this stance with artfulness. But narrative is awfully hard to escape, no matter how associative or impressionistic or lyric or lacking in syntax your work might be, and narrative keeps maddeningly close company with meaning. Narrative is, after all, the primary mechanism by which we make meaning. And I believe even works that do not provide much narrative on the page are made "narrative" as the reader finds or constructs sense and meaning within them.

CO: This takes me back to the Montaigne line you quoted, "What do we know?" Is this the question from which you essentially start writing? What form do these beginnings tend to take for you: an image, a question, or tension?

EB: Well, I'm not quoting Montaigne exactly, there. His line was: "What do I know?" The motto of the school where I did my undergraduate studies, Hampshire College, is *non satis scire*: to know is not enough. My writing is born more out of that challenge, I think, than Montaigne's query. And yes, you're right on, the beginnings of essays for me are always vague tensions that won't stop netting me, or questions I don't have the words for, or problems I can't articulate yet, or clutters of feelings around certain words or phrases. It's easy to see this last one in my essay "All Apologies"—I began this essay by just wandering through all my associations with the word *sorry*.

CO: You are one of the co-editors of Essay Press. Can you talk about what your interest was in starting the press and how the role of editor affects your perspective of the genre?

EB: I was interested in working on this press in part because I felt I had a debt to pay forward into my community. My first book was published by a small press, Hanging Loose, which is run by a generous group of editors who volunteer their labor and expertise to the end of publishing work that might not otherwise be published. I found Hanging Loose blessedly early in my writing life and have now built something of a career on their generosity, so I feel an obligation to reproduce it as best I can. I think of my work for Essay Press primarily as an act of service, but it's also been an education. I've learned quite a bit about the politics of aesthetics.

CO: Could you speak a little more about what you had to learn and whether there was anything you took from this that was beneficial to your craft?

EB: I'm one of three editors at Essay Press and we make our decisions by consensus, which has at times been difficult to achieve, to say the least. We've had some long, hot debates over aesthetics and I've learned in the process how enmeshed aesthetic values are with values of other sorts—moral, social, political. My philosopher sister has a sophisticated understanding of this relationship between aesthetic judgment and moral judgment and she's tutored me in this area but I still operate from a dirty gut sense around this stuff, particularly in my own writing. That said, all the aesthetic decisions I make in my own work now carry a bit more freight and are a bit more tortured.

CO: Are you working on a collection of poetry? What else are you working on?

EB: In the loose moments when I'm not consumed with the work of raising my young son, I'm working on an essay about the metaphors that fuel fears of vaccination. I'll be writing some more medical essays when I'm done with this one, including a long essay about pain.

New American Moralities

Ruth Maxey sits down with Tom Perrotta

Tom Perrotta is the author of five novels: The Wishbones (1997), Election (1998), Joe College (2000), Little Children (2004), and The Abstinence Teacher (2007). He has also published a collection of short stories, Bad Haircut: Stories of the Seventies (1995), and a range of essays, reportage and unanthologized short fiction. He has adapted Little Children and The Abstinence Teacher for the screen and is now at work on a new novel. This discussion is taken from a longer public interview conducted with Perrotta at the Broadway Cinema, Nottingham, UK, on February 3, 2009, in which he situated his writing in relation to contemporary American fiction.

Ruth Maxey: What are the main challenges of trying to represent America in the twenty-first century? More generally, what do you see as the challenges facing contemporary writers?

Tom Perrotta: Well, I think the challenge for a writer like me who grew up in a white, working-class suburb and now lives in a predominantly white, more affluent middle-class suburb [is that] the country's just changing. For instance, there's an enormous presence of Spanish-speaking people in the U.S. I know some of them, but I certainly don't know that culture. There's been a big influx of Asian Americans who I do know better. I also think people's lives are much more globally integrated, and I tend to be still writing from a small-town model of the novel so that's a challenge for me.

On the other hand, Philip Roth has written pretty relentlessly about his family, the place he grew up in. He created a myth of himself that somehow, even though it's not representative of America, seems to be able to explain a whole lot about the country. So it doesn't mean that every writer has to be global or has to know everything, but that idea of the novelist—Balzac, who seemed to know all of Paris—is something that I aspire to and it seems to be a grand myth of the novelist. I don't know any American writer who really can encompass the whole place. Maybe that's not the way to do it. It's one of the reasons I tend to work in smaller slices. But I do think there are all sorts of spaces in the country that haven't been described by novelists.

One of the reasons I wrote *The Abstinence Teacher* was that I felt the Christian Right had an enormous influence on America, but I hadn't seen them captured in fiction. So two of the main characters in *The Abstinence Teacher* are evangelical Christians who are fighting a culture war. One is an uncompromising preacher, a small-town version of a Jerry Falwell-type figure. The other is a much more ambivalent guy who has found his way to the church because of drug and alcohol problems, and has really benefitted from the pastor's concern for him but is unsure how to integrate his faith into his real life. So I try, in those two characters, to get at two very different ways to be a Christian culture warrior.

RM: Gender seems to be a particular issue for you, especially different models of masculinity: masculinity in crisis and men with sexually "deviant" tendencies. What are you trying to say about gender, especially in your more recent work?

TP: In the past, I've mentioned the divide between my private, autobiographical novels and the more public ones. And one of the things I'll point out is that the private books are very much about men and often about becoming a man in American culture, especially in the 1970s, when traditional male models of being were really under fire. People didn't trust the military or politicians, feminism was questioning male sexual desire in all sorts of ways, and I feel like we grew up without father figures in a sense. That's one way to look at the book *Bad Haircut*: to see these kids on their own trying to figure out how to act as men without any real models for male behaviour around them. Certainly in *The Wishbones*, these guys just don't want to grow up. They don't want to become men because, as far as they can tell, being a man is the death of fun, and fun is the only thing that they really have any faith in.

In my more public novels, I've been thinking about the flip-side of that, which is what it means to be a woman growing up at this moment when feminism was at its height, but then to live through a kind of backlash and a re-imposition of more traditional gender roles. So Sarah in *Little Children* very much reminded me of a lot of women I went to college with, women who said circa 1985, "I'm not going to get married, but if I do get married, my husband is

going to do half the housework and half the childcare and I'm going to have a career and I'm going to have a family and we're going to reinvent the family so that it's a fairer, more equitable institution." And some people did that. But a lot of other people ended up in marriages that looked a lot like their mother's marriage where their husband went to work. Some were okay with this: "Well, he likes his job and he makes a lot more money and I didn't like my job and I'm happy to be home with the kids." And that's fine, but there were also other people who felt like, "What just happened? How did I get from there to here?" They couldn't quite understand it.

A funny thing often happened when I went to book groups, which are predominantly female institutions. At the end, a woman would come up to me and say, "You know, I was an English major and I wanted to do something, and now I'm stuck here at the playground." There was a slightly desperate note that they would strike, and I found myself very interested in those sort of women. They're very different from the women Betty Friedan describes in *The Feminine Mystique*, who didn't have the choice. These women felt like they had a choice but had somehow made the wrong one. Or maybe they didn't have the choice that they thought they had. You can look at it in different ways. But in that sense, I think all of my books are reacting to the enormous cultural shift brought on by feminism, which was also the cause of an enormous backlash. People of my age who think of themselves as feminists are often surprised when they talk to undergraduates who insist that that phrase doesn't apply to them. They expect to have equal opportunity in the workplace and they expect to have sexual autonomy. They expect to have all the things that feminists fought for but then they'll say, "I'm not a feminist." It's confusing for a lot of women, but also for a lot of men who found that the roles that they were supposed to inhabit suddenly didn't exist or had been de-legitimized in some way.

