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Editorial

Harvard Review has attended a number of conferences and festivals this year, which has given me a chance to listen to some of my colleagues try to answer a question that always comes up: What are you looking for in a piece of writing? One reason this question continues to get asked is that the answers editors give are almost always impossible to translate into any kind of action a writer can take.

Editors can tell writers how to format their work for submission, or what to leave out of a cover letter, or how long they should expect to wait for a reply. But it is difficult for them to say in the abstract what it is about a piece of writing that makes them want to publish it. Still, most editors will give it a try, and while what they say may not be *actionable*, it usually reveals something about the editor's—and therefore the journal's—sensitivity.

I was interested, for example, to hear Jennifer Barber, the editor of *Salamander*, say at an editors' roundtable in Cambridge this year that her journal was open to work that was powerful in a quiet sort of way. This is a feeling I share, but "quiet" is a funny word in literary publishing—one rarely sees it used in a commendatory way. In fact, "too quiet" is frequently tossed in the face of aspiring writers by agents and editors who consider it an especially damning description of debut fiction.

I like quiet; I also like smart, and literary, and funny. But a quality that almost all editors appreciate is *surprising*. This is not the same as *shocking*—a mistake many writers make—it has almost nothing to do with transgression and everything to do with originality.

For me, the idea is that the work offers something unexpected—something I had not anticipated, perhaps something I had never seen, or not seen in a long time, or not in precisely that way. In this issue, for

example, I think Campbell McGrath's poems about famous figures produce a frisson of amusement and pleasure that I would classify as a form of surprise. Theo Greenblatt's essay, "Spatial Practice in Grade Four," also surprised me when I pulled it from the slush pile, not because it was dramatic—it is not—but because it combined interesting ideas in a charming and subtly funny way. David McGlynn's essay, "The Moth," turns on a joke I didn't see coming. Joan Wickersham's "The Program" is narrated in an uncommon—and rather difficult—mode, which I was delighted to see her pull off. Kyoko Mori's "Pet Grief" manages to be both absurd and moving at the same time. The protagonist of Johanna Berkman's "Admission" becomes pitiable in a way that the story does not, initially, invite us to envision; while Gail Mazur, in a span of two compact pages, gives us something tricky to worry about.

Some of these pieces are quiet, some are funny, a few are actually rather dark. They are different from one another in almost every way, except in originality. At this same editors' roundtable, Bill Pierce of *Agni* observed that what he and Sven Birkerts look for is work that could only be written by one person, which is to say, writing with a recognizable voice. But I think we can—and should—take it one step further and say that what editors want is writing that not only sounds like something they've never heard before but tells them something they didn't already know.

Of course—and this is always the problem—this is not the easiest advice to put into practice. But one thing writers should understand is that what is most surprising about a work is not necessarily the same as what is most sensational. Even in a piece of writing with obvious pathos, like Richard Sonnenmoser's essay about a desperately ill child, what matters even more than the inherent drama is what the author does with it—the pulling back and away, the wondering, the spinning off. It is not experience itself in the end but the translation of experience into art.

—Christina Thompson

CAMPBELL MCGRATH

Zora Neale Hurston (1960)

Zora: z to a; a name, an anagram, an enigmatic atlas.

Youth, sweet and spurious as a pirate's treasure map,
x marks the spot, X for Christ arisen in Eatonville,
wandering tribes of the Niger, the Congo, the Zambezi,
voodoo children unshackled but still bound to that cross.

Under the great green hands of the chinaberry trees
tribulations shadowed my girlhood, but I
sought always the light of knowledge, sought
release from the strictures of social circumstance,
queen of my own empowered imagination.

Poverty rots the soul, powerlessness unmans us.
Only in Harlem could I spar with equals,
New York an apple of which I bit, and swallowed.

My wings were ever the mockingbird's, my eyes
loved mirrors, my pen drew ink from an echoing well,
kin-pool, deep reservoir of African blood.

Just as I learned to smile for white folks in Memphis
I mastered the anthropologist's dialect at Columbia,

hoodoo lingo of the academic idiolect,
glorification of folklore into ethnographic gospel. O, but

Florida, I could never escape your prodigal soil.

Eau Gallie, my final home, a garden for gourds,
despair, and forgetfulness, my memory and my works
consigned to the oblivion of a debtor's bonfire
because I chose to speak my people's truth unaltered,
and so lay claim to all history's sorrows.

CAMPBELL MCGRATH

Wittgenstein: Letter to Bertrand Russell (1919)

In 1914, as the Austrian army retreated before the Russians, while I was stuck with an engineering unit, repairing vehicles and reading Tolstoy's version of the Gospels, I received a postcard from a friend in Vienna, informing me that the poet Georg Trakl was recuperating from wounds not far away, in Krakow, and urging me to visit him at my convenience. What delight to discover a fellow voice in the midst of war's monotony! I struggle not to hate all those around me, and to recognize in them some common humanity with myself. Survival in these times, as you will understand, Russell, can depend on having even a single real companion, a single soul to comprehend one's ideas, one's mode of thought, one's vision. Needless to say I rushed to the military hospital, only to discover that Trakl had killed himself two days earlier. What misery!

In 1916 at last I received my requested transfer to the front, where I volunteered for the most hazardous duty, manning the forward observation post, to be certain of drawing fire. Fear of death proved to be both harrowing and clarifying. At heart we are animals, Russell. By day I was corresponding with Frege on logic, but at night, during the Brusilov Offensive, with the Russian artillery barrages exploding around me, I found myself driven toward ontological inquiry.

What do I truly know about life, the world, about God?
 What can be proven or derived, and via which calculus?
 What means of situating oneself to receive such knowledge?
 God grant me insight. Enlighten me. I am a worm.
 I resemble the man in a storm, whose friends, behind their window,
 cannot conceive the wild winds raging against him.

Now, as you know, I am taken prisoner by the Italians,
 along with most of the Austrian army, which, in essence,
 abandoned the war and surrendered en masse last autumn.
 The good news is that I have at last solved all of our problems
 and succeeded in completing my *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.
 Logic and ontology are syntactically parallel, and hereafter
 no further questions remain to be answered in either realm.
 I do worry, however, that my method may not be understood,
 as even Frege seems unable, or unwilling, to grasp it.
 Certainly your own recent writings suggest that my meaning
 will pass you by completely, without lengthy explanations,
 impossible unless you can somehow arrange to visit me
 here, at the prisoner of war camp, in Cassino,
 as I carry with me the only copy of the manuscript.

The war has changed me. Cambridge is a fond memory
 but I have decided to become an elementary school teacher,
 working, I hope, in the most isolated Alpine districts.
 Friends in the Vatican have worked for my early release
 but of course I will refuse any special considerations.
 I have a rather funny anecdote to relate from the other day.
 Some of the officers, one of them a reputable Viennese sculptor,
 were talking of the painting by Klimt of "Fraulein Wittgenstein,"
 and when I said I knew it well, being a portrait of my sister,

they fell back in amazement, having taken me for a common soldier.
It is very hard not to be understood by any single other
person in the world—the entire world, Russell.
There is a perilous loneliness in this state of affairs,
and a planetary sorrow in my soul. Yours, Ludwig.

CAMPBELL MCGRATH

Gertrude Stein (1909)

I arose.

I arouse.

Eye arroz.

I arrows.

I, a rose!

JOHANNA BERKMAN

Admission

VOTED OFF THE ISLAND, that's how Ben described them. They were his cousins' cousins, a self-satisfied obstetrician who'd gone to Yale, her self-satisfied corporate lawyer husband, also from Yale, and their precocious, surely slated for Yale but somehow unable to get into a single Manhattan nursery school two-year-old daughter. We knew them from having attended a number of the same family gatherings over the years, weddings, bar mitzvahs, the occasional Friday night dinner, but now, well, now we wouldn't be seeing them quite as frequently. Now that they had been voted off Manhattan, they were decamping to Scarsdale.

Ben told me the story in the fall, the fall when Jonah was just two years old and I was, believe it or not, already applying him to preschool, and I think he told it to me as a kind of cautionary tale, since I am notoriously bad when it comes to deadlines and had begun dragging my feet, a fact which had already resulted in our missing the open house at Park and Village, our inability to even get an application for Bright Beginnings in Gramercy Park, and god knows how many other irreparable fuck-ups and indignities. Blithe procrastinator that I am, though, I naturally missed his point and took the story to mean something else.

For me it was proof that the world does, on rare occasions, work exactly as it should. I had always disliked the Yales and though I would often try to engage them and ask after their work, they would never reciprocate and ask after mine. I think they thought of me as a writer in quotes, a hausfrau too ashamed to admit the truth, and so their forced march from Manhattan provided me no small amount of schadenfreude. *Take your smugness to the Westchester mall. Carry it with you when you go to pick up your no-delivery shitty Chinese food.*

We would be having no such nursery school problems, thank you, and that in spite of my writerly inability to meet deadlines. Sure, like the Yales, we were Ivy League educated, a touch neurotic, Jewish, etc., etc., but we were not, I repeat not, the sort to do things like prep-and-quizz our kid on who is President and who is Secretary of State, where's the U.N. and what's a thirty-year Treasury, or better still, hire a toddler coach to temporarily strip our toddler of all toddler qualities so that our toddler would be utterly untoddlerlike when it came time for the nursery school playgroup evaluation. No, we were not that crazy and besides, our kid wasn't even talking. No, when we started the nursery school process, and when I say "process" I mean that quite literally, emphasis on its secondary definition as something that is continuous, ongoing, *the process of decay, the process of human development*, we were quite certain that, crazy tales of cutthroat competition aside, we would waltz right into any nursery school in the city. Call us naive, call us stupid, arrogant or what you will, but that is what we believed back then, what we *knew* we knew, and we had our reasons.

First off, unlike the Yales, we were kind, thoughtful people, the sort of people who like to build people up, not take them down, the sort who can find common ground with anyone, and if we can't, well, it's not for lack of trying, or at least not usually anyway. Added to that we were smart, and not just book-smart like the Yales who were still hung up on things like who graduated magna (me) and who graduated sum-

ma (them), but we were intelligent, humanists in the broadest sense, people who had passions and had turned those passions into careers. (I am assuming here, for Ben's sake, that investing can count as a passion). We knew a lot about a little, a little about a lot, and, in short, were the sort of people who read not just the *Times* and the *Journal* but also the *Economist*, *Harper's* and the *New York Review*, though it's true that, on occasion, whenever we were awfully busy, for example, we would throw out the whole lot of them without even so much as flipping through.

So there you have us. It's no coincidence, of course, that I have run through our entire laundry list of nursery school attributes without even once mentioning Jonah. *Jonah*, l'étudiant. The boy was two years old when we started the process and was, in our minds anyway, an unmitigated positive if he, unformed and malleable as he no doubt was, counted as anything at all. He was very, very tall, blond, and handsome, the sort of kid whose beauty people consistently remarked upon when he was a newborn but then kept on remarking about even as he grew. Sure he didn't talk, but he was kind and sweet and clearly of extraordinary intelligence. The boy loved Vivaldi ("Spring" in particular), "Acis and Galatea," and "The Goldberg Variations," which he liked to listen to while flipping through his *Complete Collection of Curious George*. He had the best visual memory of all of us, take him anywhere once and he could, if let out of his stroller, find his way right back, and, while he often grunted when he couldn't verbalize what he was thinking, we were convinced this was utterly normal and that as soon as he could talk he would be dazzling us with his thoughts.

All of which is to say that at this point we were still simply just parents, parents with fervent hopes and desperate, projecting dreams, clichéd as all parents inevitably are, in spite of whatever best intentions, in spite of whatever top-notch psychotherapy, and for us, back then, the projecting dreams coalesced around a single entity, one single brick-and-mortar institution. Park and Village. That was our place, I tell you,

that was our destiny. We had known it way back when, back before we'd had Jonah, back before we'd even known each other. We knew it when we each, with our respective lovers, had watched that Woody Allen movie about the rich and fascinating but slightly dysfunctional family that sends its kids there for school. The school's name is never quite spelled out in the movie (what New York-specific details in a pre-Soon Yi movie are?), but to people like me and Ben, people who know the city's topography as well, if not better, than we know anything else, that one panning-shot glimpse of West 13th between Sixth and Seventh said it all. Park and Village. Village and Park. The unassuming facade cobbled together out of equal parts townhouse and tenement. The thick but not-too-clumpy dull maroon Communist paint job. The plain wooden blocks of every shape and size stacked like sentries against the street-front windows. And then, the *pièce de résistance*: the intentionally left unlocked tool cabinet. Even from the street you could see the little box cutters and semi-circular saws dangling on pegs inside. Who wouldn't want a child responsible enough to roam safely in such an environment? Who doesn't dream of making their child useful to society by the age of four? By the time Jonah was through with that place, that Park, that Village, he would be building us all new tables and chairs, scolding us for being so useless, so bourgeois. And that, at bottom I suppose, was the thing we desired, a way out of all of the excess, the crazy, moneyed culture of which we were both a part and apart, a way out of what was undesirable about New York without ever having to leave.

Aside from the fact that we miss the open house, our introduction to Park and Village begins auspiciously enough. Our introduction begins with Linda, an attractive but slightly overweight Hispanic woman with a husky voice, a clear complexion, and cool, turquoise, plastic-frame glasses. We meet on a frantic Tuesday morning, frantic for me and not for her, frantic because I have just come from Bleeker Park where I've

spent nearly an hour listening to all the neighborhood mothers go on and on about the amazing open house that I missed. I rush over to the school not because I think that there might be another open house to sign up for, no, I am much too much of a realist to wish for that, but because I figure that, as with every time I've ever missed a deadline or procrastinated my way into a tight spot, there must be some way around it. Silence, that is the first thing that I notice. Not a single child's cry, not a single child's voice, not a single buzzing hum of a single child's work tool. Nothing but a cool, aquarium-like, bathy, dark silence and Linda, pristine, powerful, proud Linda sitting there at her desk, poised at the edge of our dreams. You can tell from the way that she speaks, the incredibly clear enunciation, the way her voice ironically drops at the end of her sentences, the over-the-top, intense-as-a-cat eye contact: this is no mere receptionist, no, this is a woman with power. Before I left investigative reporting to write fiction and have babies, it was people like Linda who could make or break my stories. Get one of those Lindas to talk and you could find out everything you wanted to know, get access to everyone that you needed. Rub a few Lindas the wrong way and well, you might have no story at all. I say this not because I want to drone on about my previous career and how good I was and how I gave it all up in a risky gambit to work on creating art and life, two of the most unforgiving mediums that there are, but because I want you to understand what I thought was incredibly clear: win over Linda and we, ideal candidates that we were, were a shoe-in.

I tell Linda I've missed the open house and she smiles, her smile as big as a Cheshire's, and then my cell phone rings, Fuck!, "Mom" popping up on my screen.

"Excuse me," I tell Linda. "It's— It's an emergency." I sound like I'm lying, even I think so; Linda rolls her eyes.

I step to the side. "What?" I whisper. I hear intense, child-like whimpering. Jonah! It sounds like Jonah, and for a moment I am convinced

that it *is* Jonah, that he, brilliant boy that he is, has somehow figured out how to reach me and is trying to communicate his displeasure with his new nanny, a Sherpa from Nepal whom I have hired so I can try to get back to my work.

But then the voice. “I can’t take it anymore,” my mother sobs. Not once in my life have I ever heard her like this. No, I have never heard her like this.

“I want to talk,” I whisper, “really, I do, but I’m at a school and—”

“I am not cruel,” she shouts back, still crying. “You’re cruel. Why are you whispering?”

“I can’t talk,” I say. “I’m sorry. I want to, really, but I’ll call you ba—” Click and she’s gone. I want to run out of here, come back another day, but I know I can’t; with these Lindas, things don’t work that way. I walk back over to her desk. “I’m sorry. I, ah—”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I nod, “yeah, sure.” But she can hear it in my voice, I can hear it in my voice. I am starting to crack. “We missed the open house,” I repeat, “really, we wanted to come but—”

“But you’ve got bigger issues, haven’t you? I can see that,” she says. I can’t tell if this is sarcasm or honesty. It’s like my normally hyper-attuned emotional antennae have gotten knocked out in a storm and all stations are coming through unintelligibly scrambled, audio and video both.

“Family, huh?”