RM: Another intriguing area of your work is the whole issue of morality and ethics. I'm thinking here about the way that you look at the moral majority and the hysteria and cruelty that can accompany it. We see that in *Little Children*, for example: a "not in my back yard" attitude as well as moral ambiguity and the

blurred line between criminal behaviour and what is morally justifiable, at least in the perpetrator's mind. But you always treat your characters with compassion. I wanted to know what general points about morality you're trying to make.

TP: That's a complicated question for me. As a novelist, I think I'm explicitly engaging with moral questions but trying to keep an open mind about them and trying to see it always from the character's point of view. So for instance, Mr. M in *Election* basically cheats. He overturns the results of the election for a personal vendetta that he has against Tracy. Now, he knows that's wrong and we know that that's wrong. I think the whole point of the novel is to understand his life and understand why, on that particular day, he was capable of that particular action.

If you only know the movie, it's probably hard to understand what I'm saying because in the novel, Mr. M thinks of himself as an explicitly political teacher and he's trying to teach his students about oppression. He talks about how the strong always oppress the weak and he uses a famous rape case that happened in New Jersey in the 1980s as a way to talk about oppression and fairness to his students, so for him to be the one who actually uses his position of power for illegitimate reasons is devastating. If he's a tragic figure, it's because he betrays his own values. Knowing better and doing it anyway is a very sad thing in most of our lives, but it's very funny to watch. To me, that's the single funniest thing: somebody willingly doing the stupid thing. So I write about that a lot, but also because I think people can be very smart, yet do very stupid things. People want good characters to make smart decisions but, in a way, their stupid decisions are far more revealing than their many good judgements because it tells you about that one thing that they just can't control. So without stupidity, writers would be nowhere!

I think the whole tradition of the novel is morally destabilizing because novelists are always getting into the heads of characters who are doing things that we don't approve of, and if the novelist does the job right, we end up thinking, "You know, that Raskolnikov, he's not such a bad guy. He just had a bad theory." I mean, Tolstoy started out writing *Anna Karenina* to show what was wrong with an adulterous woman: how she was so selfish and how she deserved her punish-

ment. And he ended up falling under her spell and understanding her life so well that he saw exactly why she needed to break out of her marriage and have this moment of happiness that basically destroyed her. I think he was very troubled by the novel afterward because it took him into some moral zone that he was unprepared for. That's part of the job of the novelist and part of the reason why, I think, people with rigid moralities don't like the novel in general, because it asks you to suspend what you think you know and enter into the mind of someone else, someone you may not approve of, and that can be a dangerous act.

It certainly happened in *Little Children* where Ronnie, the pedophile character, entered the novel. I didn't want him there. I said, "Okay, I'm not going to go into his head. I don't want to go into the head of a pedophile. I'm just not interested in that." He was a real challenge for me. So I ended up describing him from his mother's point of view and it turned out to do something very odd because she was the one person in the world who loved him in spite of everything that was wrong with him. You saw him through her eyes and then through the eyes of everybody else, and it made it impossible for the reader to get him into focus for quite a while. So people were often troubled by the book because they felt that they were far more sympathetic to this character than they wanted to be. But I felt like at every point where you actually heard him speak, you could see that he was a pretty awful person and pretty frightening. And yet for whatever reason, the combination of those two points of view—neither of which saw him clearly—confused a lot of readers in a way that is useful for the novel, but also for our own moral thinking.

Ronnie also exerted a sort of thematic pressure on the novel, which explores sexual transgressions of other sorts: questions like "which sexual transgressions are okay and understandable and which are beyond the pale?" What's funny about the book for me is that in the nineteenth century, the adulterous woman was an incredibly frightening figure. In the case of *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*, the whole community has to rise up and cast her out because she throws the whole system into question. But in *Little Children*, the adulterous couple are the most normal people in the book! So it shows you how far "deviancy" has been incorporated into [our world]. What used to be deviancy is now part of what we consider perfectly understandable behavior.

RM: In previous interviews, you've talked about the manner in which you use voice and you've just explained that in *Little Children*, the pedophile is treated in a more complex way through his mother's perspective. Can you talk about your methods of shifting between different voices and how you decide on a particular narrative voice?

TP: You know, that's one of the mysterious parts of writing. *Little Children* is told in that close third-person, where there's a narrator sometimes very distantly describing the characters, who then occasionally will move into their minds and will come close to a kind of stream-of-consciousness. In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood talks about that particular move, which he ascribes to Flaubert and calls "free indirect style." Wood sees this as *the* important stylistic breakthrough in narrative in the whole history of the novel because it allows you to have a dual perspective on the character and allows you not to be limited: if you go into first person, you're really in the head of the character and you can only do so much and still seem plausible. *Little Children* uses that close, flexible third-person point of view, and I don't think of it so much as a voice as a kind of technique.

Election is the complete opposite. It has seven first-person narrators, a sort of fragmented babble of voices. None of the characters actually understands the whole story. Only the reader has a global understanding of how this particular set of events managed to occur.

RM: Your work seems generally to be set on the East Coast and often in New Jersey. How important is place to you and how would you say your vision of New Jersey is different from that of other artists? How has it changed?

TP: When I was growing up, New Jersey really was a working-class place full of smokestacks and big factories. It was a bit of a national joke because it smelled so bad. There was just so much industrial activity, so much toxic waste. There was a dump that had been on fire for about twenty-five years. They couldn't put it out because it was burning from within. So we had that pride that you have when you live in a much-maligned place but it was a place where there was a

working-class consciousness. Bruce Springsteen was the epitome of that—very different from somebody like [Philip] Roth.

My own story is more similar to Roth's because he grew up in the working-class city of Newark but then went on this trajectory of social mobility: he went to college and became an intellectual, and that's been more the trajectory of my life. But my mother grew up in Jersey City under very similar circumstances to the ones that Roth's family did: first-generation immigrants who would come to these factory towns and get an education and, if they were lucky, move out to the more pleasant suburbs. Roth really is the last person to write about immigration in the old-fashioned "melting-pot" sense. I think a lot of more current immigrants are not in favor of that—though some of them are living out that narrative—but it's not in fashion as a way to conceptualise [immigration] because it seems to imply a loss of your original identity. But that's certainly the case for my family. They were Italian but retained very few traces of their Italian identity and were really eager to get rid of it.

RM: You show a consistent interest in high school settings from *Bad Haircut* to *Election* to *The Abstinence Teacher* and you've said previously that a youth-focused culture is something that surrounds us. You've also talked about the fact that you're not trying to write genre fiction, yet you've published a campus novel, *Joe College*, and you've also shown this consistent interest in high schools. The high school genre is a well-known form of cultural production and I think your work makes a distinct contribution to that genre. Do you see yourself as revising the high school genre and if so, how?

TP: Certainly, with *Bad Haircut*, I felt I was revising a coming-of-age genre, particularly the TV series, *The Wonder Years*. I thought it was a very good show at the time and it was very much about the world I grew up in, but partly because it was on American network TV, there was so much that it couldn't talk about and I felt that everything it couldn't talk about was really at the heart of growing up at that time. So if there was a guiding rule in the composition of *Bad Haircut*, it was: "I'm going to put in everything that *The Wonder Years* left out!" There's racial

conflict, there's somebody who comes out as gay. It was just an attempt to extend what you could talk about within this traditional coming-of-age story.

With *Election* I really felt I was writing a political novel. I was using high school in an allegorical sense. High school is so consuming to the people who are in it that the thought of using it to describe something else may be a new wrinkle within the genre. That said, when you write allegory, it's got to work on that first level. If you're not describing high school in a way that seems real, then you can't use it in a way that's going to describe something else. You can certainly read *Election* as a high school novel. In fact, most critics did when the book came out. It was very disappointing for me because nobody seemed to understand that it was an allegory and that it was a political satire.

But when the movie came out—and the movie really pushed the satirical element of the book, really magnified it—then suddenly critics understood it. And it was a humbling thing for me as a writer because I felt like the film embodied my intention maybe more powerfully than I had on the page. On the other hand, I felt—sad to say—that film critics were smarter than book critics.

Joe College was very much a meditation on class. It was about making that jump from a working-class high school to an Ivy League college, which is an autobiographical journey of mine. What's unusual about *Joe College* is that it uses class tension as a source of comedy. There are a lot of books written by minority writers about going from the inner city to the Ivy League and it's often a much more tragic and painful transformation. For me, the leap wasn't as culturally daunting as that. It pulled me in crazy directions but it didn't put intolerable pressure on my identity in either place.

RM: You quite often leave your novels on some kind of question mark or cliff-hanger and sometimes the endings are quite bleak: for instance, the ending to *Little Children*. At the same time, it affirms the importance of love: the parents' love for their children. How do you decide on the endings to your novels? What factors come into play?

TP: My first book is a collection of short stories and when you write a short story,

the ending is everything. The story is so small and self-contained, the last line really has to hit home. I always loved that jolt that you get with a story that ends well. And the writers I loved when I was writing those [stories] were Raymond Carver and [Tobias] Wolff. They were obviously influenced by Hemingway and there was that minimalist sense that a story should end a beat or two before you think it should and that you should make that last leap on your own. One thing I really dislike about most big novels is that they seem to go past their natural ending, run out of steam and keep going. They just keep limping along for twenty, thirty, forty, sometimes fifty pages. I find those pages excruciating, and swore to myself that I would never write them. So what I want to do is write novels that end like stories, that end at a high pitch, a moment when it's still happening, maybe even a moment before it stops happening, and leave you to take the last few steps on your own.

RM: And leave us wanting more, I think.

TP: I hope so. I got an email from a guy who said: "Dear Sir, I bought your book. I read it and I really enjoyed it but the last thirty pages were missing so I went to the library and got their copy and the last thirty pages were missing from that as well"—and I felt like I'd done my job.

Only Words

Michael Powers

Elisabeth Sheffield, *Fort Da: a report*.

Fiction Collective 2 (FC2), 2009. Paperback, 310 pp, \$19.95

Vladimir Nabokov was famously hostile to Freud. In a 1967 interview with the journal *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, he said “Oh, I am not up to discussing again that figure of fun... Let the credulous and the vulgar continue to believe that all mental woes can be solved by a daily application of old Greek myths to their private parts. I really do not care.” So it’s fitting that Elisabeth Sheffield’s sly retelling of Nabokov’s masterpiece takes its title from the Austrian’s observation of his eighteen-month-old nephew in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Dismayed by the occasional absence of his mother from the house, the boy developed a game in which he dropped a wooden spool, with a string tied around it, off the edge of his crib and out of sight, saying *Fort* (gone), and then pulled it back again, saying *Da* (here). The boy, according to Freud, compensated himself for the temporary loss of his mother by staging the return of the “lost” object.

For Rosemarie Ramee, a middle-aged American neuroscientist writing from the complicated aftermath of her sexual affair with a twelve-year-old Cypriot boy, psychoanalysis is one of a series of narratives through which she tries to explain the events of the last several months, searching less for forgiveness than for understanding. Ramee turns in this search to the complex instinctive drives of the body and the brain, to all kinds of mythology, and to the theme that emerges from the *fort/da* game: the ongoing attempt to regain what’s been lost, or to find a surrogate for the irrecoverable. Early in the book she tells us that her brother died tragically when they were both young teenagers—and the Cypriot boy, Aslan, bears some striking similarities to the lost brother. But as with Humbert Humbert’s “certain initial girl-child,” we know enough not to trust any of these alleged causes too completely. In the end, for Rosemarie as well as for us as readers, nothing at all can be trusted but what the body feels; Rosemarie feels a

sexual attraction to Aslan that's as irresistible as it is inexplicable. Later, roaming with the boy across Europe, hounded by others whose interests in Aslan are vague and, to Rosemarie, intensely threatening, she feels intermittently nauseous for weeks and appears to express a range of emotions through spontaneous vomiting. But clarity and certainty dissolve at the borders of the body—the moment we try to move from sensation and impulse to anything we might call meaning, we are at a loss.

Much of the abundant pleasure of this book is to be found in language. Rosemarie frames her narrative as a report, and—at least at first—she tries to write and think as a scientist. Among other things, this apparently involves near constant use of the passive voice:

Strolling on this beautiful afternoon to the *Schneideri*, which was on Holtenuerstrasse, the dress recently purchased during a weekend in Berlin to be altered for a cocktail party at Nils Wenzel's three weekends in the future stowed in a canvas bag slung over the shoulder, the aforementioned luminous effects of the late day sun (although it was not 4:00 P.M.), effects that have, alas, no equivalent in the United States or Northern Cyprus due to latitudinal restrictions, were enjoyed. (58)

The effect of this odd verbal habit should be to erase subjectivity, to suggest that the writer is merely relating events as they happened: the luminous effects of the late day sun *were* enjoyed. But instead, and rather ironically, it makes us focus on subjectivity—the futility of her various linguistic gestures toward scientific detachment continually reminds us that Rosemarie's experience is always only her own. As the situation becomes more complex and emotionally intense, Rosemarie's narrative voice strains at the limits she's imposed on it and then transforms, first gradually, then rapidly, into something new—a chaotic, overflowing subjectivity operating at the limits of what language can express, dragging analogies from far-flung corners of human experience, explaining, say, the way light is received by the retina with a footnote that runs to three pages and ends with a love letter from a high-school boyfriend, re-arranged to

become an incantatory found poem that revolves around the line, "I want to know what I feel."

It's remarkable that a novel whose critical agenda is so close to the surface should feel this painfully real. Sheffield's Rosemarie Ramee is every bit as palpably alive, as compelling, and, at times, as frightening a character as Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, but she's entirely Sheffield's creation—an irredeemably twenty-first-century American solipsist trying hard to touch something that isn't just more of the obscure, untrustworthy self.