I nod. I guess Linda is just doing what I myself like to do, what I used to get paid to do, drawing people out, going with my gut, going with guesswork.

“That’ll do it,” she says matter-of-factly, world-weary. And then nothing. It’s my turn to speak, but I don’t know what to say. Do I reveal something more or do I return to talking about what I have come to talk about, why, in spite of our absence at last night’s open house, we

are so gung-ho about Park and Village? In the face of total uncertainty I pull a Ben, run a quick risk/reward analysis and go for Option A. "It's my mother," I say, and from the way Linda's face lights up, complexion flushing, eyes a-twinkle, I know my gamble was a wise one. I flush too.

"Cancer," I volunteer.

Linda closes her eyes, an appropriately remorseful reaction, then boom! they're open. "Hospice?" she asks, her voice rising expectantly with the "sss" at the end of the word.

God, no, that's what I want to say. My mother, she was just here the other day, in Bleecker Park, me chasing her chase Jonah chasing pigeons away. "Still in treatment," I say. But I am losing her now, I can see it, Linda's eyes dimming with the news, the implied hope that treatment conveys. "But terminal," I add.

"My mother," says Linda, "two years," holding up two fingers in a staunch Richard Nixon-like V.

"Two years?" I raise my voice to sound surprised, impressed.

"Uh-huh. Two *years* on hospice. Can you believe that?" says Linda. "That woman was incredible. Oh that woman."

"Wow," I offer. "That's amazing," unsure of whether she means two years spent in hospice to be a good thing or a bad, perhaps grounds for medical malpractice?

"Mothers," she says, throwing open her hands.

"Mothers," I repeat, mimicking her gesture. She laughs, I do too, and then that's it, the gates are open. I learn Linda has a daughter at the school; I learn Linda pays no tuition. I learn the founder of the school has a book; I learn Linda can sell me that book but is willing to loan it for free. I learn there are too many applicants for preschool; I learn they've decided to limit the number by lottery; I learn the lottery is totally random but that Linda can make sure I win. We shake hands at the end of our chat, we air-kiss each other good-bye. And then I'm done. I open the Lilliputian hand-hewn Park and Village door, look up at the

impossibly bright sliver of Lilliputian Park and Village sky and thank dear god for making me one of the blessed, the beneficiary of totally random, completely aberrant, and absolutely wonderful, great, good fortune.

A few months later and I'm back, this time with Jonah. Just as Linda promised, we've made the cut, won the right to strut our stuff in a toddler playgroup. In an attempt at further ingratiation, I've dressed us both as Commies for the occasion, albeit Commies by way of Madison Avenue, Jonah in Petit Bateau denim overalls and a flannel Ralph Lauren work shirt, me in overpriced jeans and a black made-in-China cashmere hoodie. Up till now we've had a fabulous morning, croissants and hot chocolate at our favorite café, the one where Jonah likes to high-five all the counter help and run his fingers through the tip jar, followed by some neat creative play at home. "Dis." I could have sworn I heard Jonah say that several times, whenever he reached for a little Lego window as we built a little Lego house, replete with little Lego people, on the floor of his room. Dis. Dis, Dis, Dis. If that's not enough to boost my confidence for the playgroup there's the fact that just before we left the apartment Jonah ran back to his room, pulled *If You Take a Mouse to School* down from his shelf and held it out for me to read. I indulged him of course, how could I not, how could anyone not indulge reading? And when I got to the page where the mouse is sitting in a classroom facing a giant blackboard and rows and rows of desks, Jonah looked me in the eye and shook his head, as if to say, Yes, Mommy, don't you worry, I'll do my best in school.

So there you have it. Between that incident and the aforementioned Dises I am so knee-deep in fantasy, so busy imagining a scenario where in Jonah erupts spontaneously, opera-style, into full sentence English in the midst of our play session, that by the time we make it inside the Lilliputian Park and Village lobby, a lobby now teeming with parents and

toddlers, I notice nothing, nothing but the all-consuming, resplendent splendor of the beautiful blond boy standing in front of me—a me-not-me—taking, I know, absorbing, I’m sure, anything and everything and nothing in.

So this is how it ends, that is what I’m thinking, it’s the end of the beginning, the beginning that started with just an idea, a wish, a hazy concept of family, nearly infinite specks of unknown, floating and floating, unkineticized for years, decades, and then splash! the breakthrough, a way out to realization, ethereal, unconnected genetic matter no more. A link, a match-up, a pairing, as random and not random as any pairing that has ever taken place in any synagogue or church or city hall, the instantaneous creation of frantic heart-thumping life-not-yet-life, cramming forty weeks’ preparation for the big coming out, the coming out that is the greatest, most liberating, most decadent debutante ball of them all. And then there you are, absolutely perfect in all your perfect imperfections. I am staring down now at the back of Jonah’s head, this head that once tucked so neatly inside me, so neatly that I couldn’t even really believe it was there until it wasn’t and all I can think is, No need to bother with the mails, thank you. We’ll take our acceptance right here, right now, just verbally, no problem.

“He’s adorable!” Linda shouts from her desk on the other side of the lobby. In all the confusion I hadn’t even noticed she was here. “Absolutely adorable!”

I pick Jonah up, walk over to thank her for the compliment, and as I do can’t help but take in the angry tableau assembled behind her, the stony-faced collage of parents sick with the realization that, yes, even the Park and Village receptionist was once up for grabs.

Inside the classroom the admissions director has taken up a post beside the water table, has got comrades-in-arms stationed in each of the play areas, dolls, blocks, even dress-up and kitchen, meanwhile

Jonah, up till now ebullient, arms-pumping Jonah, freezes just inside the doorway, takes one long semi-circular scan of the room and makes a beeline for the only unattended station there is. He makes a beeline for the books. He grabs hold of *The Runaway Bunny*, motions for me to sit down on the floor and as he scoots into my lap all I can think is, I could not have planned it any better myself. I wrote it down on his application, how much he loved to look at books, how much he loved to hear me read, and now, voilà, all the proof they needed, if they needed any at all.

It is not until we've finished, the bunny having given up and gone home, concluding that escape from mother is well nigh impossible, that I look up and see that every child, absolutely every child—that is, every child but mine—is standing at the water table, holding a naked baby in their arms and joyously, rapturously giving it a bath. All the teachers and the lower school director have converged there now, too, and are weaving in and out, asking questions, patting heads and taking notes, scribbling them down on skinny spiral flip-top pads, the same sort of pads I used to buy in bulk when I was working on a story. And just then, for an instant, I metamorphose back into who I used to be, a dogged, truth-obsessed reporter, only this domestic, scholastic story and not some tale of corporate greed and corruption, this is my assignment, and I am able to see, to really see, to evaluate the scene through non-mother, third-party eyes, and what do I see? I see a roomful of normal, happy children and then this, this outlier, this enigma, this oddity, this boy who is clearly lacking or different in some fundamental way. So what do I do? I brush-shoo this boy who is my boy, my love-doo, my life, my immortality, I brush him from my lap and give him a push, a not-too-gentle push, in the direction of the water, the place where I am one-hundred-percent, not-up-for-any-negotiation certain he belongs, and what does he do? He pushes me back. I push again, this time harder, and as I hold him there, out front, pinned to the fringe of the world, he

turns around and looks at me, his face squished up in a mix of fear and plaintiveness and anger. Don't make me! Please don't do it!

Eventually he goes, slowly, tentatively at first, but go he does and it is then, temporarily relieved from the burden of making him do what he needs to do, what *I* need him to do, that I notice the pairings, how every parent is paired off with their spouse, sitting side by side in teeny wooden chairs watching deliciously, ravenously as their little sperm-and-egg incarnations interact around that table. I am taking this in now, taking everything in and cursing myself for being so confident, so carefree that I let Ben—Ben who takes everything on faith and numbers, Ben who's so mired in earnings season, Ben who felt it didn't matter anyway, Ben who handicapped us at a 75 percent chance-of-acceptance rate—go to some completely-irrelevant-to-the-rest-of-our-lives corporate presentation in midtown and send me here to fend on my own.

Jonah, my poor, perfect Jonah, is zigzagging all over the room now, holding his baby the way a hunter holds a dead rabbit, upside down by one foot. To make matters worse he is also grunting like a madman, exhibiting a level of frustration that he never has before, or perhaps he has and the fault lies with me, that is, I have never seen it for what it was. And then a couple of boys get inspired, ditch the table as well, and begin knocking about the room like, well, like little boys. This is what little boys do, isn't it? It is, isn't it? I start glancing around at the other parents for support, surely someone knows the answer, but no one is meeting my gaze. Perhaps Jonah isn't frustrated, perhaps I'm just imagining it, but I am so desperate for simpatico now that I lean over to the mother sitting closest to me, a mother I have known since Jonah was born but never really liked, never really trusted, a mother whose son is now, like mine, bouncing around the room, and I laugh and say, "Jonah's quite the inspiration, huh?"

Her son is following Jonah toward the tool cabinet now, the tool cabinet that was intentionally left open even for this, this toddler

playgroup, this toddler test, the boys running with their hands held out in front of them, their little, grimy, can't-wait-to-touch-the-vises-and-saws-and-hammers hands, when the director of admissions looks up, sees the future and pounces, it was only just a pop quiz anyway, shutting the cabinet so loudly, so preemptively, so jarringly that nearly everyone in the room, not just adults but children, too, look up in one collective painful twitch. And then the mother of this similarly but not quite as awfully renegade boy, what does she do? "Roman's just saying 'Hi,'" she says, her voice loud and syrupy and sickening. "He's just being friendly. He just wants to talk."

It's time to put the toys away, the director is singing. It's time to put the toys away. It's snack time now, she is ringing a teeny, meant-to-be-soothing, but completely irritating bell, and as I go over to help a struggling Jonah into his seat I notice both that he is the only child who cannot complete this task alone, and, just as worrisome, that I am the only parent not huddled deep in conference with a comrade. Jean is bilingual, well I guess you could say tri- if you count English because then there's French and Russian too. Do you have music? Oh good, because Dora's been playing scales for, well, forever. I have no prepared remarks, no idea what I should say, what is good and great about Jonah disappearing right here, right now, from memory in less than one hour. And yet still I go over and stand beside the director, this keeper of the keys to the park, the village, my park, my village, the one that belongs to me. It's a decision that still comes naturally to me even now, the indelible mark of years spent shmoozing with CEOs, always going up to them whenever I could for even the shortest of chats. So here I am, standing right beside the director now, and what is it she's doing? The wolf in Eileen Fisher clothing is ignoring me to talk to who? To talk to Roman's mother.

"Oh, yes," his mother is saying. "We are very into the block thing. And did I introduce you to my husband? Did I tell you he runs his own firm?"

“Your own firm!” says the wolf. “Well congratulations. And what is it you make?”

I am straining to hear the answer, probably leaning in too close, but no matter. The director is laughing now.

“I always love when it’s something that’s auctionable,” she says. “That’s what I love to hear.”

And then I tap her. I do it reflexively, instinctively, before I even realize that I’m going to do it and can assert some self-control. She turns, looks straight into my eyes in a way that Jonah never has, maybe not even Ben, maybe not even anyone, straight on, not searching, not curious, not questioning, not interested, not even maybe a little. It’s an animal look, the kind of look a dog might give you if you looked up close in his face when he is hungry and you are not food and therefore completely, wholly beside the point.

“Uh-huh,” she says.

Uh-huh? I am speechless, trying to gather my thoughts, to think of what I can say to drag her up out of this hateful, disinterested pose, this pose that has never been posed to me before, people always caring what I think, wanting to make a good impression, I am calling from the *Times*, I am calling you from *Fortune*. I can hear Jonah’s grunting now, refracted across the room and straight into my perfectly attuned, prickly mother ears, and then I hear a comrade, some adult with some degree of power, “You’ve had enough, I think,” she’s saying. “That’s absolutely more than enough!” I look beyond the director, just a quick little glance, and I see Jonah, cheeks bulging like a fish, chocolate smeared all over. He sees me, a flicker of recognition, what I like to think of as a smile, and he picks up his cup, a wax paper cup, a soft, crushable cup, the sort of cup I have never given him before, the sort of cup I never would, and he picks it up, holding it as though he’s about to make a toast or do an experiment, yes, a science experiment! And then he just tosses it up like a ball. He’s got juice all over the table, he’s got juice all over the floor.

"I, I, I need to explain," I tell the director. "I think you've gotten us all wrong. At home, at home Jonah does—Well he does—amazing, truly amazing things! He builds walls out of blocks and not just walls but representative staircases. I don't even show him how, he just does it on his own. And he loves Bach and books and..." And then, and then I hear myself telling her the one thing I never thought I would. I pull a Yale. That is, I tell her I went to Harvard.

She smiles, the smile of someone who went to Tufts.

"How nice for you," she says, and then she turns, turns and walks away.

Tears are welling in my eyes now. I am ashamed in a way I haven't felt since I was a child. I hope you have a child who's as nasty to you as you are to me. It's what my mother used to say back when she was mad or disappointed, and she was well and I was little. But my son is not nasty, I want to say, this is nobody's fault, not mine and not his either. What's happening here, maybe it's like cancer, a biological glitch, something random, undeserved.

I go get Jonah and it's crazy because he suddenly seems so happy. He is smiling, his smile loose and broad, as loose and broad as I've ever seen it. He is staring into my eyes the way I'm always hoping that he will, the way I believe a child should, and I cannot help it, but now it's me, now I'm the one who looks away.

We file back out into the lobby and see Linda, sweet, all-powerful Linda, sitting on the edge of her desk, swinging her legs back and forth like a little girl. "Jonah!" she calls and he runs right to her and they give each other five.

"So," she says matter-of-factly, "will I be seeing you every morning for coffee or what?"

I briefly tell her what's just happened.

"Oh," she says ominously, sliding down off her desk. "Good luck. And I'll need that book back."

We bundle up. Jonah is exhausted now, demanding, via his grunts, that I carry him home. He is heavy and my arms ache and there is a lightly dusting snow, little white Slurpee flakes drifting down one by one from a blank bleak sky the way they do in children's drawings. We are just a few storefronts from the corner when my back gives way and I put him down. He is clutching my neck, flailing his legs, the grunts getting louder and louder and then he gets it, he understands, I am not going to pick him up no matter what. And what does he do? This tired, lifeless boy lets me go and starts to run, heading straight for Seventh Avenue. "Red light!" I scream, a game I never successfully managed to teach. Nothing. "Stop, Jonah, stop!" Nothing still. Stop or say anything, that is what I'm thinking, give me some sign you're really there. Say taxi say cab say car say run just say.

He is just a few steps from the curb now, cars whizzing fast. I have just enough time to break into a miracle mother run and save him from the worst fate that there is, a fate that will surely befall me before it ever comes to him, but before I can do it he makes a perpetual motion U-turn, not stopping, heading right straight for me.

THEO GREENBLATT

Spatial Practice in Grade Four

They are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen.

—Michel de Certeau

EVERY MORNING we cross the double lanes of traffic on Mt. Auburn and head up Hilliard Street, often walking several feet apart, my brother ahead of me. We are just barely traveling together, but in my mind, an invisible thread of familial obligation binds us. Then sometimes my brother snaps the thread; he takes off and hides farther along or, on the worst days, leaves me to walk all the way by myself. He is in control; I know the route, but I dread the idea of negotiating the entire journey on my own and he knows it. I can't turn back—another thread of obligation unfurls and pulls me inexorably toward school. I walk a fine line, unable to shrug off the fear, needy for his tenuous escort, but resentful of his power. He enjoys his superiority; he is shorter than me, but older, faster, stronger, and braver. My only trump card—if he ditches me, I can “tell” on him.

Hilliard Street is where Mr. and Mrs. H. A. Rey live, the people who write the *Curious George* books. A few times we've been invited in. Mrs. Rey is old and no taller than I am. In a muffled German accent she asks gentle questions about what we like to read, and once she gave me a book on constellations. She smells like cinnamon. I love knowing that books are happening inside as I pass their house.

Near the top of the street live the Snows, Tom, Lydia, and what seems like a team of other children. They all have big round heads like real snowmen and ruddy cheeks, especially Mrs. Snow. The Snows have a gigantic squared-off woodie station wagon, and once they offered us a ride to school, but there are so many of them that they don't usually have room for us. We have never been inside their house. The outside has wood shingles, but I always imagine it smooth and light inside like an igloo.