Of Specificity and Simple Language

Rebecca Wadlinger

Andrew Michael Roberts, *something has to happen next*
University of Iowa Press, 2009. Paperback, 68 pp, \$16.00

Once again the short poem appears at the forefront of the contemporary American poetry discussion, this time with Andrew Michael Roberts's first collection *something has to happen next*. Co-winner of the 2008 Iowa Prize, the book tackles big themes of catastrophe, love, abandonment, and access—"access" meaning the act of approaching something, from the Latin *accedere* ("to approach" or "to arrive"). The majority of poems in Roberts's collection are ten lines or fewer; thirteen poems in the collection are four lines or fewer, and not a single poem surpasses the one-page mark.

Formally, Roberts's work engages with the tradition of short poems in America. Read, for example, "strip mall" in its entirety:

we stop to watch
seagulls swarm
the Burger King.

As one would expect, the reader response to this poem varies wildly. Some sit back and contemplate with a satisfied and inquisitive poetry "Hmm," while others immediately dismiss the poem as "something anyone could write" or "vapid." Others busy themselves in an attempt to drum out the syllable count in search of the comfortable 5-7-5 haiku.

We cannot deny that Roberts's poem echoes the descriptive precision and anti-discursiveness favored by Modernist and Imagist poets in the first half of the twentieth century—two famous examples being William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" and Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro." Impressionistic, succinct descriptions are prevalent in this collection, though Roberts replaces natural landscapes with that of Consumerist America.

However, "strip mall" lacks the immediacy and tension that other poems

accomplish in just as few words—Charles Simic, for instance, begins *Hotel Insomnia* (1992) with a strikingly effective short poem titled “Evening Chess”:

The Black Queen raised high
In my father’s angry hand.

Simic ups the ante by choosing a moment that is both exciting and full of implication. His poem invites discussions of timing, conflict, and anticipation, while provoking readers to rethink the potential of a two-line poem.

And so I must (irresistibly) apply the question that is at the heart of Roberts’s collection to the tradition of writing short poems in America: Mustn’t something happen next?

I hoped that Roberts would complicate the writing of two-to-four-line poems through profoundly poetical insight, or his ability to make meaning beyond the imagistic impression. Perhaps an attempt at the reinvention-via-insight approach occurs for some readers in the poem “the moon”:

all the other moons
get their own names.

While the declaration behind this poem is true—Earth’s moon is, indeed, nameless—the poem offers little beyond mere observation. We get no insight into the speaker’s complicated existence, nor do we feel particularly moved in the way that Hemingway’s legendary short moves us: “For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn.”

Another method of complicating the short poem is to move away from the Imagist tradition and delve deeper into the complexities of the written word. Such a move reveals possibilities for poets to enliven language and add layers to a seemingly simple text. It is not easy to find examples of short poems that are linguistic goldmines, yet Roberts’s titling scheme proves to be one rewarding tactic in his book.

But before I reveal a moment where Roberts moves towards complexity in *something has to happen next*, I offer readers a brief textual analysis of the collection.

For us non-linguists, Robert Gunning developed the Gunning Fog Index

in 1952 to calculate and assess the readability of a writing sample. The index uses an algorithm to determine and assign a number to a given sample, and that value corresponds to the number of years of education a reader would need to fully grasp the text. Admittedly, this algorithm is riddled with assumptions and generalizations, and does not traditionally appear in discussions of poetry.

Nevertheless, Roberts's collection yields a 5.1 on the Gunning Fog Index, which means that fifth-grade students should be able to read his words without trouble. *The New York Times* is usually an 11 or 12, while professional publications come in at 18 or higher. Including titles, Roberts uses 925 distinct words (out of 1,499 words total), and on average, his words are 1.44 syllables long.

Of course this linguistic analysis should be taken lightly. Poets have countless skills beyond using a complex lexicon in their toolboxes—use of line breaks, enjambment, and juxtaposition to name a few—but the simple idea that we can take from this analysis is that Roberts's poems are entirely readable when it comes to mere words. And so we must investigate other efforts the poet makes to elevate his ideas and engage our brains.

As mentioned earlier, the rhetorically and linguistically redemptive moments in *something has to happen next* revolve around the poet's approach to titling short poems. Roberts uses titles to direct readers' interpretations of his poems, or as handy add-ons for poetic leftovers or extensions of the small poems themselves. One interesting exercise is to read the book's table of contents as if it were a poem:

dear wild abandon
we are not birds
explain yourself
among the beautiful illusions
poem written on the mirror of her skin
dear man on fire
tragic figure in a rearview
the moon
what i know of the moon
...

It's a strange exercise, but the anaphora of "dear (something)" proves to be rhythmically satisfying and speaks to the organizational success of the book.

Though most of his titles provide a convenient synopsis of the poem's content, readers (as meaning-making machines) are invited to complicate the relationship between the titles and bodies of the poems:

"before sleep takes us"

i memorize my life
so it's still there
when i arrive again
in the morning.

We have something to think about, here. While the poem still situates itself as an impressionistic moment, the title shakes things up a bit. Should we read the title as a literal, yet slightly-removed first line? Or is it sleep that is "still there" after the speaker spends the night recollecting his existence? Is the title meant to act as a metaphor for life, and should we implicate ourselves with the objective, first-person plural pronoun? Or are these all just the embarrassing musings of a reader who is desperately searching for something new and exciting to think about?

Roberts's book leaves readers with particulars to applaud. His range, for one, encompasses not only brief meditations but also spreads to what I call the "wacky situation poem" we see in wildly imaginative poets like James Tate. Though often derivative, Roberts proves to be a master of specificity and simple language who gets us thinking more about the need for invention when crafting short poems.

Those Who Forget the Past

Adam Peterson

J. Robert Lennon's *Castle*
Graywolf Press, 2009. Hardcover, 229 pp, \$22.00.

Full of tortured delays, unexplained betrayals, and unlikely redemption, the last few years of J. Robert Lennon's career have been as unique as his fiction. His stunning collection of (very) short fiction, *Pieces for the Left Hand*, came out in Great Britain in 2005 but went years without American publication. W. W. Norton dropped his novel *Happyland*, the story of a town purchased by the wealthy owner of a doll company, over fears of litigation from the founder of the American Girl Company, only to see the book serialized—without incident—in *Harper's*. Of course, thirty thousand words had to be cut. So it should come as a relief to both the writer and lovers of thrilling literary fiction that his newest novel, *Castle*, arrived without waiting, without cutting, without incident.

And thank goodness. Released by Graywolf Press simultaneously with the first American edition of *Pieces for the Left Hand*, *Castle* is a novel that could not bear one more day. It is a profoundly topical book, though it is a very creeping topicality—one first indicated by sadly familiar desert-camouflage lettering on the book cover, then hinted at for a full two-thirds of the book before dropping, like a grenade, in the final chapters.

It's a familiar beginning: Eric Loesch returns to his upstate New York hometown in 2006 after a long absence, but almost immediately the book turns the familiar scenario on its head. Rather than a tortured homecoming full of encounters with old friends and ex-lovers, Loesch's return to the fictional town of Gerrysburg is immediately peculiar. He recalls little of the town and his childhood there, nor does he understand exactly why he has returned after more than thirty years. All that interests him is the rash purchase of a dilapidated house and 612 acres of thickly wooded land which sits abandoned outside of town. It is upon discovering that a small section in the center of the property is owned by someone else that Loesch begins to venture into the woods, which are oddly

free of wildlife except for one white deer. It is during these journeys that Loesch discovers that the property in question contains the eponymous stone castle and that the forest—like our narrator—contains more secrets than answers. In a telling understatement, Loesch thinks:

Sitting there at my kitchen table, I was not especially happy to revisit these memories. I have already established that I am not one to live in the past, and I feel that the anger which results from recalling past injustices is among the most impure of emotions, and damaging to heart and soul.

It is a belief which must seem like honor to Loesch but he need only look at the history of his own property see how flawed his thinking is. Once the site of an Indian massacre, to those who are willing to confront injustice, the land itself should be a reminder of the importance of recognizing the humanity of others in maintaining one's own humanity. It is not emotion that will damage the heart and soul but the denial of it, and as Loesch finds himself isolated on his own property with a mysterious nemesis, his refusal to acknowledge the past—to be less than fully human—is what makes him vulnerable.

In Loesch, Lennon has taken on an extraordinary challenge. He is a narrator both pathologically obsessed with detail and decorum (he coldly gives his profession as “infrastructure and information”), yet devastatingly imprecise in his memory and unreliable in his perceptions. Indeed, as much as my brief description of the plot might lead the reader to expect one kind of book, almost any sentence could use a variation of “seems to...” or “it might be that...” or “for a while you think...” Long before he finds the castle, Loesch himself has become the most mysterious object in his own novel. He alienates his real estate agent by brusquely declining a wrongly perceived sexual advance. He is ready for blows when a friendly hardware store employee asks if he was in the military. These moments—and many more like them—are a not-particularly-subtle warning that Loesch is neither as normal nor as forgetful as he portrays himself, and that his connection with his hometown is far more complicated than it appears. It is not sentimentality that has returned him to Gerrysburg but trauma, not a nostalgic itch being scratched but an old scar being fingered. Loesch is neither

unfamiliar with the property he's purchased, nor the disgraced psychologist who owns the formidable stone castle in its center. He is also not entirely surprised by the reaction he sometimes receives from others as, we slowly learn, he's on indefinite furlough from the military after charges serious enough to lead to congressional hearings.

Lennon drops these developments throughout the book, and if they sometimes feel more like barbells than breadcrumbs, it's easy to forgive. The novel is dependent upon Loesch remembering things just as the reader is on the brink of discovering them, and while it's a device that does not hold up particularly well when dissected, it's one that creates as much tension and mystery as any airport thriller. Loesch is not just a man chasing a phantom through the dense woods, he's rediscovering his own past and learning, without any particular satisfaction or exoneration, how his failure as a commander in Iraq was a direct result of the misinterpretation of America's last troubled war.

Lennon's novel then becomes one of confronting the past, both recent and distant, both an individual's and a country's. Loesch's character is no less human for serving as a larger metaphor for the generation of neo-conservative desk crusaders who viewed Vietnam as a failure of will, and the implications of their seeking to replace perceived weakness with inhuman obedience. It is in the novel's collision between the country's project in Iraq and Loesch's personal one as commander of an Abu Ghraib-like prison that the most moving passages occur, not because Loesch is shown to be as robotic as the psychologist once tried to make him, but because he is all too human in his devotion to his commanders and his expectation that the devotion be returned by those he commands. He aims to do the best job possible even when that job is the worst imaginable, a situation that calls for nuance and understanding that he—like his superiors all the way up the chain of command to his commander-in-chief—is philosophically and psychologically incapable of providing. It's a powerful rendering of what a person free from having to confront the past will do when ordered, and how a chain of such purposefully displaced responsibility led the country's military to new lows in the first half of this decade.

If the last few chapters are at all disappointing it is only because their timeliness demands attention five years and two presidential elections after Abu Ghraib, and that attention makes it clear how much the book's plot is dependent upon Loesch's faulty memory, yet how quickly that memory is restored in service of the book's larger purpose. In the end, both the reader and Loesch find themselves with a clear perspective on where it all went wrong, a situation less earned than necessary to conclude a plot that has come to be not about a man with a castle on his property, but about a man who can't remember what happened to him (until he does). The reader must trust those past perceptions as much as he or she doubted his present ones, though the novel is less interested in settling the question of truth than it is in illustrating how even once we have the truth—or as close as we can get to it—we won't necessarily use it correctly. The restored Loesch is no more likely to learn from his own history than the architects of the Iraq War were to learn from their country's. In the heartbreaking final pages, the novel overcomes any concerns one might have about its devices or its relevance when we're reminded that for all the soul-searching of the last six years, for all we've learned, the war is not over. Lennon could have given his narrator full access to his memories from the beginning and, it's clear, he would come to the same end. It might have made his story more tragic, but it would not have made it more entertaining.

Two Reads and Few Distractions

Miab Arnold

Affinity Konar, *The Illustrated Version of Things*.

Fiction Collective 2 (FC2), 2009. Paperback, 248 pp, \$17.95.

The Illustrated Version of Things, Affinity Konar's debut novel, chronicles an unnamed narrator's attempts to piece herself into an adult world almost indecipherable to her because of a tortured childhood. Her human landscape has been sculpted by the pimps and addicts her mother depended on, by the cruel and complicated series of foster parents she and her younger brother were forced to live with when their mother was sent to prison, by fellow incarcerated children at juvenile facilities, and by the nurses and patients in the psychiatric ward in which she spent her seventeenth year. The book begins when the narrator is expelled from a mental institution at eighteen.

The plot centers around her peculiar but diligent efforts to compose a family from the shards of relatives immediately available to her. She starts with her paternal grandparents, holocaust survivors that sleep in their boots in case they need to flee. Next she reconnects with her younger, seemingly better-adjusted brother, Moses, who has tried in her absence to reinvent himself—ethnicity and all—by forgetting his past and changing his name to Miguel. Then she works in her father, a nurse she hasn't seen since childhood, whose well-intentioned and inept attempts to nurture her arrive too late. The specter of her missing mother, and the narrator's growing resolution to actively seek her out, hovers throughout the book.

The plot, however, is hardly what propels this novel forward. The book was published by the Fiction Collective 2, a nonprofit dedicated to experimental, artistically daring works—and here the experimentation is partially the novel's voice. Largely because of the jumbled and illogical associations created by its mentally and emotionally challenged narrator, the text is surreal in almost every aspect: on the level of sentence and paragraph, scene and chapter.

This means that all the reader can predict is that something unpredictable

will happen. When the narrator becomes jealous of her brother's relationship with her father, for example, she demotes him to the role of ex-brother and decides to "trap a new brother by sunup"—which she accomplishes by catching a homeless woman with a wishbone. The narrator sneaks the woman to her father's house, soaks away the layers of refuse covering her, and informs her she is to replace Moses. The woman protests, suggesting she would rather be a mother. Soon the woman's confusion and insanity prove to be even greater than the narrator's, who caves in to the woman's wishes. "I can't leave," she tells her ex-brother when he discovers the disintegrating woman his sister has brought home, "She's like a mother to me now."