Across the street from the Snows' house is the Loeb Drama Center. This is the outermost edge of the official Harvard sprawl, at least in this direction. Beyond this, reaching into the tree-lined, residential streets of Cambridge, there are plenty of faculty homes and student lodgings, but this oddly geometric, modern building on its narrow plot has a different territorial feel. A red brick wall, taller than we are, marks the boundary, although it doesn't go all the way around the building. Inside the wall, the walkways are laid with brick, and there is a stiff, dried-out little garden formation at the very back. The foyer of the building is surrounded by glass and once we have snuck behind the wall, as we do every morning, we can see into it. But the glass doors are always locked, padlocked chains draped through the handles.

On the side of the building, between the brick wall and the glass, is a large grate set in the ground, and a delicious cloud of hot air rises from it. In the winter this is our first stop on the way to school. We stand on the grate and let the warmth infiltrate our clothing. It envelops my bare knees, blotched from the cold, and lifts my skirt slightly around me. My brother isn't as desperate since he is allowed to wear pants to school, but we never skip this stop. We are hidden from the street here and usually we stand for a minute or so unnoticed, but occasionally the janitor will see us from inside the building and wave his arm threateningly, shouting for us to "Get out of there, or else!" Why is he so angry? We do not have the same ideas about how to occupy this space.

We skirt some other red-brick buildings and continue northwest, zigzagging to avoid the busiest streets. We pass the seminary school and the house where my horse-loving British friend Jane lives, and where I love to visit because they have tea every afternoon, with cups and saucers and three kinds of cookies. There on Berkeley Street is a wooden fence about two feet high, consisting of square posts with long, square beams running between them, one about six inches from the ground and one a few inches from the top of the posts. This is not a fence that keeps anything in or out; it merely delineates property. The fence, painted black, surrounds a relatively large lawn, which in turn surrounds a stately, old yellow house, beginning to look out of place among the modern buildings encroaching from all sides. We walk along the top of the narrow beams, balancing carefully, stopping to rest on the generous square of each post, maybe six feet apart. On one side of the fence is a bottomless pit, on the other, an ocean full of hungry sharks. The tree that overhangs the fence about midway along has poisonous daggers that shoot out from it so we have to ease past it, careful not to make any contact. If the people in the yellow house were to spot us, our fate could not be worse than the sharks or the endless fall.

Where Berkeley meets Garden Street, just past Lloyd Aiello's barn-shaped house, stands the Sheraton Commander Hotel. We approach from the Berkeley Street side and slip in through the delivery entrance, rarely locked. Sidling down the narrow corridor we enter the hotel lobby. To our left, the wide main entrance, couches and chandeliers; to the right, the newspaper stand. As soon as we enter the building I am satisfied; my goal is to get warm. Usually I wait right by the delivery door, not even venturing down the passage, because sometimes one of the bellhops or desk clerks will spot us there and chase us out. If it's not cold out, I might even wait outside. But my brother's goal is to buy candy at the newsstand if it's open. The man who runs it doesn't care who buys candy. He'll wait on my brother as long as no one interferes, but he

won't defend him against hotel security. I am always worried I won't be able to run fast enough, and I can't even contemplate the humiliation of being caught. This early in the morning, anyone who doesn't work at the hotel doesn't really belong in the lobby. Any time of day, children unaccompanied by adults do not belong in the lobby—double jeopardy.

My brother won't buy candy for me—this is my punishment for being “chicken.” Sometimes with a candy bar and sometimes without, we scoot back up the delivery corridor, out through the heavy door and across the street, where an L-shaped alley has been created by the construction of a new office building. The building shields the alley from the wind, so we have adapted this passage into our daily route. Besides, once Tom Snow found a *Playboy* magazine on the ground back there, so my brother insists on checking the trash cans daily.

Emerging from the short end of the “L” onto Garden Street, we cross at the light in front of the Longy School of Music—a different color brick wall—and race to the Hotel Continental. We are about two-thirds of the way to school. This hotel has a small, square, glassed-in entry that sticks out from the building, with a door on either side. Inside the glass cubicle, three wide steps lead down into the hotel lobby. Here is another brief moment of warmth. Sometimes we linger for a bit before opening the second door and re-emerging. The doormen in their gray-blue uniforms with rows of polished buttons rarely come out to hail cabs this early. They are deep inside the lobby with their coffee and the morning paper, uniforms unbuttoned at the neck. They watch us warily, but they don't get up. It bothers them that we come in one side and go out the other—it's too much like a game, I think. The hotel is a serious place.

We turn up Shepherd Street, into Walker. We have moved back into university territory. Just a block from the back doors of Peabody Elementary School, our destination, along the side of the Radcliffe dorms, are long rows of bike racks protected by high walls of the ubiquitous

red brick, with gravel on the ground, marking the border between public and private space. When it's warm enough to ride our bikes we lock them here, where they are less likely to get stolen. In the winter, it's just an out-of-the-wind spot, the last stop before we get to the school building, where unwillingly but emphatically we *do* belong.

One May day we come back to the Radcliffe bike racks after school and all the bikes are gone, ours and everyone else's, too. When the Harvard students leave, it turns out, the maintenance staff gathers up all the bicycles left behind and locks them in the basement of the music building, to be claimed, or not, in the fall. Somehow we track down a maintenance man with a key who takes us to the vast underground storage area and reluctantly allows us to identify and claim our bikes—they are obviously not the bikes of college students. He tells us that if he ever finds them on Radcliffe property again, he will lock them up for good. He looks like he might lock us up for good in that dim, dusty basement.

Our bikes don't belong there, and neither do we.

In September, my brother rides his bike to school and boldly locks it behind the red brick wall again, tires jammed into the gravel. I leave my bike at home and walk to school alone.

CHARLOTTE PENCE

How to Measure Distance

How to Measure Distance*

I. Only Use Light Years When Talking to the General Public

or to squirrels testing spring between two branches. Or to a new mother saddened by thoughts of earth and its death; sun's death; her death. She watches her husband leave the room for a burp cloth, wonders, could she do it without him? What's the measurement of distance between two people growing too close, too quickly?

II. The Measures We Use Depend on What We Are Measuring

Distance between parents? Hills? Rogue comets? Within our solar system, distance is measured in Astronomical Units. Or "A.U.," an abbreviation that sounds similar to the "ow" of a toe stub. Or similar to the sound of a mother teaching the beginning of all sound. "Ah, eh, ee, oo, uu." Watch her mouth widen,

purr, and close. This is the measurement
for what we call breath.

*III. For Most Everything Else—Stars, Galaxies, Etc...—the Distance Unit Is
the Parsec (pc). This Is a Convenient Unit*

for gathering groceries, grains in silos,
gasses we cannot package and discount.

*This is convenient, too, when measuring
stars' distances by triangulation.*

*1 pc = 3.26 light years =
about the distance to the nearest star.*

An equal sign leading to an “about.”

An estimate. A close enough.

Close enough feels safer than being wrong.
Or exact. “Close enough,” we say of that
asteroid skimming past our atmosphere’s skin.
“Close enough,” we say when he returns
with a guest towel.

IV. For Distances Within our Galaxy or Other Galaxies, It Is Kiloparsecs

She is unsure what fatherhood will do
to him. Accurate measurements require
one to know where one stands, where one belongs,
where one imagines going. Rub the toe
of the blue shoe into the dust. See how

the dust is not a bit bluer. The shoe,
a bit browner. Distance = a thing
between and against.

V. The Exception to These Units Is When One Is Studying a Smaller Object

Father to mother to early zygote.
Branch to squirrel to tail-twitch and release.
Knee to toe to spring mud too soft to flake.
No units for these.

VI. One Might Say, "Its Radius Is 5 Solar Radii," Meaning It Is 5 Times the Size of our Sun

Her fear is five times the size of sun, five
times the hours of sleep or lack thereof.
Five times the huddle of father, mother,
child. Five times the energy created
for one nap as opposed to the distance
of that nap, that leap.

VII. She Wants Answers

But is realizing that won't happen.
She fears the truth that nothing stays the same.
Rashes fade, yet skin will prickle again.
Cries will quiet, yet the quiet will cry.
The man will leave, yet the same man will leave
again. That's why eyes are bloodshot, why she
answers questions as if she doesn't care.
All answers are "almost" or "about"—

everything moving. And this thing called light
years is a distance she can't comprehend,
yet somewhere she squirms at one forever-
changing end of it.

**Lines in italics are from NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center website written by Jonathan Keohane.*



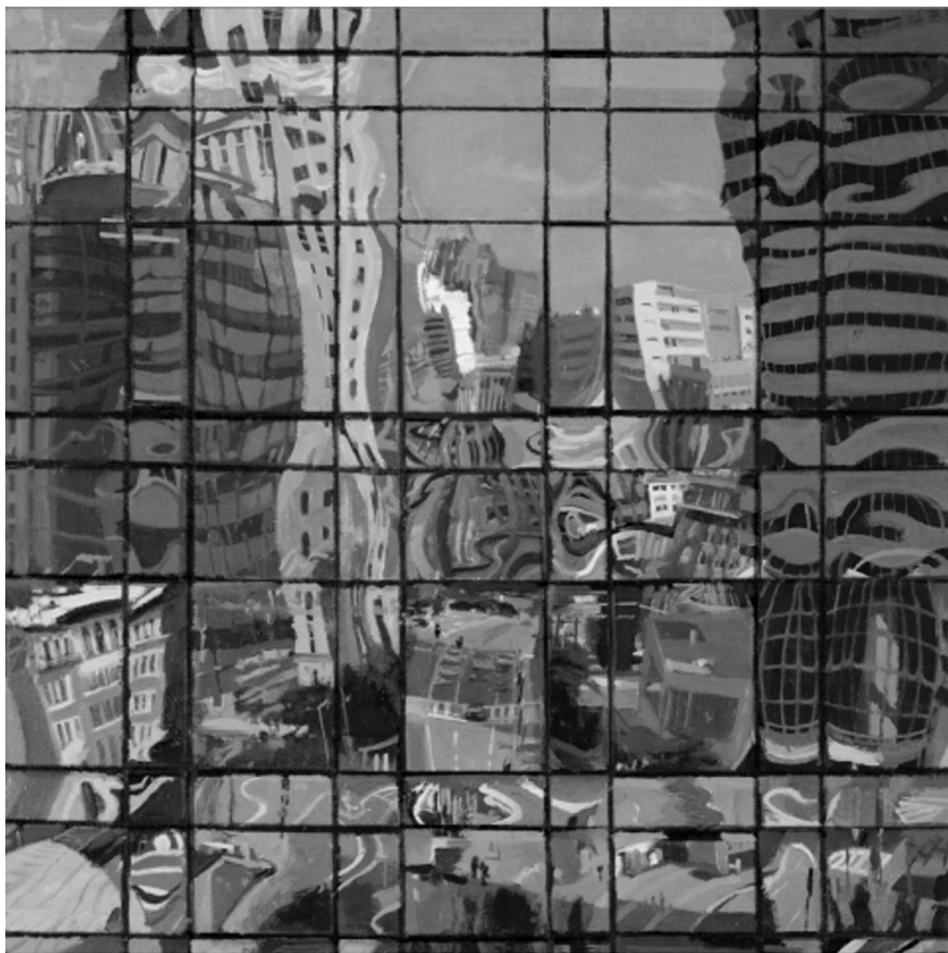
Richard Raiselis, *Greenway at Gridley St. (detail)* 2012-3,
oil on linen, 48 in. x 42 in. (whole). Courtesy Gallery
NAGA.



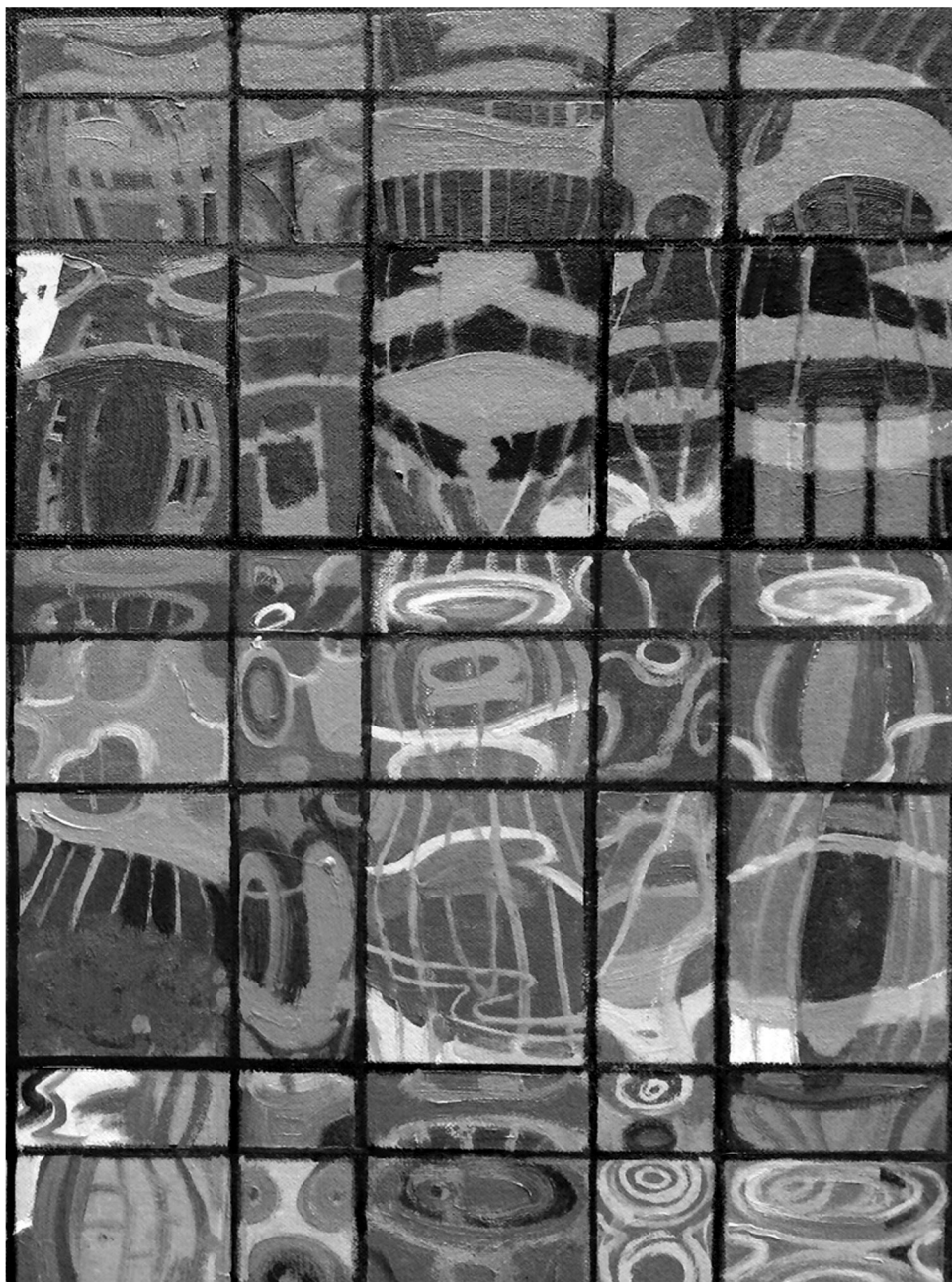
Richard Raiselis, *Blue 'n' Boogie*, 2013, oil on linen, 34 in. x 24 in. Courtesy Gallery NAGA.