This fast-passed succession of outlandish turns is echoed on the sentence level, to a sparkling effect—but of course, a sparkling more like the flickers of neon beer signs on roadside puddles than of stars on a lake's surface. A random sampling of sentences: "When I don't respond favorably to the cats' offers of brotherhood, they circle the trap and mew. They begin to multiply themselves in vengeance." And: "My grandmother takes my hand. She likes to take things that belong to me because it makes her feel nearer my father..." And: "A woman calls, she says that my grandfather just walked in the door with a sharp instrument saluting from his chest." And, from a memory of her mother: "We had sores all over ourselves, we opened them up with our fingers and the blood ran out, but then it ran right back in again and sealed the holes shut. She was so glad to see us, she said."

Because of the dreaminess of voice and form, at points this novel is a tug-of-war between Kathy Acker and Tom Waits. At its strongest, it makes the reader feel as though the accepted adult world makes no real rational sense; the tone reverberates with those first, earliest memories of childhood. Although convoluted, there is usually a comprehensible sensibility to the narrator's storytelling style, and it can be rewarding to sort it out.

The use of sideshow freaks—of vagrants, pedophiles, and pimps, of girl gang leaders and deformed children, of victims and bullies—alternately distracts or invigorates the narrator by complicating her views about what constitutes a family. For the most part, the narrator refuses to judge these outsiders (even

if she resents them) and she often enlists their help. Even when the results are disastrous, as when she's turned into a man's human stool, she takes these experiences for the best of their worth.

The strengths of this novel are, predictably, also its weaknesses. There is no denying the beauty and surprise of Konar's language. At the same time, the collage of separately breathtaking images, characters, and scenes pile up on each other so relentlessly that they begin canceling each other out. This produces the sensation that if you have read one or two pages, you have read the book. And so while the language propels, it also sucks away tension and mystery. There can be no danger when anything can happen.

Konar herself predicts this possibility when the narrator asks the demi-brother/homeless woman if there's anything she wants. The woman responds in a long ramble that she wishes people knew "how it might feel to be a woman who once had a job but lost it, who had a house but misplaced it, who had an explanation for her illness but couldn't remember it..." The woman goes on and on with a haunting catalogue of her life, and the narrator reasons: "I can't understand what the old woman's trying to get at, so I do the only reasonable thing you can do in a situation like this, which is to act like you never heard anything at all." *The Illustrated Version of Things* risks this fate for the casual reader. It is a difficult book that relies on the beauty of the language to compel readers who might wonder if the effort is worth it. It is a book that requires two reads and few distractions.

Ultimately, the book is worth the effort. A first book to be proud of, about the kind of girl who might throw a baby in the trash bin, or might rescue a baby from the clutches of an uncaring mother, depending on the fluctuations of the day. Her emotions are both deeply engrained and detached, and this makes for her strange and compelling point of view.

Perhaps the best reason to read this book is that contrary to how it might sound, this is not a novel about victimization. "Plot by plot, the cemetery flowers fake an interest in being bright," the narrator notes midway through, when she has run away and spends the night in a graveyard. "But I won't lie down with the graves, no matter how cheery the epitaphs or settled the dirt. Instead, I throw

my coat on the bench and put my book beneath my head. I try to sleep. My roommates are loud. They like to stay up all night and moan. But these dead don't seem to have it so bad. And I tell them so."

The narrator's determination to hush the dead rather than fear or ignore them, to make the best of what she's been given, and to choose the best for herself even when one choice seems just incrementally better than the other—bench over ground—is consistently remarkable in this book. It is what sets the narrator apart from the other characters and what leads her on her ultimate journey to find her mother.

Sweetbitter, Irresistible, Creeping

Shara Lessley

Kara Candito, *Taste of Cherry*.
University of Nebraska Press, 2009. Paperback, 80 pp, \$17.95.

In lieu of a substantial publication record, the obsessive subject (and its treatment) often acts as an emerging poet's calling card. For Kara Candito, it's the physical and emotional entanglement of sex and love—matter long bedeviled and defended in verse—that fires the lyric imagination. Candito's geographic and psychic landscapes are varied: throughout *Taste of Cherry*, she explores locations as disparate as Florida and Africa; via personas, she enters the interior lives of Faulker's Caddy Compson and Atwood's anonymous Handmaid, among others. However, whether investigating memory-based events or assuming the identities of well-known literary figures, confronting lovers lost stateside or reconciled with overseas, Candito consistently interrogates the sensual and cerebral with a sense of urgency and candor.

It's easy to read the collection's title as an exploitation of sexist slang, a willful means of provocation. If "popping the cherry" is shorthand for taking a girl's virginity, for example, does *Taste of Cherry* suggest oral sex? In fact, the phrase is taken from an Iranian film by the same name in which the lead actor picks up a series of strangers and drives them across the countryside. What the man seeks isn't sex, but a kind of twisted intimacy: he hopes to convince one of the passengers to assist his suicide. The darker tensions provided by *Taste of Cherry's* secondary context exemplify Candito's tendency to align the erotic surface with more complicated undercurrents. Although in one moment a woman's breasts "swell and expand /—a performance," the same female body soon becomes an intellectual concept "like Baudelaire's / giantess grafted with Betty Boop" ("Sleeping with Rene Margritte"). Candito proves the sensual life isn't purely corporeal: *Taste of Cherry's* libido is stimulated not only physically, but intellectually by artists and thinkers ranging from Montale to Walter Benjamin, Arthur Rimbaud to Puccini.

While her lyric boldness is seductive, Candito's work is kindred neither to the erotic rhetoric of Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," nor

Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." Instead, Candito appears most interested in scrutinizing the incongruities that lie at the very heart of sex and romance. The conflict the poet returns to throughout *Taste of Cherry* is well-defined by Anne Carson in *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*. Here, Carson cites confusion—an emotional and physical muddling up—as a primary source of lyric tension. It is Sappho whom Carson credits with first exposing the contradictory facts of passion that seem to obsess Candito; that is, the convergence of love and hate within erotic desire:

Eros once more limslackener makes me shudder
sweetbitter irresistible creeping

In the above fragment, Sappho characterizes Eros both as an "irresistible" seducer and "creeping" predator, an agent of love whose effects are simultaneously physical and emotional, desired and feared, and—perhaps most significantly—the "sweet-bitter" source of pleasure and pain.

Throughout *Taste of Cherry*, pain so fully comingles with the erotic it is difficult to find an instance of pleasure without some degree or threat of suffering. In fact, at her best, what strikes me most about Candito is the extent to which her poems pursue (unflinchingly) those destinations where "the guidebook says DANGER and the street is a garish / human theatre" ("Egypt Journal | *The Poet's Condition*"). Whether or not it is theirs, time and again Candito's speakers take pleasure in physical or emotional grief. In "California," for example, the poet praises "the holy pulse of shower water in the morning / the intimacy of knowing someone upstairs is flushing, / alone in the privacy of their own private suffering." At times, the speaker's bravado slips into cliché or falls flat, as in lines like "You were dreaming of stilettos / and fast cars, a shove-me-hard-up-against-the-wall / kind of love" ("Taste of Cherry") and "Maybe what we need / more than anything is to be fucked to sleep in a California / king, or slapped across the face" ("On the Occasion of Our Argument During a VH1 Best Power Ballads Countdown").

Candito's writing takes on energy when the pleasure-seekers who so often suffer the more painful consequences of love morph into potential perpetrators. In one of the collection's strongest poems, "Egypt Journal | *Christmas at the Great Pyramid*," Candito locates danger in cultural and geographic sources, rather than sexual interaction. While her lover claims "the desert wind is romantic," the speaker sees deprivation:

For example, the whole world tastes like sand today; in this country it is illegal to say, *I believe in evolution*—and if you say it, there is no pendulum, no bare bulb swinging across the interrogation room and sometimes there isn't even a body...

Throughout "Egypt Journal | *Christmas at the Great Pyramid*," Candito's juxtaposition of political and sensual vulnerability is quite deft. After highlighting a series of local threats, the reader discovers real danger in more personal matters of love. Turning from "the bomb mirrors ... swept beneath the car / each time we returned to the hotel," the speaker reflects on meeting her lover's father, remembering:

...the part you didn't translate, which I
understood: *Ayoon otta*. Cat eyes. And later,
when you explained his question: *How can you trust
a woman with eyes like an animal that is loyal to no one?*

Emphasizing our animal nature, Candito underscores human vulnerability in matters of sex and romance. The phrase "*ayoon otta*" aligns the speaker with an ancient animal long cherished and worshipped in Egypt. Whatever its cultural value, however, the cat's loyalty remains in question. Thus, the animal takes on dual qualities; it is simultaneously domestic and wild, acting as both a cultural icon and curse that echoes, once again, all that is "sweetbitter, irresistible, creeping."

Established or emerging, the writer's enemy is mannerism. Whether tonal, formal, imagistic or syntactic, a poet's unconscious adherence to particular modes of speech ultimately results in predictability. *Taste of Cherry* stalls when Candito reads the physical world exclusively through the lens of the erotic. In such instances, "Essex" too often "look[s] like Sex Street" ("Self-Portrait with an Ice Pick") and the stanza becomes just another room where the volume's occupants fuck. "Fuck," in fact, shows up thirteen times in the twenty-three poem collection both as qualification ("...deep, inexplicable / fucked-up love," title poem) and action:

[we] returned to the *baglio*, emboldened and drunk,
to fuck on the ancient floor and pass out
with spumante fizzing over the sides of our glasses

("La Bufera | *Our Last Trip to Sicily*")

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Carlos Oquendo de Amat (1905-1936), born in Puno, Peru, was the son of a Sorbonne-educated newspaper publisher who was both a prominent member of the elite of Puno and an irascible enemy of Peru's Catholic-conservative establishment. Upon the death of his father, the teenage Oquendo de Amat and his mother moved from provincial genteel comfort to a life of poverty in Lima, where he became connected with the city's vanguardist poetry scene of the 1920s and '30s, eventually writing *5 Metros de Poesía* (*5 Meters of Poems*). After several stints in prison, Oquendo de Amat emphatically embraced Marxism and renounced poetry. After being deported to Panama in 1936, he traveled to Republican Spain and died of tuberculosis shortly after arriving, at the age of thirty-two.

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Adrian Blevins's *The Brass Girl Brouhaha* won the 2004 Kate Tufts Discovery Award. Blevins is also the recipient of a Rona Jaffe Writer's Foundation Award, a Bright Hill Press Chapbook Award for *The Man Who Went Out for Cigarettes*, and the Lamar York Prize for Nonfiction. A new book, *Live from the Homesick Jamboree*, has just been released from Wesleyan University Press. Blevins teaches at Colby College in Waterville, Maine.

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Eric Burger's poems have appeared in *Black Warrior Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Quarterly West*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Green Mountains Review*, and *CatBank*, among others. He was a Jay C. and Ruth Halls Poetry Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, and is a recipient of a grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts. He teaches at the University of Colorado and lives in Boulder with his wife Katherine and daughter June.

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Sabrina Orah Mark is the author of *The Babies* (Saturnalia 2004) and *Tsim Tsum* (Saturnalia 2009). Woodland Editions published her chapbook *Walter B.'s Extraordinary Cousin Arrives for a Visit & Other Tales*. She has received fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center, the Glenn Schaeffer Foundation, and the NEA. Her writing has appeared in the anthologies *Legitimate Dangers* and *Best American Poetry 2007*. She teaches at the University of Georgia.

Lee Martin is the author of the novels *The Bright Forever* (a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction), *River of Heaven*, and *Quakertown*. He has also published two memoirs (*From Our House and Turning Bones*), and a short story collection, *The Least You Need To Know*. He teaches in the MFA program at Ohio State University.

Ruth Maxey is a Lecturer in Modern American Literature at the University of Nottingham. She has published articles on contemporary fiction, postcolonial literature, and Edwardian writing, and her work has appeared in *Kenyon Review*, *MELUS*, *Textual Practice*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, and elsewhere.

Edward McFadden is a recent graduate of The University of Montana's Creative Writing Program and past editor of *CutBank* reviews. His poems, translations, and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *Kyoto Journal*, *RHINO*, *Open Letters*, *Sugar Mule*, and *Cerise Press*. He currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

Jennifer Moxley is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *Clampdown* (Flood 2009). She teaches poetry and poetics at the University of Maine.

Harmony Neal recently adopted a puppy named Milkshake. He has eaten her Danish clogs, belt, ethernet cord, massage chair, roommate's cellphone and laptop power cords (twice), and every pen in the house. Harmony's

been published by or has work forthcoming in places like *The Gettysburg Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Georgetown Review*, and *Sou'Wester*. Sometimes she thinks she has superpowers, but this is probably not true.

Carrie Oeding has a PhD in creative writing from Ohio University, and teaches at the University of Houston as a Writing Fellow. Her work has appeared in several journals, including *Brevity*, *DLAGRAM*, *Colorado Review*, *Best New Poets*, *Mid-American Review*, *storySouth* and *Third Coast*. Her first poetry manuscript has been a finalist or semifinalist for The Vassar Miller Poetry Book Prize, The Akron Poetry Prize, Marsh Hawk Press, and more. She received second place, from judge Brenda Hillman, in The Poetry Center of Chicago's 2009 Juried Reading Series.

Cecily Parks's first book of poems, *Field Folly Snow* (University of Georgia Press/VQR Poetry Series 2008), was a finalist for the Norma Farber First Book Award. Her poems and reviews have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Octopus*, *Tin House*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Yale Review*, and elsewhere. She is a PhD candidate in English at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Tom Perrotta is the author of five novels: *The Wishbones* (1997), *Election* (1998), *Joe College* (2000), *Little Children* (2004), and *The Absstinence Teacher* (2007). He has also published a collection of short stories, *Bad Haircut* (1995), and a range of essays, reportage and unanthologized short fiction. He has adapted *Little Children* and *The Absstinence Teacher* for the screen and is now at work on a new novel.

Adam Peterson is an assistant fiction editor for *Gulf Coast*. His writing has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, and *Denver Quarterly*, among other journals.

Matthew Rohrer is the author of *A Hammock in the Maloocas*, *Satellite*, *A Green Light*, *Rise Up* and *A Plate of Chicken*. With Joshua Beckman he wrote *Nice Hat. Thanks.* and recorded the audio CD *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*. With Joshua Beckman and Anthony McCann he wrote the secret book *Gentle Reader!* It is not for sale. Octopus Books published his action/adventure chapbook-length poem *They All Seemed Asleep* in 2008.