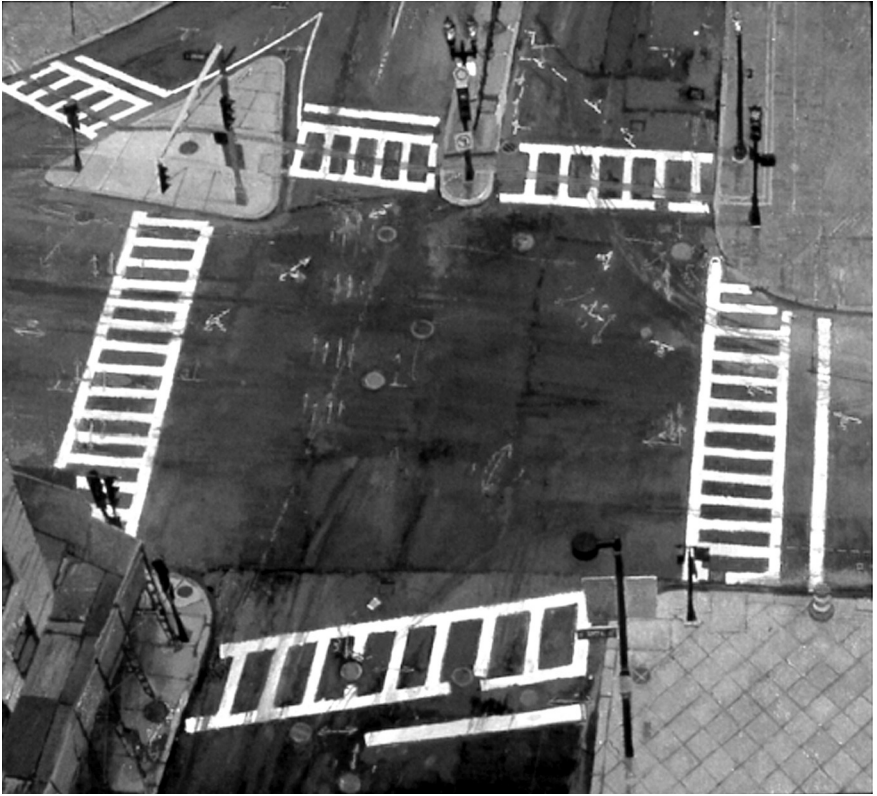
Richard Raiselis, *Square One*, 2012, oil on canvas, 15 in. x 15 in. Courtesy Gallery NAGA.



Richard Raiselis, *Dewey Square*, 2012, oil on
linen, 16 in. x 16 in. Courtesy Gallery NAGA.



Richard Raiselis, *Windows and Walls (detail)* 2013, oil on linen, 80 in. x 50 in. (whole). Courtesy Gallery NAGA.



Richard Raiselis, *Palimpsest: Site of the Boston Massacre*, 2005,
oil on linen, 22 in. x 24 in. (whole). Courtesy Gallery NAGA.

DAVID WAGONER

The Death of the Sky

After a blood-red evening, the sky fell
as silently as the light it had shed on us
through all our other nights. It scattered
its fire on fields and hills and cities, the Moon first,
her face spinning from full to dark, then Venus,
unveiled and melting, Mars in a burned shambles,
and Mercury with featherless heels, the rubble
of asteroids, the ice-laden, blurred foxfire
of comets, the wind-blown beard of Jupiter
spun down and around and through
and intermingled with the saturnalia of Saturn,
Uranus castrated again by Chronos
and dismembered, Neptune
plunging, drowning, Pluto tumbling
dead as a stone, and from the broken belt
of the Zodiac, the Ram and the Bull
brought down to slaughter, the Twins
parting, the Crab clawless, the Lion
and Virgin crumpled together, snarling and weeping ashes,
the balanced Scales unhinged, the Scorpion's tail
now stinging only itself, the Archer
bent like his bow by the dying Goat,
the mouth of the fish

gaping beside the Water-carrier, and we stood
dazed in that black night, and in the morning
the Sun rose white into an empty whiteness.

RALPH SNEEDEN

Two Short Films of My Father

For Ellen Bryant Voigt

I. Liberation of Stalag Luft One: Barthes, Germany, 1945

Like any lyric, nothing happens;
a core fueled by something outside
the interminable moment—lines
of soldiers filing without origin,
that slow parade of boyish smokers
trudging rags of mismatched uniforms
and smirks toward but not into
the flank of a waiting plane. I trust
he is among them, have to watch
with the sort of faith his parents
mustered poring over censored
letters, longing between the lines,
bored evocations of boredom: he was
alive, but wasn't free. And we
never see them board the plane.
Like any narrative, it must be followed
for the purpose of learning what happens,
because something does. It has
already, yet it never can.

II. *En Route, Olympic Games: London, 1948*

Whoever aims the camera struggles
 to keep the horizon level. The ship
 pitches, rights itself like the world
 in which they've lived, a liner's cargo
 of nervous men in uniform going
 overseas again. Scripted calisthenics
 on the deck above the silent bow-
 wave of black, hull-peeled water.
 Cigarettes, self-conscious chatting,
 elbows on the gleaming brightwork,
 bangs lifting. And there, swinging
 around his neck, the religious medal
 he wore throughout the war and after.
 In the tropics they told him to leave it
 on the beach; flashing, it would only
 lure the barracudas to his throat.
 Though I didn't believe in the power
 of its little saint I always
 wanted one like it, silver pendant
 to chafe the chests of all my tees,
 wear holes my mother, in disgust,
 would widen with her finger folding
 laundry on their bed. A talisman
 that might keep me from drowning,
 or at least catch light through water
 while I swam, like him, from shore.

RICHARD SONNENMOSER

Our Love Comes in Like Milk

ONCE, A DOCTOR, a young resident, said to us, “This is as hard as it gets. This is the hardest thing you’ll ever experience in your life.” We were about two weeks into our baby’s hospitalization. And I thought, first, *Yes, yes, that is so true. Thank you for acknowledging the truth!* And then: *How can he know? How can any of us know?*

In the days leading up to the arrival of our child, I’d talked to the pros, my friends, men who were already fathers. None said he successfully anticipated what having a child might mean to his life, and so I worried mostly about the lawn.

My wife, Kori, and I learned we were expecting in October. We walked around the house we eventually bought, over two visits, for about ninety minutes in November. We moved out of our apartment in December. By February we’d adopted a dog, and by late spring I was devoting myself to the weeds.

I don’t recall loving this chore as a child, but at thirty-four, a first-time homeowner, a father-to-be, digging up dandelions seemed joyous. The yard had been dotted with yellow flowers, these plants that crowd

out the grass, and now it wasn't. A feeling of progress, I suppose. Certainly an illusion.

On our nightly walks with our dog, a rust-colored Miniature Pinscher named Frankie, Kori and I talked about the seahorse. We imagined how our lives might change. We didn't pretend to know anything for sure. The pros said, "If it's a boy, point the penis down. Remember that: point it down. If it's a girl, remember: wipe front to back. That's pretty much all you need to know. Oh, and say good-bye to sleep. Oh, and relax."

Kori goes into labor on her due date, Friday, May 30, in the small hours. Once the sun's up, we take Frankie for a walk. Then we sit on our porch and write a letter to our child. We tell him or her how we've been calling him or her the seahorse. We leave a blank at the top, where we'll fill in the name once he or she is born. Most of the letter is about our pets. We struggle to describe the child's parents.

Over the next sixty-five hours, Kori will labor, with a brief hiatus on Saturday afternoon, at our house, a hotel in St. Joseph, Missouri, a hospital from which we'll be sent home when her labor stalls out on Saturday morning, and then again at our house—where she also sleeps for a while and eats a spaghetti dinner—and then finally at a second, more local, hospital, St. Francis.

In April and May, as part of my preparation, I fantasized about fighting pushy medical personnel. I practiced saying, "Let's wait," or "Can we think about it for half an hour?" or "May we see that policy in writing?" On the first of June, events become memories before I even register they're happening. I agree to everything. This must be the taped version, I keep thinking, the one where I'm stripped of my agency.

Our son is born at 4:44 p.m.

He is gray.

He has the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck.

He is floppy.

I thought the first thing the doctor would say would be, “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” I assumed that was part of the training our culture, if not medical schools and residencies, has provided. What the doctor says, to the room, to everyone and no one, is “Help me! Help me!”

Another doctor rushes in to help the obstetrician and the nurses resuscitate the baby. Two nurses and two doctors. Rachel, a doula we’ve hired, and I are, for twenty minutes or so, in charge of my wife’s health. We talk at her face. I keep my head close to hers. Useless, unable to move, I cannot will myself to walk around the room. Our baby is resuscitated, the doctor will later tell me on the phone, for fifteen minutes.

Whenever I look over, our child isn’t moving; he isn’t crying. But he’s not gray anymore; he’s pinkish white. He looks like a realistic doll.

I say many things to my wife, I’m sure. Rachel is telling me I need to reassure Kori, to talk to her. Maybe I tell Kori that she did a good job, that I’m proud of her. In the next few weeks, I’ll tell her she’s done a hundred really difficult things in a row.

Eventually Kori’s asking if the baby is all right. I don’t know what to tell her. Rachel says she’s seen stillbirths before and this baby doesn’t look like a stillbirth.

Someone answers a question. The baby is a boy.

What’s his name, the doula wants to know, in a singsong voice. I can tell she’s trying to sound excited; she’s worried about morale.

Kori says it, sort of breathlessly, and I tell myself, *Remember the way she says his name for the rest of your life*. I’m worried about morale, too. Remember that sound. Remember it. Oh, it’s beautiful when she says his name: Theodore. His name’s Theodore.

In *Breastfeeding: A Parent’s Guide*, Amy Spangler advises mothers and newborns to stay together, sharing a room, twenty-four hours a day. She

says baby's first attempt at breastfeeding should not be delayed, especially not by more than an hour. The book instructs: "Watch your baby, not the clock."

For the first few days after birth, the breastfeeding baby gets colostrum. Then, as early as a couple days after delivery and sometimes as much as two weeks later, transitional milk, spurred by the hormone prolactin, arrives. Transitional milk contains more calories, more fat. When medical people ask whether or not a mother's milk has "come in," this is what they're asking about: transitional milk. Typically a mother's milk "comes in" about four days after delivery.

For an hour and fifteen minutes, goop is being suctioned from Theodore. Nurses and doctors are doing things to him that I don't understand. He's measured toe-to-tip in the old-world way, by holding him upside down by his ankles. "I've seen a lot of babies delivered," Rachel tells me, "but I've never seen that before. I think they're trying to get him going." He isn't stable enough to be held to his mother's chest, we're told.

Then, after an hour and fifteen minutes, he briefly is. He lies on Kori. He's a good-looking baby. He has a lot of hair.

I convince myself all is well. We are fine. He is fine. Everything's fine.

Rachel takes a picture of me, smiling, talking on the phone with my parents. The smile, I later convince myself, was in response to my five-year-old niece, Petra, who grabbed her grandmother's phone and shouted, "I love you," before joyfully handing the phone to the floor.

I hold him. I put my face very, very close to his face, and then the nurses check Theodore's blood sugar. The glucometer reads 5 mg/dL. "That's the lowest it goes," a nurse says, "so let's call it five or below."

A blood glucose reading below 45 mg/dL, we'll eventually be told, may cause brain damage.

Like much else in the medical care of neonates, there's no consensus about which blood sugar readings are dangerously low and which are a tad too low for comfort; nor is there a universal protocol for how hypoglycemia at birth should be treated. The "normal" range for infant blood sugar, according to Theodore's various doctors, either starts at 45 or 60 or 70 mg/dL. Two weeks after his birth, we'll be informed by an endocrinologist that Theodore's blood sugar, with his condition, should never fall below 70 mg/dL while controlled with IV glucose and medication.

On June 1, this 5 mg/dL reading simply seems a mistake.

We ask if there might be something wrong with the glucometer. The nurses try a different one. Same result. They take his blood sugar again. And again. And again. Each time, he has nearly undetectable levels of blood sugar. He's critically hypoglycemic.

"Why does he look OK?" I ask. "Shouldn't he be passing out?"

"Yeah, that's what we're wondering," a nurse says.

When I ask again a few hours later, another nurse says, "It's odd that his body's not shutting down. I'm surprised he's functioning."

Weeks later we'll learn a common feature of sugar blindness is a lack of observable symptoms, sometimes referred to as *hypoglycemia unawareness*. That term makes some sense for sufferers of diabetes mellitus. I prefer the term *silent hypoglycemia* for infants with congenital hyperinsulinism. One theory for asymptomatic hypoglycemia: the counter-regulatory hormones, which cause symptoms such as lethargy or jitteriness, are blunted by the inappropriate release of insulin. The epinephrine and cortisol and glucagon, which alert most of us that our blood sugar is falling by making us look and feel sick (as well as raising our blood sugar), aren't reliably released in a baby with a malfunctioning pancreas, a broken insulin pump.

The nurses take him to the nursery and feed him sugar water with an eyedropper. I put on a paper gown and mask and gloves and go in to

see him. A nurse asks if I'd like to feed him sugar water with an eyedropper. I do.

His blood glucose rises to 10 mg/dL.

He's started on IV fluids: saline and dextrose. D10, they call it, which is also the name of a Soviet tank gun, ten percent dextrose. His blood sugar is still low, in the 30s. I'm as ignorant about blood sugar as I can be. Certainly he'll be joining us in our room at the hospital soon, so we can practice being parents for a night, before heading home. "Thirty is good, right?"

A nurse says, "Well, it's good that it's going up. That's what's good."

Somehow, I don't really hear her. I can't read the subtext.

Somehow, because I think it's important, because I don't want to wait any longer, I send a text message to everyone in my address book announcing our son's birth.

Somehow, because it's been a while, because I don't know what else to do, I go home and let the dog out. I eat a big plate of leftover spaghetti. A ridiculous amount of spaghetti. Like maybe three pounds of microwaved spaghetti.

Midnight on June 2—about seven hours after my son was born, before I'd really thought much about calling him Theodore or Teddy or Theo—I'm outside, in the rain, pleading with Frankie to poop. I am holding Cosmo, an indoor cat, who doesn't mind the rain; he will escape into any weather. Because Frankie rhymes with Yankee, we also call him Doodle. And now I'm saying, "Please go, Doodle. Please."

Doodle doesn't go. It's raining. Doodle doesn't go in the rain. Doodle also doesn't go, if he can help it, in the snow. Or on a really cold day. Or in grass that's too long.

Because he doesn't go in the rain, what I ask of my mother, a little after midnight on June 2, is to come up and let the dog out as early in the morning as possible. Could someone, she or my dad, come to the house

at six in the morning? I'm worried that the dog has gone too long. I'm worried the dog-sitter, to whom I've sent a text message, won't get the message until later in the day. Frankie Doodle hasn't really done what he needs to do in a few hours, and now it's raining—and he's certainly not going to now.

Yes, the baby's being transferred to a children's hospital. Yes, they believe something's wrong with him. I try to say what the doctor had said to me. He'd talked mainly about infection. I talk about white blood cells, band cells. I talk about blood sugar. But what's really important, I want my mother to know, what would really make me feel all right, is if someone would worry about Frankie, this dog I love very much, pooping outside as much as I am worried about Frankie pooping outside.

The transport team from Children's Mercy arrives. They are dressed like the X-Men, which is both comforting and not comforting. I wonder whether I am, though I don't know my son yet, beginning to grieve for him. In the first few days, most of my thoughts are troubled by this phrase: *our son whom we don't really know*.

A grave transport nurse says Theodore's X-ray reveals a total anomalous pulmonary venous return, a heart defect wherein the veins connecting lungs to heart don't attach normally to the left atrium. He says that, because of this heart defect, he needs to intubate our son so that if something happens on the ride to Kansas City the transport team will be protected. This news is delivered with such certainty we don't know how to respond. Finally my wife says, "Well if you're asking if we want you to—" and the transport nurse cuts her off.

"I'm not asking for permission," he says. "We're going to intubate him."

Eventually we'll learn he doesn't have this heart defect. Over the next few weeks, we'll be told Teddy has an acylcarnitine deficit, a problem with his potassium regulation, that he's not gaining enough weight, that

he's not receiving enough protein through breast milk, and that he has a neurologic defect that's causing him difficulty with breastfeeding. "He doesn't have a neurological problem," a doctor will tell us, after a lactation consultant had said Teddy needed a neurologic exam. "He's just an angry baby," the doctor said. "Babies in the NICU have a right to be angry."

A nurse asks if we want to take pictures of Theodore before his ambulance ride. At the time, this feels like the funeral director asking if we want to take one last look before the lid closes or the men with shovels arrive.

I take a picture. It's the one you think it is, with all the tubes and wires. What I don't expect, what I'm not prepared for, is how normal I feel. I'm not so used to seeing Theodore unencumbered by tubes and wires that the sight of him with tubes and wires is shocking. I'm not surprised by how he looks intubated.

Briefly I consider trying to convince my wife we should sleep for an hour or two at St. Francis and then drive to the next hospital. As reasonable an idea as this might be, the fear of making a mistake—choosing wrongly—overwhelms me, and so we do what seems to be what later, as well as we can predict, we'll be least likely to regret.

Here's how I'm thinking: with each decision, we must weigh what, if all goes wrong, we'll be least likely to regret.

We sign forms saying we've refused to watch the don't-shake-the-baby video. A nurse gives Kori a bottle of ibuprofen from her purse.

An hour and a half later, a little before six in the morning on June 2, when we arrive at Children's Mercy, I park our car in a circle drive in front of the hospital. We tell a security guard our baby's been brought here. He says we can leave our car where it is for a minute, but then we'll have to move it. We're told to find a pink elevator and to take it to the third floor. We're buzzed in to the NICU.

Theodore, we learn, has just arrived.

We're given a tour of the unit, and, when we approach the room of babies where our baby is, the transport team's giving a large group of people in scrubs and white coats the story of Theodore's life so far. The transport nurse says, "Thirty-one-year-old mother," and then the communications specialist showing us around realizes they aren't ready for us yet, and so we're shown where to wash our hands.

I'm not surprised that we turn and walk away, so as to not make anyone in the room uncomfortable with our presence. I don't think it strange that I don't see my son again for thirty minutes, an hour, two hours. I don't really know. I wasn't watching our baby or the clock. I'm not surprised that I don't grab anyone by the lapels and demand to know how his ambulance ride went; nor do I politely inquire. These facts, too, don't seem bizarre.

Eventually, I will learn. No movement feels entirely natural, entirely correct. No choice is unambiguously the right choice.

The communications specialist shows us a room where we can sit and wait for a doctor. She leaves us and then, a few minutes later, bursts into the room. She says, "Someone's looking for you." The security guard's not happy about our car being parked in the circle drive. "He's looking for you," she says, raising a finger at me. "He's interested in finding you."

I sprint down the hallway, away from the love of my life and my newborn son, and I don't think it strange at all that, so our car might not get towed, I'm running away from them.

Early on, nurses and doctors would ask my wife if her milk had "come in." Kori would say, "I don't know. Maybe." Sometimes, a lactation nurse would describe it in more detail, ask further questions; she'd describe various physical sensations and ask Kori if what had just been described was what she was feeling. I'd think about that eye test where you're supposed to say if one or another image is better or worse or "about the same." I nearly always thought the images were "about the same."

At first, I think in days. I tell friends how each day compares to the previous. I anticipate the days until we might be able to go home. Early on, all I think about is going home. For a week or so, my story begins, “We had a good hour on Teddy’s birthday, and then everything got confusing.”

Monday, the day after his birth, I spend the morning trying to find my wife a place to sleep. Once Theodore’s first blood sugar reading had been taken, she’d been exiled; no longer was she “Kori,” a patient whose medical needs and well-being were interesting to caregivers; she was now one among many “moms” in the NICU.

Finally, near noon, I manage to get us a “nap room” at the hospital. We leave the NICU, and there, in the waiting room, are my parents and sister and nephew. When I see them, I feel the need to entertain. I want them to smile and laugh and to not look like our baby has died. I want them to say, “Congratulations!” and smack me on the back.

Kori is confused about why they’re there, how they knew to show up. In the elevator she says, “Why’d they look so worried?”

Monday night I drive to get my wife pizza. It is *very important* to get my wife a meal, I think. She’s just delivered our baby, and she hasn’t really eaten anything since the spaghetti. Guilt floods: I’d eaten so much more spaghetti than her! And then, while driving to the pizza place, I see a jogging trail. I see so many beautiful dogs on walks with their happy owners, and I sob.

Frankie. I miss Frankie.

The noises I’m making, I realize, are similar to the sounds of my wife in labor.

We get a room at the Ronald McDonald House; these places, we learn quickly, are an unbelievably good idea that we had neglected to think much about for most of our adult lives.

By Tuesday, three or four people at the hospital have told us we have to take care of ourselves. They are, of course, referring to Kori. “If you’re not taking care of yourself,” a lactation nurse says while petting Kori’s arm, “then how can you possibly take care of your baby?” (We’re not

taking care of our baby, we'll say to each other later. *Other people* are taking care of our baby.) Kori needs to take care of herself. I need to take care of her. Three or four people have told her she needs to make sure to eat. By Tuesday, three or four people have told me that my job is to take care of her by making sure she eats—and drinks. As a breastfeeding mom, she has a special privilege; she may drink water at Teddy's bedside. She's given a large plastic cup, and my job is to fill this plastic cup with ice water every few minutes. Once, a nurse tells me that I'm doing a very good job refilling the ice water every few minutes, and I don't even consider whether or not she's condescending.

After every breastfeeding session, a nurse would ask, "How'd he do?" Early on, Kori would describe how Theodore did, his demeanor, how *well* he was feeding; his interest, his desire. Eventually we learned they were asking for a number. For how many minutes did he eat?

Eventually we learned to say he'd eaten for "about ten minutes." That would prevent the nurses from being required to ask if they needed to heat up a bottle.

Eventually I think in weeks. The first week, the week we thought he'd had an infection and then he'd been diagnosed with congenital hyperinsulinism. The second week, the wasted one, with the endocrinologist's cornstarch experiment and the attempts to wean him off the IV sugar. The third week, a new endocrinologist, preparing to go to Philadelphia, the first of the genetic tests coming back: ABCC8 mutation. The fourth week, our first in Philadelphia, reconfirming the diagnosis with a fast, new central line being placed, our son getting the nasogastric tube. The fifth week, his PET scan, more genetic tests coming back, learning that he wouldn't have to have most of his pancreas removed. The sixth week, waiting. The seventh week, his surgery, his recovery. The eighth week, stabilizing, the "cure" fast which he failed, getting ready and then finally going home.

Not that much of our lives, really: 55 days. Born on the first of June, home before August.

Without discussing it, without orchestrating a plan, Kori and I figured out how to trade off days of breaking down. In the end, of course, I took more of these days than was my share.

I ask a NICU nurse how parents who aren't college professors manage, especially since so many patients at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia come from other states, other countries. "They don't," she says. "One stays back wherever they're from, maybe visits once or twice. Somebody's got to work."

"We're lucky," I tell her. "We're lucky we weren't teaching this summer."

I'm surprised I never see NICU parents collapsing or blowing up. I ask one of the communications specialists in Kansas City why I haven't seen more mental breakdowns, more displays of frustration and sadness and rage. "Do you see a lot of freakouts," I ask her, "parents who aren't keeping it together very well?"

"Not really," she says. "You'd think we'd see a lot of that, but we don't."

Many of the frustrations are too subtle to warrant explosions of feeling. Once, Kori came back to Teddy's bedside and described a poster hanging in a lactation room: a "Top Ten" list of the benefits of breastfeeding. Women using a lactation room in a NICU might be interested, certainly, in breast milk's role in fostering a healthy immune system or preventing obesity. But how would it be encouraging, we wondered, for a new mother whose baby's in intensive care, a mother who's pumping milk to be later fed through a tube or a bottle, perhaps a few months in the future, *or not at all*—how helpful is it for such a woman to be reminded the number one benefit of breastfeeding is the establishment of a bond between mother and child?

Once, apropos of nothing, I said, "I think I'm depressed."

"What did you say?" my wife said.

"I said I'm depressed."

She nodded, like, sure, of course, why wouldn't you be.

And yet we know we're lucky. We're at Teddy's bedside while he does some age-appropriate infant thing; meanwhile, our nurse is on the phone about a new admission, the details of which sound daunting, scary, untreatable. Our colleagues and a graduate student are taking care of our house, our garden, our lawn, our pets. When I write an email thanking everyone, I resort to the cliché about not wanting to list names since I'm worried about leaving someone out.

A few weeks after we'd arrived in Philadelphia, my wife and I were leaving the hospital when we saw a woman stumbling from a cab near the main entrance, vomiting, unable to stand. She pawed the pavement. She's dying, I thought. She's dying, and the cab driver brought her to the nearest hospital. I ran inside to get the attention of a security guard while Kori tracked down a wheelchair. When I returned outside, a woman pushing the dying woman in the wheelchair said, "She's not actually sick. She just found out her daughter's been brought here. She's just having a hard time coping."

One, only one. That's the only one I saw.

Every other parent—even in surgery waiting, even carrying a crying child through the halls of the hospital, even waiting in line at the hospital cafeteria next to a child with the IV stand and the telltale headwear of the cancer patient—had the officious look or the dazed look or the placid, almost bored, look of *Well, we're here*.

My theory is that most parents put it off. They wade through the care conferences and the long days at the bedside. They don't cry when the news is delivered; they postpone. They don't get sick at the hospital entrance. They get sick in their cars. They find their way to the cafeteria; they mumble, if they're lucky, to someone they love, about doctors or lactation consultants or social workers over French fries and coffee. They sit in the shower at the Ronald McDonald House, unwilling to get out and dry themselves off and get dressed and make the walk to the hospital.

*

Frankie was afraid of my dad, who came up early in the morning on June 2 while I was watching my wife fall asleep on a couch in the Family Resource Center at Children's Mercy. He nipped at my dad's heels. He barked. He didn't go outside. That morning, the dog-sitter later informed me, Doodle pooped on the carpet.

I learn at the end of July that our dog fairly regularly pooped in the house while we were gone. In the days before we get home, we learn a friend has paid to have our carpets cleaned. While we were gone, he bit at least two adults and one child—nervous, perhaps, about all the different people who were stopping by to take care of him. Thankfully, our friends knew not to tell us that Frankie was having trouble making it outside in time or that he was biting people. Everyone knew that that might send us somewhere we wouldn't come back from.

When we get home, the time for dandelions has passed. Rather, the time for dandelion blooms has passed. We have new weeds. Lots of white clover. Foxtails. More troubling is the buffalo bur in the garden, plants as spiny and thick as sapling trees. I read they can grow as tall as two feet, but ours are five feet tall and have deep taproots. My father tells us they're pasture weeds, and he thinks the topsoil we bought must have come from grazing pasture, which, he wants us to know, is a good thing. I'm amazed at what can grow in two months. Some I manage to pull from the raised beds. Others have spines that pierce my gloves, and so I cut them as close to their bases as possible with a limb pruner. "Will that take care of them?" Kori asks.

"Probably not. I don't really know what I'm doing."

In our absence, some of the furniture has been moved around. My son's dresser drawers have been painted blue. The dog seems less hesitant around strangers. The cat still wants to escape. Our house, the one we walked around in for an hour and a half before we bought it, stands. We're lucky, we keep telling each other. Nothing's really changed. Fifty-five days.

We're reluctant to celebrate. That's what we told our parents after Teddy's surgery. That's still where we're at: happy to be home but reluctant to celebrate. Hesitant, maybe, is the better word.

After his partial pancreatectomy, which removed about five percent of his pancreas, Theodore failed his "cure" fast. His blood sugar dropped below 70 mg/dL after eight hours, and he dropped below 50 mg/dL shortly thereafter. Once in a while, for no reason that doctors have been able to explain, he becomes truly hypoglycemic, with a blood sugar below 50 mg/dL, after fasting for three hours. During the hospital fast, when he went hypoglycemic, he had an inappropriate, there's-too-much-insulin-here response to a glucagon injection. So our best guess is that there's a spot, another lesion on his pancreas, some malfunctioning cells. His body still releases too much insulin, even as his blood sugar drops.

Sometimes, when someone asks, I explain this and tell them, "I think we'll just have an anxious first year. Sometimes, apparently, the problem basically resolves itself."

Most of the time, I say, "He's fine. Very stable. Much better. He's fine."

Guilt floods.

Theodore, before your mom and I drove down to Children's Mercy, before we saw you again, before we got to the place where you'd live for the next three weeks, before you were transported to another hospital, in Philadelphia, where you'd live for the next month, before in those first few days of your life we approached your bassinet, cautiously, because we were convinced you might not be all right when we got to you each time—before all this, before we left Maryville, we drove through McDonald's and your father tried to order some breakfast item, because he obviously hadn't eaten enough spaghetti, but they didn't have it or it was too early, and then he begrudgingly just had coffee. But it was probably a large, so that's good.

And:

On Thursday, June 5, we enacted a plan; your grandmother, who was watching our pets, would come to the hospital so she could spend more time with you and your mother. And so the dog wouldn't have to be alone for too long, and so I could retrieve some clothes for me and Mom, I'd drive home. I'd take a look at the lawn. I'd only be gone a few hours.

Then, a little before five p.m., your mother called. She was crying. She said I needed to get back to the hospital right away. She said things weren't going well. She explained what had happened—with your hypoglycemic episode, and the director of the NICU and a nurse getting into an argument at your bedside about hanging a new IV bag, and the blood that was drawn for “critical labs,” and what the resident physician had said about the amount of insulin that was detected in the blood when you were hypoglycemic.

On the day you were diagnosed, I wasn't there. I was two hours away by car. I was checking on the dandelions. I was hanging out with the dog.

I can imagine it: years from now, my son reading about the story of his birth, the story of his first few months of life. I imagine him asking, “Your love came in like milk? What's that supposed to mean? That you didn't love me right away? That it didn't happen instantly, that there was a progression?”

I'm new at this, but my gut tells me I've got to be careful. Time for the dance of the parent? Or shall I be honest?

Yes, Theodore, on the rooftop garden at the Kansas City Ronald McDonald House, your mother and I worried about our love, whether our love was enough. Six or seven or eight days after your birth, we wondered if we loved you enough.

Eventually I proposed to your mother that what we were experiencing might be a different kind of love. I said, “Well, with his condition, with him in the hospital, it's got to be an act of love to read these medical

articles. Learning about what it might mean for him to be diazoxide-unresponsive, to learn as much as we have about the Islets of Langerhans, about all of this, just keeping it together—that’s our love right now; right now that’s what love *feels* like.”

Maybe.

After you were given a “diagnostic fast,” I asked a doctor what your insulin number had been when the fast ended.

“Well, I can look it up for you,” the doctor said, “but the insulin test is unreliable. That’s why we measure ketones, too. That’s a better measure.”

In the absence of exogenous sugar, our bodies begin to break down fat—and ketone bodies are a byproduct of fat breakdown. Ketones go up, for most of us, the longer we fast.

“With Theodore’s condition,” the doctor said, “ketones are a more reliable indicator, or rather an inverse indicator, of insulin. After fasting for a few hours, a healthy pancreas will shut down insulin and allow fat breakdown to begin.”

Higher ketones mean lower insulin.

Oh, what might there be less of that means there’s more of something else?

So, yes, Theodore, I’m searching for the inverse indicator of love.

He was the seahorse. To all the nurses he was Teddy. Now, at home, he goes by other names.

In the mornings, especially, he is Theodore. “Good morning, Theodore,” I say. On the hospital rolls, he was Theodore Binette. On his insurance card and his birth certificate he’s Theodore Binette Sonnenmoser. His crib sign at the NICU said, “Teddy B.” and had a bear on it. We really liked the nurse who made it for him, so the sign now hangs on his bedroom door. Because of a face he makes, when he sleeps, he is Beaky. My wife sends a message: “Kiss his beak for me, if he’ll allow it.” Lately, he is Winks, too, short for Winkerbean, just because. He is

Bean. Often at night and in the early evening, he is Fussy Pants or Señor Fussy Pants.

We need to take care of ourselves, and we mustn't do anything which, if all goes wrong, we'll regret. Most of the time, of course, these are conflicting principles. I doubt this is news. Perhaps all parents know this. Perhaps all parents with babies, sick and not sick, learn this in the first hours and days and weeks and months.

If anyone asked me what I wasn't expecting, how the birth of my son has changed my life, I'd have to say, Guilt. I didn't know I could feel so much guilt.

And he is Pancreataur.

Once, in a message I sent to my brother, I misspelled it *P-A-N-C-R-E-A-T-O-R*. Only later, when I read my brother's response, did I realize what I'd typed looked like PanCreator, which I imagine not to be the crime-fighting hero of a children's book Kori and I haven't yet written, a book whose plot we'd absentmindedly imagine at his bedside, to kill time while waiting, waiting for doctors, waiting to go home, a book we don't really want to write, I think, because we don't want to prolong this part of our story, because we're tired of thinking about the neurological effects of hypoglycemia in infancy, because we know that babies have a right to be angry but we're not sure about their parents, because we know why the guilt floods but we're unsure about the source of the resentment, because we're looking for ways to emerge from the summer of 2014 and to begin thinking of it as the taped version, as history.