Anjali Sachdeva is a freelance editor and has taught creative writing and literature at the University of Iowa and Augustana College. Recent fiction and essays appear in *Creative Nonfiction* and the *Sonora Review*, and she has work forthcoming in the *Alaska Quarterly Review*. She has worked as a journalist in the United States and Ireland, has an MFA in fiction from the University of Iowa, and spends her summers hiking in the backcountry.

Joseph Scapellato Joseph Scapellato was born in the suburbs of Chicago and earned his MFA in fiction at New Mexico State University. Currently he's an English/Creative Writing adjunct professor at Susquehanna University and Bucknell University. Joseph's fiction appears in *Fringe Magazine*, *Willows Wept Review*, and *Prick of the Spindle*. He was recently a finalist for the Philip Roth Residency. This is his first print publication.

Jon Schneider has also been published in *TriQuarterly* and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*.

Zachary Schomburg is the author of *Scary, No Scary* (Black Ocean 2009) and *The Man Suit* (Black Ocean 2007). He co-edits *Octopus Magazine* and Octopus Books. He teaches film, literature, and writing at Portland State University and Portland Community College.

Peter Selgin is the author of *Drowning Lessons*, winner of the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction, and a novel, *Life Goes to the Movies*. A book on writing craft, including *180 Ways to Save a Novel*, is forthcoming from Writers Digest Books. His first memoir, *Confessions of a Left-Handed Man*, is forthcoming.

Brandon Shimoda was born in the United States. His collaborations, drawings, and poems have appeared in numerous places in print, online, on vinyl, and on walls. He lives, also, in the United States.

Austin Tremblay hails from North Carolina and teaches at New Mexico State University. His work has been featured or is forthcoming in *New South*, *Cream City Review*, *Eclipse*, *California Quarterly*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and other journals. He loves baseball fields and playing with his band, Railroad Gin.

Chase Twichell has published six books of poetry. *Horses Where the Answers Should Have Been: New & Selected Poems* is forthcoming from Copper Canyon in April 2010. From 1999–2009 she was the editor of *Ausable Press*. A student in the Mountains and Rivers Order at Zen Mountain Monastery, she lives in upstate New York with her husband, the novelist Russell Banks.

Florencia Varela's work has appeared recently or is forthcoming in *DIAGRAM*, *Drunken Boat*, *Pateron Literary Review*, and *Western Humanities Review*. She is a recent graduate of Columbia University's MFA program and currently lives in Brooklyn.

Angela Vogel's poems appear or are forthcoming in *Best New Poets 2008*, *The National Poetry Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Barrow Street*, *POOL*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *RHINO*, *The American Poetry Journal*, *Barn Owl Review*, and elsewhere. Awards include the 2008 Southeast Review Poetry Prize, a Maryland State poetry fellowship, and two Pushcart Prize nominations. Her chapbook, *Social Smile*, is available from Finishing Line Press.

Rebecca Wadlinger is a doctoral candidate in literature and creative writing at the University of Houston, where she also translates contemporary Norwegian poetry. She received her MFA in poetry and playwriting from the Michener Center for Writers in Austin.

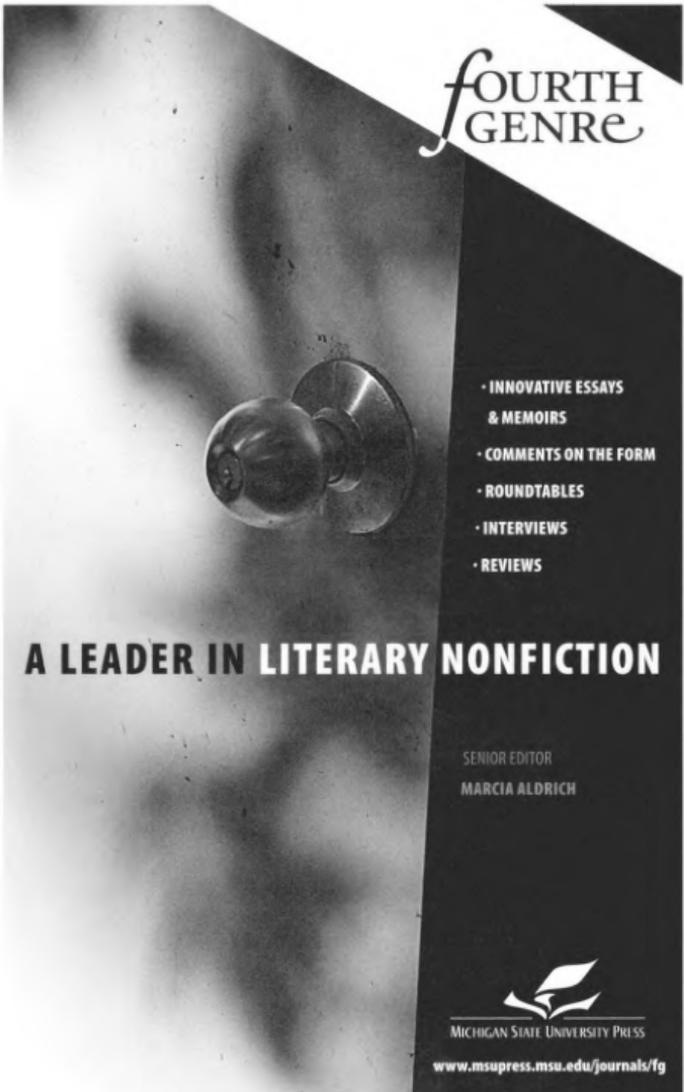
Miles Waggener is the author of *Phoenix Suites*, winner of the Washington Prize, and the chapbook *Portents Aside*. He recently joined the faculty of the Writer's Workshop at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He lives in Omaha with fellow writer Megan Gannon and their new son Manny.

David Welch has poems published or forthcoming in *AGNI Online*, *Pleiades*, and *Quarterly West*, among other journals. He lives in Chicago.

K. C. Wolfe is a founding editor of *Sweet: A Literary Confection* (www.sweetlit.com), as well as the associate nonfiction editor of *The Journal*. You can find a recent essay in the next issue of *Redivider*, and read his reviews at *The Clever Title: Book Reviews*. He is an MFA candidate at Ohio State University.

Matthew Yeager's poems have appeared most recently in *Sixth Finch*, *Bat City Review*, *Agriculture Reader*, and *NY Quarterly*. His short film "A Big Ball of Foil in a Small NY Apartment," based on his long poem of the same title (*Best American Poetry 2005*), screened to acclaim on the festival circuit in 2009. He lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Matthew Zapruder is the author of two collections of poetry: *American Linden* and *The Pajamaist*. His poems, essays, and translations have appeared in many publications, including *Open City*, *BOMB*, *Harvard Review*, *Paris Review*, *The New Republic*, *The Boston Review*, *The New Yorker*, *McSweeney's*, *The Believer* and the *Los Angeles Times*. He is also co-translator of *Secret Weapon: Selected Late Poems of Eugen Iebeleanu*. His third full-length collection of poems, *Come On All You Ghosts*, is forthcoming from Copper Canyon in 2010. He lives in San Francisco, works as an editor for Wave Books, and teaches in the low-residency MFA program at UC Riverside-Palm Desert.



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