So, this PanCreator is not our protagonist, a boy whose unregulated release of insulin is mirrored by his excitability, his exuberance, let's just say his passion, but another character altogether, perhaps a god present and infused in all things.

JOANNA SOLFRIAN

*Now That the Children
Are Grown*

After Patrizia Cavalli

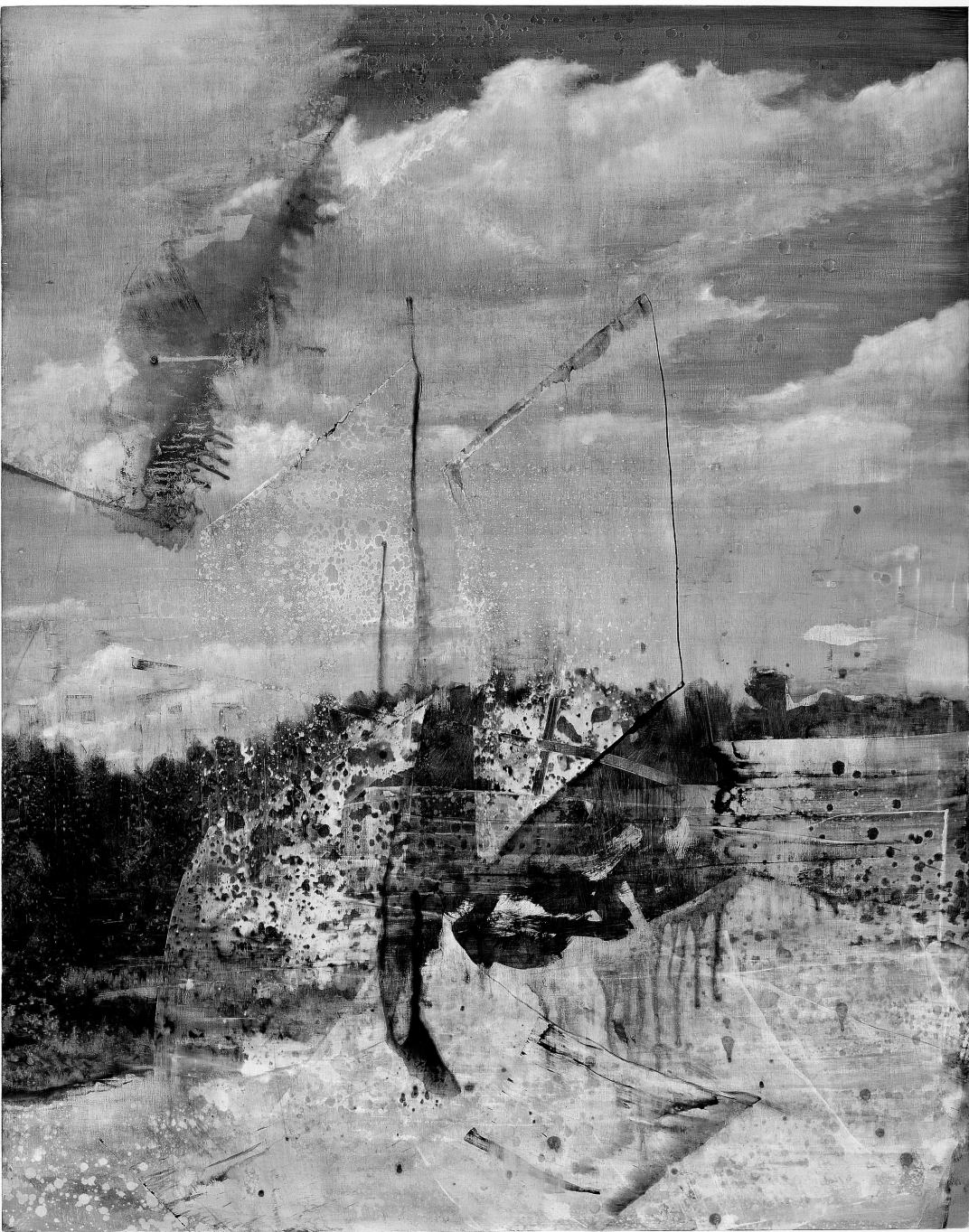
and time seems wrapped up and bowed
now that no one calls me to wipe excrement
and I can watch out the window
the scattered congregation of crows
now that there is no one to dress and undress
and snap and tie and dress and undress
and the weeds sprout flowers atop their stalks
now that there are no more sweet loaves of bellies
and I can climb in a vehicle and curse at highways
now that the evening rolls over and yawns obtusely
and no one cries out with fever and I can sit
fully within myself and pretend
to care about the transformative weeds
now that every word I dig up
can be held and weighed like a potato
suddenly I am fond of earthworms
and their professional urges.



Damian Stamer, *South Lowell 21*, 2014, oil on panel,
48 in. x 60 in. Courtesy of Freight and Volume.



Damian Stamer, *New Sharon Church Rd. 4*, 2013, oil on panel, 48 in. x 72 in. Courtesy of Freight and Volume.





Damian Stamer, *South Lowell 7*, 2014, oil on panel, 48 in. x 72 in. Courtesy of Freight and Volume.



JOYCE PESEROFF

August Landscape with Tractor, Logger, Daylilies

The snore of a tractor tedding hay sounds nothing like a chainsaw gnashing its teeth in a birch grove. My neighbor flails row on row, a peaceful hum of expensive machinery. No Russian-style scenery was harmed in the process, and the round bales, like giant pillows of Shredded Wheat, make me nostalgic for *Rin Tin Tin*, sponsored by same.

Oxen trained for the ox-pull, sheep bare of fleece, all the horses in Georgina Bloomberg's stable depend on someone turning and drying the grass. In Polanski's vision of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, women glean in Breughelian aprons and bonnets while behind the burlap, in soft focus, steams a clot-red tractor that will end life as they know it.

Yo, Rinty! You made German police dogs lovable after WWII, on TV you lived in a fort among cavalry, transposed from the Great War and its slime to Sioux vs. settler, cowpokes and schoolmarms, America's rural romance. Who knew where wheat came from in NYC, or bottles of milk, or frozen peas? I figured, from a factory, like television, like library books.

A horse-logger returns to limb and twitch some trees
from the woodlot. One axe clapped against bark
doesn't disturb a forest. A skid trail makes excellent cross-
country skiing, nothing harmed in its creation that won't
bristle again like lilies from a bulb, skull fondled by darkness
now the daily glory's done, the party girl jumped
out of the cake, ribbon plucked, ceremony pillaged.

JONATHAN WEINERT

Katabdin

My dad said “Ah” he said “Ah”
and he meant it. Made himself clear
to himself. We drove the tent stakes in,

we rolled the bedrolls out. The sun rolled, too,
along the pines’ extinguished skyline, like a coin,
a bright coin gauzed with cloud, until it dropped.

It dropped.

My dad said “Ah” I said nothing.
Some chill, released, ascended in the sky,
my insides turning inside out, and dark,

like drowned weeds in a dark extinguished lake.
Everything was something else. My dad said
“Ah” said “Ah” and several times

I thought he might say something else.

Stars
began to glimmer out, and dark shapes swerved
beyond the camp’s hard edge—coyotes

prowling in the needle-wrack, their eyes like pairs
of brilliant dimes, their dime-bright eyes.

I thought he might say “Son” or “Here” or “Look.”

We could have talked about the next day’s hike;
the country north of where we camped
all emptied woods and hard black skies

and how a person with a fierce enough desire
could live for months out there, could live,
procuring food and other possibles

in Millinocket or in smaller towns.
We could have talked about a life
of fierce enough desire, and what it meant

for him to be a twin, a son of recent immigrants,
a Jew in Roman Catholic Mattapan—
the whole believable story of his life,

which would have made my own life seem
more real, my life of not yet fierce enough desire.
My dad said “Ah” and afterwards

said nothing. As usual, I took his reticence
for condemnation.

The woods went far,
went far, the dime’s-eyes pushed into the darkness,

the mountain held its secrets, held them,
secret, and I lay there wide awake, I lay there,
snug and dumb and wide awake.

DAVID MCGLYNN

The Moth

IN 1988 I RECEIVED for my twelfth birthday a Nintendo Entertainment System—Nintendo’s original 8-bit video game console. The package included two controllers and a laser gun that connected to the machine by way of long black cords and a game cartridge featuring not one but two games: Super Mario Brothers and Duck Hunt. All this for \$99, which I remember thinking at the time was impossibly expensive. Also my mother doubted her ability to afford it and had warned me not to get my hopes up.

The NES had arrived in America two years earlier in an invasion tantamount to the Beatles disembarking in New York in 1964, with thousands of screaming adolescents awaiting its arrival. The American video game industry had crashed in 1983 after the market became flooded with too many troglodytic systems and games; even Atari, erstwhile king of the video game hill, was teetering on bankruptcy. Conditions were ripe for Nintendo to sweep the country like an epidemic, and it did. By 1988, the year I was begging my mother for a system of my own, the market for Nintendo game cartridges was larger than the market for all other home computing software combined. Nintendo caused such

a stir, especially among children and adolescents, that John Stossel did an exposé of the craze for ABC's 20/20, a show my mother and father watched with religious devotion, and which I continued to watch after they separated in a kind of totemic ritual—the voodoo belief that by continuing the activities they once did together I could keep alive the possibility of their reconciliation.

Stossel's report, titled "Nuts for Nintendo," opens with the reporter waiting like a schmuck, rolling his eyes and huffing in the wintry air, for a Manhattan toy store to unlock its doors. He talks to a man who has driven a thousand miles from Indiana, hitting seven stores a day on a ludicrous quest to fulfill his children's Christmas dreams. Later Stossel questions how an unknown Japanese company managed to capitalize so wildly on computer technology developed right here in the US of A. Throughout the report, Stossel is incredulous and condescending about what is surely a passing fad, a feeling Barbara Walters can't help but corroborate. She quips to Stossel in the final seconds, "Now I know how you'll be spending *your* holidays: watching Nintendo."

"*Playing* Nintendo," Stossel corrects. *Duh.*

That year, however, I spent most of my time watching, rather than playing, Nintendo. I was the last kid in my suburban Houston neighborhood to get a system of my own and was years behind my friends when it came to video games. Lacking both talent and experience, I had a habit, like most novices, of spastically jerking the controller whenever I wanted a character to jump. My only opportunities for practice came when friends invited me to their houses to play.

A year or two earlier, an invitation to play had meant time outside, in the bayou that snaked along the back of the neighborhood, or in the small clutch of woods that had managed to survive the developers' plows; now playing meant video games and nothing but. And the games invariably went one of two ways. Either my friend called dibs on player one, since it was his system and his house, and I sat dumbly

beside him, bored and restless, while I waited for him to die, which could take hours. Or occasionally my friend would offer to let me go first. I could be Mario and he'd take Luigi, but given how green I was, my death would come quickly. Then it would be my friend's turn again and the cycle would repeat itself: me bored and restless, my friend holding catatonically still, eyes glassy and jaws slack, Mario bouncing and swimming and spitting fireballs from his mouth. Maybe John Stossel was right: maybe it *was* ludicrous, but the absurdity only stoked the flames of my desire.

Even my uncle had a Nintendo before me. He claimed he'd bought it for my cousin, who was only three and not yet dexterous enough to handle the controller, so it was my uncle who played it most of the time. Yet because he was thirty-three, not eleven, and he loved me, he didn't force me to wait hours for my turn. He let me play first and go again if I died too quickly, and often he granted me sole access to the game for hours at a time. He lived five hours north of us, in a suburb north of Dallas, and that year we went there a lot. We spent so much time on the highway that I learned which restaurants had candy machines outside the restrooms and where the highway patrolmen liked to hide. My parents had been seeing a marriage counselor, but the sessions, according to my mother's reports, hadn't been going well. My father slept on the floor of a friend's apartment in Houston's Lower Westheimer district, and my mother didn't sleep much at all. At night I'd hear her ankles cracking as she paced the hallway outside my bedroom. My uncle's house in contrast was loud and rowdy, always full of people and music, smoke from the grill clouding the sliding glass door to the back patio, the kitchen counters sticky with margaritas. My mother welcomed the distraction.

My uncle and aunt often invited friends, including a number of the men who played on my uncle's indoor soccer team—men who drove pickups or vans and entered the house shouting my uncle's last name

and carrying six-packs of Corona. I sat on the living room floor and played Super Mario Brothers while the adults laughed and hollered in the kitchen and my sister played in the back rooms with my cousins. In the brief breaks I took from the game, I noticed my mother talking to one of my uncle's friends—a tall, broad-shouldered man with a dark mustache who, at first glance, looked not unlike my father. He was separated, too, and had a son and daughter close in age to my sister and me. I saw him smile into his open longneck, and later I watched him and my mother play Ping-Pong together in the room adjacent to the den. The sight unnerved me.

Six months into their separation, I was still hopeful that my mother and father would find a way to make things right. There'd been signs: my father came to dinner on Sunday evenings when we were in town; he and my mother had bought a new car together. But seeing my mother and the man volley the white orb back and forth across the table I felt a change in the weather, the barometer needle wobbling. It felt like watching a tree full of birds take to the air before a storm rolls in. Back in Houston my mother spent long stretches of the afternoon on the telephone, giddy and giggling, and though she wouldn't tell me whom she was talking to, I had a pretty good idea. The next time we went to Dallas, he was standing in my uncle's driveway when we pulled in on Friday night and the next night I caught my mother furtively kissing him in the darkened corridor between the kitchen and the garage. The next time we went north, a few weeks later, I found them in the garage, standing against my uncle's car. My mother leaned against his leg and chest and he had his arm around her waist. She smiled at me and tried not to look embarrassed, as if this was her way of letting me know what the future held. In May, she was the one who filed for divorce.

By July my Super Mario skills had advanced to the point that I could get through the first three worlds on a single life. The worlds that followed

were harder but I was improving. My only limitation was regular access to the game. One weekend in Dallas, a few days before my birthday, my aunt asked me to look after my cousins in the backroom for a few minutes. I'd been playing Mario for most of the day and it was high time for a break, she said. I shrugged and said okay. After a while, my aunt came and got me. She set my cousin on her hip and told me she had something she wanted to show me. I followed her through the air-conditioned house, eerily empty of voices, and around the corner to the living room and the sliding door to the back patio where my mother and uncle and more than a dozen of his friends had gathered. My mother's boyfriend—though “boyfriend” was never a term we used—stood with his pinky hooked through my mother's belt loop. He held a beer in a red foam cozy in his other hand. In the conflagrative heat, the lawn beyond the cement patio had gone the same color as the fence: brittle and brown. When I stepped through the doorway, the small crowd applauded, as if to congratulate me, and then parted to reveal a large wrapped box on the patio table. The crowd burst into Happy Birthday. The paper fell away and the Nintendo, at last, was mine.

My mother's warnings about the cost of the console had been so steadfast, her doubts so convincing, that I'd given up hope of ever getting one. But somehow a miracle had occurred. Before we cut the cake, my mother gathered up the discarded paper and carried it to the trash-can and her boyfriend led me into the shade. He laid a hand on my shoulder, leaned so close to my ear that I could smell the beer on his breath, and whispered that everyone had pitched in to help my mother afford the gift. It was a big deal, he said, and I needed to make sure I said thank you to everyone, including my uncle and aunt, and including him. I understood that all this hoopla—the extravagance of the gift, the applause, my would-be stepfather's hand on my shoulder—had to do with my parents' divorce and the relationships emerging in front of me. That the Nintendo was in effect a consolation prize, an effort to muster

my loyalty. But I was only twelve, or almost. How could I say such a thing?

“Thank you,” I said. He smiled and winked, squeezing my shoulder. I hooked up the Nintendo to our living room television, sat cross-legged on the tile floor, and played Super Mario Brothers until my butt went numb. With my mother at work during the day and no one to share the game with, I played for hour after uninterrupted hour. Occasionally my sister begged me to let her play, and I either made her wait or else allowed her to go first and encouraged her to take risks so she’d lose quickly. She tried whining for another turn, but when I didn’t give in she left me alone. I figured out the cheats for moving through walls and warping to other worlds and racking up a mother lode of extra lives, so many the game represented the amount with bejeweled symbols instead of numbers. My thumbs grew calloused and I stopped jerking the controller. I became very engrossed, not exactly a gamer by contemporary standards, but definitely a dedicated student. I had ground to make up.

I played through the rest of July and August, the sky white with humidity. I played through the weeks my mother and father were in depositions and meeting with their attorneys and testifying at the trial. At the end of the month, the judge awarded my mother full custody, my father four weeks of visitation a year, and ordered him to pay child support until my sister turned eighteen. My father had thirty days to appeal. He didn’t. Instead he moved to California the first week of November, already engaged again. The week before school started, I beat Super Mario Brothers, rescued Princess Toadstool from Bowser’s clutches, and had started playing the game over from the beginning. I also figured out how to get to the secret Minus World, which you accessed by standing on the pipe that leads to the flagpole at the end of World 1-2. If you move to the far left side, duck while facing left, jump, and move right while in the air, you end up moving through the wall and into the warp room. Getting there was more fun than the world itself. There was no

way out: the tunnel at the end just took you back to the start of the world, an interminably repeating loop. I kept playing anyway. Besides Duck Hunt, which was too lame to bother with, Super Mario Brothers was only game I had.

The week my father moved away, my mother took me to Target and told me I could pick out another game. She'd warned me, as she'd warned me about the Nintendo, that the games were expensive and Super Mario Brothers would have to last me until Christmas. A year ago I couldn't imagine ever getting tired of Mario, but neither could I have imagined my father living in another state. I stared at the rack of games behind the locked glass cabinet and tried to decide on a game. I wanted one I hadn't played before; more importantly, I wanted a game none of my friends had played before. I wanted to get the jump, to master the game before they'd even tried it and thus seek revenge whenever they came to my house to play. I went with T&C Surf Designs because the palm trees and crashing waves on the box seemed connected to the place where my father had gone.

The game sucked. Donkey Kong on a surfboard was dumb; all he ever did was go up and down on a wave that never moved. Now and then he floated up to claim a banana that had mysteriously appeared in the sky, as if that was even a thing. But it was the game I had chosen and was stuck with, so I asked my friends if I could borrow a game or two from them. I borrowed Metroid and Contra and Excitebike, and once the kids across the street were finished with it, I borrowed The Legend of Zelda. I started in on Zelda in early February, a few weeks after my father's wedding, which I didn't attend, and a little more than a month after my mother got engaged.

Zelda, like Super Mario Brothers, is an adventure game; it too involves a hero on a quest to rescue a princess from an underworld dungeon. Only The Legend of Zelda is far more complicated. It requires amassing a vast arsenal of weapons, deciphering a series of strange clues,

and collecting eight fragments of the “Triforce of Wisdom,” which, once completed, grants the hero passage to Death Mountain, where a villain holds Princess Zelda captive. The game can’t be defeated in a single sitting and so allows players to save their quest’s progress in the game’s memory. I entered my own name without embellishment, David, and, on the advice of a friend who’d already beaten the game, started a second quest under the equally pedestrian moniker David2. I used David2 to experiment with moves without risking my life hearts or weapons. Whenever my sister pestered me to let her play, I allowed her a few minutes with David2. David2 possessed nothing of any life-extending value; in the hands of a greenhorn like my sister my pixelated doppelgänger met a swift and unheralded demise. My real quest, David, was strictly off-limits. I told my sister in no uncertain terms that it was not to be touched. I pinned her to the floor and squeezed her head between my knees until she swore she understood.

February turned to March, March to April, my mother’s wedding was a few weeks away, and I had *The Legend of Zelda* mostly put to bed. I’d worked the game like a puzzle, slowly, deliberately, one level after another, carefully saving my progress as I went. I’d collected all eight Triforce fragments and had lain up a stockpile of weapons that President Reagan would have admired. My hero’s journey was nearing its conclusion. I came home early from a friend’s house one spring afternoon, ready to storm Death Mountain and spring the damsel. The windows were open to let the breeze through and the sunlight was freckled by the pines and sycamores in the yard. I poured myself a glass of juice and sat down on the floor. I pressed the power button and waited for the game to load, then clicked forward to the menu page to retrieve my game. Instead of finding my name, however, I found the words “The Moth” in the spaces where my name had been.

What the hell was *The Moth*? I ejected the cartridge and blew into the slot. I reinserted the game and reset the console. But *The Moth*

remained. The Moth had no weapons, no life hearts, nothing to show for itself. Both David and David2 were gone. I yelled for my mother.

"Your sister and I wanted to play your game," she said. "I tried to put my name in but that's as far as I got."

"What?" I said. "You did that?"

She laughed and held her hands close to her chin. Her diamond engagement band was prominent on her finger. "I wanted it to say The Mother Sees All, but there wasn't enough room."

"You deleted my entire game!" I yelled. "I'd been working on it for months!"

She dropped her hands. "I did? I didn't know."

"I'd almost beaten the game. I'd almost finished it."

"Well, it looked like fun," she said. "Maybe you can play it again."

I stared at the screen, The Moth in boxy white letters against the black background, my weeks of work gone with a click. I felt the way I felt whenever the cat left a dismembered squirrel on the front step: shocked and disgusted and sad. I tried for a few minutes to play the quest my mother had created, but the thought of building the game back up again was too much. I turned off the Nintendo and left the room.

I thought at first I'd only need a few days off before attempting The Legend of Zelda a second time. I'd have the benefit of experience and would move faster now. I knew where the weapons were stashed and how to unlock them. But every time I tried to play, I simply could not summon the enthusiasm to sit in front of the television for more than a few minutes. I returned Zelda to my friends and borrowed another, but the problem persisted. I felt the same restlessness and boredom I'd once felt whenever I watched my friends play, and I couldn't seem to break out of it. Whenever my sister asked for a turn, I was glad to pass her the controller. I played Nintendo less and less until I no longer played it at all. I unplugged the console, wrapped the power

cord around the deck, and shoved the system beneath the television stand.

My mother was married in May and my stepfather moved down from Dallas to our house in Houston. His clothes now hung in my father's old closet, he occupied my father's place at the table, he slept on my father's side of the bed. The bed was the one piece of furniture my parents had had custom built, a relic of the time before the Houston economy tanked and my family, like so many, ran into financial trouble. The frame was massive: milled walnut with a lighted recessed base, built in nightstands on both sides, and a bookshelf in the headboard where my mother kept a row of hardback novels. The novels were all missing their dust jackets and were there for decoration. We only had one other collection of books in the house, besides the picture books and young adult novels in my sister's and my rooms: a small three-tiered shelf in the corner of my parents' bedroom. Most of the books there were college textbooks that my parents had, for one reason or another, kept since they were students. My father took none of them when he left, and I'd never seen either of my parents ever read a novel. Magazines, yes, and in the last year my mother had read a few of the self-help books the counselor had recommended, but not novels. My stepfather, when he moved in, didn't add any volumes to the collection.

One day in the fall—I don't recall the month though I recall it was raining—I lay on my mother's bed and tried to watch television. The TV in my mother and stepfather's room was new enough to have a remote control. I was alone and the house was quiet. Along with stepping into my father's physical space, my stepfather inherited the trouble my father had left behind, and rather than float on a cloud of newlywed bliss, of love lost and found again, my mother and stepfather seemed like soldiers in a foxhole during a prolonged firefight. It was as though their divorces, from the first provocations to the final haggling over power cords and

jars of nails, had conditioned them to fight, had turned fighting into a need. Their battles could rage for hours. My mother and stepfather argued over money, over something the other said, over the fact that neither of them appreciated the other's sacrifices for the sake of the family, over how my stepfather talked to my sister and me and how my mother talked to his son and daughter. If the argument went on long enough, I'd hear something break or one of them drive off in the car, the other left slamming the cupboards and pantry door. Even when my stepfather was out of town on business, my mother slept poorly and continued to pace the hallways. The house was never quiet, never at rest.

But that cold and rainy afternoon it was quiet for the first time in months, and it seemed I ought to preserve it while I could. The TV sounded so loud, so squawking and aggressive, that I couldn't bear to have it on. On nothing more than a whim, I reached behind my head and pulled at random one of the novels from the shelf behind the pillows. The novel was *The Parsifal Mosaic* by Robert Ludlum. It's Ludlum's thirteenth novel and like all of his novels it's a spy thriller set in Europe. The hero, again like most of Ludlum's heroes, is an international operative with a secret identity, a man duty-bound and devoted to his superiors but nevertheless reluctant to kill unless he absolutely has to. I didn't know any of that yet; I wasn't even sure how to pronounce "Parsifal" or "mosaic" or what the words even meant. I simply opened the cover and started to read. I remember only fragments of the plot and even less of the prose, but what I do recall, with a nostalgia so powerful it sweeps me through time to that afternoon, was the absorption of reading itself: the book propped on my sternum, the musty smell of the pages, the rain against the windows, the striped blue bedspread softened by years of laundering. I remember the pleasure of the sentences, how one string of words flowed into another, building pictures that were impossible to see merely by thumbing through the pages. Only by taking the sentences one at a time and in order did the images appear. It felt like looking into the night sky and seeing constellations where there had once been only stars.

I read until the light grew dim and my mother and sister came home. When I heard the back door open, I carried the book into my bedroom and read until I was called to dinner. I was immersed not only in the story but also in the sensation of receiving the story through words, and to a certain extent, in the pleasure of the book in my hands, its weight and heft. Video games, despite my most fervent attempts, had never managed to produce so acute a delight. I finished the book in a few days, all seven hundred pages of it, and when I closed the back cover I went back to the shelf for another. The novels, it turned out, had come from my grandfather, himself a Ludlum fan. He had more, and said I was welcome to borrow them. I'd end up reading more than a dozen.

I'd known *how* to read for years, and I'd read plenty of novels before. I had my own library card and had habitually checked out great stacks of books at a time, far more than I could possibly read, which perhaps explains why I'd been at best a casual reader. That afternoon, I became a reader in the way a kid splashing around a pool realizes he's a swimmer: that swimming is a part of him, not just something he does but something he is, and while he might still need instruction and guidance he no longer needs encouragement. Though the first novels I devoured were all by Robert Ludlum, other novels soon followed—*Catch-22*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, mostly recommended by my teachers who'd been English majors in the '60s when those novels were popular—and then the novels and stories I found on my own, many pulled at random from the library shelves just as I pulled that first novel from my mother's headboard. I often enjoyed those books the most because inside of them I was able to believe that their secrets lay cloaked and encrypted until I happened upon and unlocked them.

The reason reading persisted when video games did not is not something I can easily explain. It's not like I didn't have ample opportunities

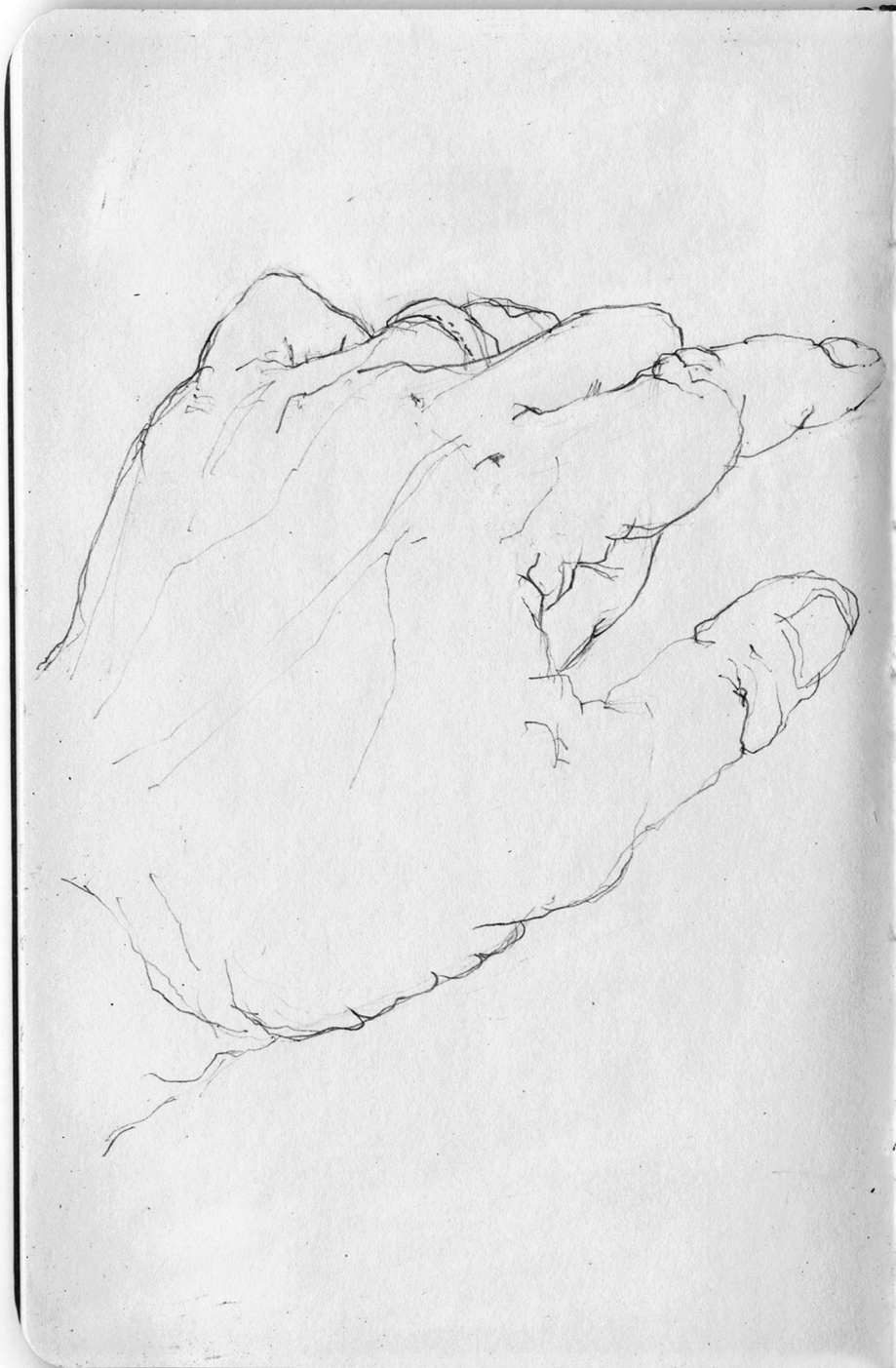
to rekindle my love for the games. Nintendo revealed itself as anything but a passing fad embraced by bored kids; by 1990, more American households contained Nintendos than personal computers, and as the '80s gave way to the '90s, the twentieth century to the twenty-first, Nintendo's original NES gave way to Nintendo 64, and then to PlayStation, GameCube, Xbox, and Wii. Video games became fixtures of American life, a staple in most living and dorm rooms, multi-player and interactive and not strictly sedentary, the subjects of television shows and movies and music. The once ludicrous plots and rudimentary graphics became more realistic, and it is John Stossel's alarmist exposé, not Nintendo, that now seems ridiculous and arcane, a product of American paranoia about our waning dominance in the global market. Or the hallmark of a reporter who made his name by constantly sounding an alarm.

What I do know is that had The Moth not swooped in and thwarted my hero's quest, I might not have become a reader, not in the way I'm a reader now. In college, I'd pass by the open doors in my dorm and see groups of young men (and later, women) sitting cross-legged on the floor, their eyes glazed and their jaws slack, or else hooting and high-fiving, and I'd feel uneasily distant from them, their doorway a threshold I couldn't cross. That strange distance often propelled me to the library, a refuge from the flashing images and pinging noises, and from my own feelings of exile. At some deep, subconscious level, reading and video games are connected in a contrapuntal harmony: I don't hate video games, they are merely the antithesis of the thing I love.

What decides who we will become? What bolt of lightning from Mount Olympus transfigures any one of us into a reader or a gamer? A swimmer or a runner or a layabout? I see in my own sons the first tendrils of this question starting to root. Who will they be? At their ages, the answer changes daily: from soccer to basketball, football cards to Greek mythology to yes, even video games. My older son, 9 now, plays a game

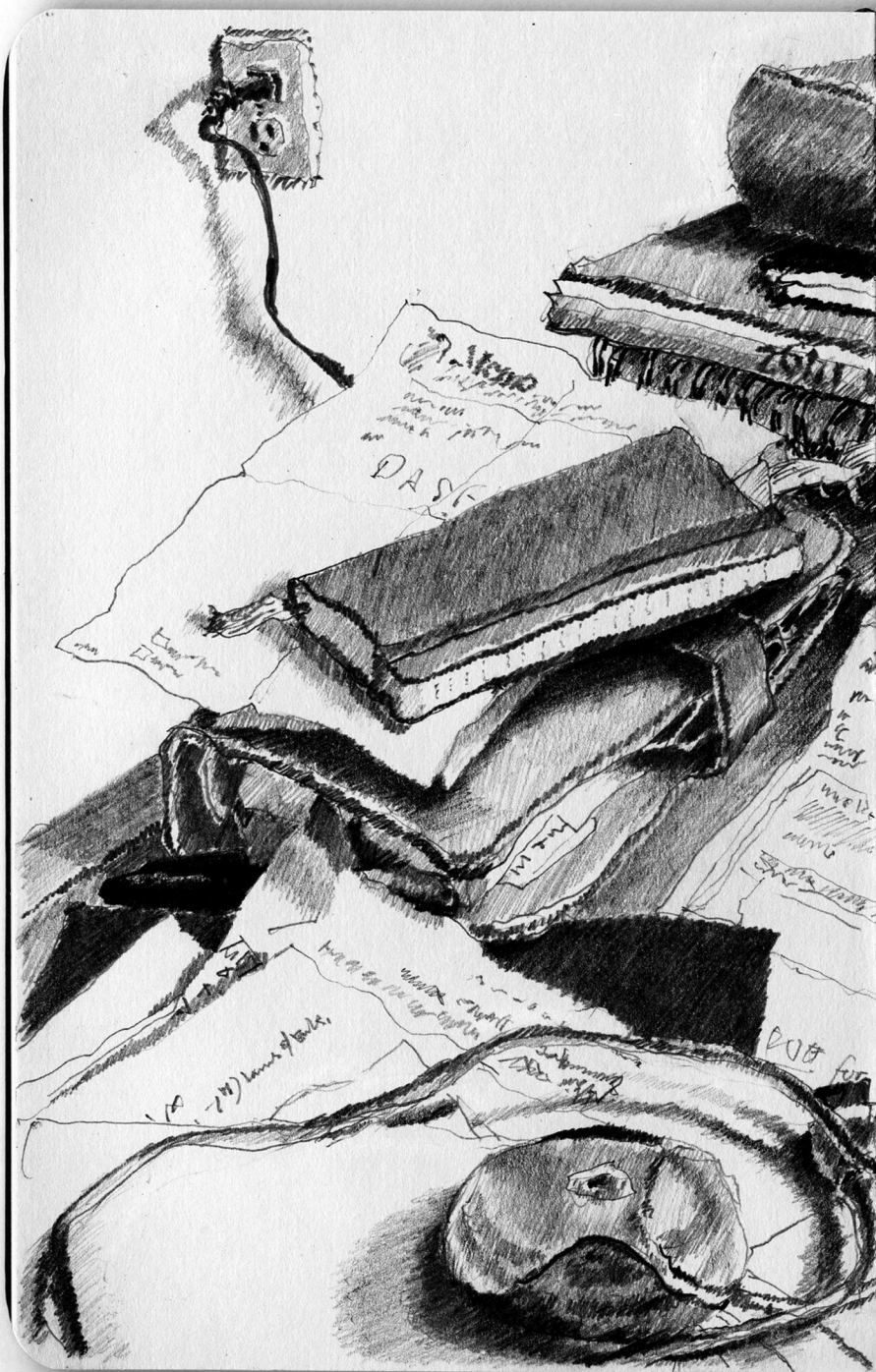
called Minecraft on the Kindle he once pined for as fiercely as I pined for a Nintendo, and if I'm honest I should admit that the game seems as absurd to me as Super Mario Brothers seemed to John Stossel. All he does is scroll across a Lego-like landscape and build houses; he never stomps mushrooms or shoots fire or rescues a princess. I want to nudge him toward reading, but if there's one thing I've learned about boys from parenting them, it's that they work by counterforce. Encourage something too much and they'll reject it; disdain too loudly and they'll want nothing more.

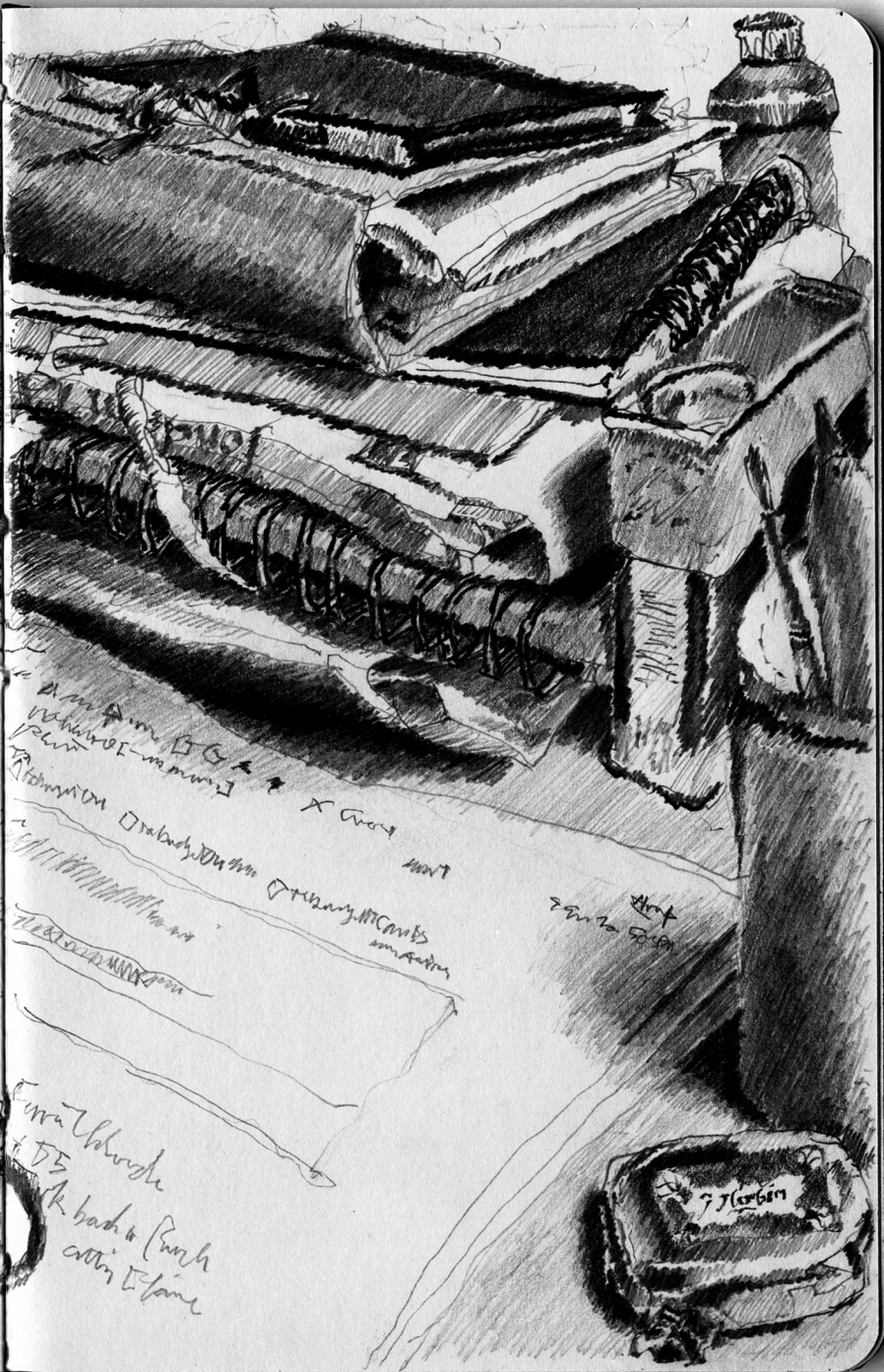
The other day, sifting through my desk drawer, I found a pack of butterfly cards I'd bought, years ago, at the Smithsonian Museum Store in Washington D.C. I'd gone there to interview for a job and needed to send a thank you note. The butterflies—depicted in muted, earthy colors on heavy cream card-stock—struck me as the right combination of scientific and aesthetic. Attractive but not gaudy. I used three or four and the rest have floated among my pens and pencils ever since. I sifted through the swallowtails and monarchs and lacewings until I found, at the bottom of the cellophane box, a Luna Moth, eerie green with eye-spots and dark red borders, cirrus tails dangling from the hind wings. I slid the card inside my son's book and left it on his dresser. You never know where the moth will strike, or when.





Peter Scott, *Sketchbook-Hands*, 2006, pencil drawing in sketchbook, 8 in. x 11 in. Courtesy Gallery NAGA.





Peter Scott, *Sketchbook-Sketchbooks with Mouse*, 2005, pencil
drawing in sketchbook, 8 in. x 11 in. Courtesy Gallery NAGA.

KYOKO MORI

Pet Grief

OUR ANIMAL HOSPITAL in D.C. had five rooms with an identical layout: a chair by the door, another against the opposite wall, and an examination table in the center. No matter which room we were shown into to wait for the veterinarian, my seal point Siamese, Algernon, trotted back and forth between the door and the wall. At each end, he rubbed his head on a chair leg.

I crouched on the floor, chanting, “Defense, defense,” and waving my arms. Algernon kept coming, so I crab-walked backward, moved out of the way at the last moment, and as soon as his head touched the chair leg, called out, “Two points for Algernon!” We turned around and headed for the other chair, Algernon prancing forward and me retreating. Both baskets were his to score on, and if he barreled into me, no fouls were called. Only when he stopped in the middle and reversed his course did I announce, “A big turnover,” and reach above his head to tap the chair leg. “Finally, two points for me.”

The veterinarian would open the door, see us playing, and laugh. Algernon, who had a wedge-shaped head and a long tail curled at the tip, resembled a monkey in a dark brown mask, vest, and boots. He had Feline Inflammatory Bowel Disease, a chronic condition similar to

Crohn's Disease in humans, so I took him in for frequent checkups and treatments.

Algernon played chair basketball with me at every veterinary visit until he suddenly went blind in March 2010. His sight was unlikely to return, but cats rely more on their other senses, and Algernon learned to navigate around our apartment and clamber onto the arm chair in the living room to sleep with Ernest, the blue point Siamese. With their legs tangled together, my two cats looked the same as they had for years. They were both ten.

The morning Algernon fell over on his side and couldn't get up, I took him to the hospital before driving to my teaching job, an hour away in northern Virginia. My class didn't meet until evening, but I had appointments throughout the day. Algernon seemed to be feeling better, so I planned to visit him—maybe even take him home—when I got back to town. It was April Fools' Day and also the first day of the Cherry Blossom Festival. Although I canceled my class and headed back in the late afternoon when Algernon's condition worsened, there was a long line of cars trying to get into the District. I was stuck on the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge when the veterinarian called. I didn't get to say goodbye to Algernon because I didn't believe he was dying.

The average life expectancy of an indoor cat is just fourteen years, compared to a human's seventy-nine years in America. We are the ones with multiple cat lives. I was twenty-two when I got my first cat, Dorian, and forty when he died. Dorian's successor, Oscar, was with me only three years because he had a congenital heart defect. After that, I somehow believed that getting two cats—Ernest and Algernon—would ensure double longevity, but it turned out to be more like burning the candle at both ends. Ernest died from pancreatitis three months after Algernon.

That's how, in October 2010, having already spent four cat lives at fifty-three, I found myself crying in the car every Wednesday night. Driving the same route home after my evening class, I couldn't help

but go over the bad decisions I'd made on the day Algernon died. My apartment was ten minutes from the animal hospital. If I had faced the seriousness of the situation and stayed home, I could have been there in time and Algernon could have heard my voice among the voices of the strangers trying to help him in ways he couldn't possibly understand. Instead, I had handed him over and hurried away. The last thing I said to him was a promise I didn't keep: "Don't worry. I'll be back after school."

The view from the bridge—the Washington Monument ahead and the Kennedy Center and the Lincoln Memorial off to the sides—was familiar and yet unreal: one of those sights I knew from postcards long before I saw the real thing. Grief, too, was personal and generic at once, each instance so different and exactly the same. It was no use being told that I had done the best I could for Algernon. I didn't care whether or not that was true. I wanted him back, and now Ernest was gone as well, and I didn't know how to start feeling even remotely like my normal self.

Although humans have kept company with dogs for 32,000 years and cats for 9,500 years, there was little help until recently for grieving pet owners. In 1980, the animal hospital at the University of Pennsylvania became the first in the United States to employ a full-time social worker for their human clients. Other veterinary clinics soon followed, and veterinarians started collaborating with mental health professionals to study the impact of their clients' grief.

They soon discovered that people who had been in psychotherapy when their pets died were no better equipped to deal with their grief than others. Since therapy sessions tended to focus more on problems than on pleasures, few clients discussed their pets with their therapists until a crisis occurred. When their pets got sick or died and the clients confessed how upset they were, many therapists assumed that the clients' distress was a symptom of other "more serious" problems. The majority of people who lost their pets reported that they received

better support from their pet-owning friends than from their therapists or their families.

These findings led Susan Cohen, the director of counseling at the Animal Medical Center in Manhattan, to start a pet-loss support group in 1982. Nearly sixty people attended the monthly meetings during the first year, adding their pets' pictures to the group scrapbook and sharing their stories. Animal hospitals and humane shelters across the country added their own support groups. By 2010, pet-owner's grief, or "pet grief" as it became known, had a national website that provided state-by-state listings of support groups.

One of these groups met at an animal shelter in Fairfax, Virginia—the city in which my university was located—every third Wednesday of the month. According to the website, the group's leader had conducted grief-counseling workshops around the country and appeared on numerous television news programs. My Wednesday class ended at 7 p.m. At 7:30 p.m., I could be crying in my car overlooking the national mall or attending a meeting with a trained professional.

In my thirties when I was married and living in Green Bay, Wisconsin, I signed up for individual counseling to sort out the advantages and disadvantages of getting divorced and moving on alone. After the counselor helped me understand that I was more afraid of the process than the result of a divorce, I didn't have a reason to stay married or to continue our appointments. Free to go anywhere on my own, I found a job on the East Coast, where I felt more at home. Until my cats died, I had never found myself crying about the same thing over and over, stuck in the traffic jam on the bridge in my memory—overlooking the tidal basin cherry blossoms at sunset—while the car sped through the empty lanes after dark in an entirely different season. Even when there were situations that upset me, it didn't usually take me six months to see that they weren't so bad compared to other people's problems or to

move on to some new preoccupation of my own. But now, talking to friends, ordinarily a source of comfort and perspective, was only making me cry. I needed help.

Still, as I tried to envision the meeting I was about to attend, the only images I had of support groups came from TV shows like *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*. But Fairfax is not Baltimore; like most of northern Virginia, it is safe, bland, and nondescript. The stretch of suburban highway between my university and the animal shelter had a dozen nearly identical office complexes, motels, and strip malls, with a mega-pharmacy and a fast-food restaurant at every intersection. It was as though I was driving the same block over and over. After a couple of miles, I started thinking that there might be some similarities between the support group I was going to and the class I had just left.

In the writing workshop I taught on Wednesday nights, students took turns submitting their essays and stories for group critique. They received conflicting suggestions from their peers and from me, and no matter whose advice they followed, their work often got worse before it began to improve. If the class was going well, though, students learned more from discussing each other's writing than from having their own writing "workshopped." By considering the strengths and weaknesses in their peers' work, they improved their knowledge of the craft of writing. Maybe this knowledge didn't help them immediately with their project, but that wasn't the point. We met to share our understanding, even if none of us could put all of it into practice every time we sat down to write.

The website for the support group mentioned the importance of people sharing their stories. Like my students, I would learn more by thinking carefully about other people's experience than by trying to fix my own. I shouldn't expect anyone, including the counselor, to offer handy tips to make me feel better. Good classes didn't result in easy

answers; they left us with questions that might, over time, lead to deeper understanding. I told my students that their writing would continue to be muddled until, after multiple revisions, they suddenly had a draft that made sense. Until then, they had to be patient and open-minded, but they should also cultivate their analytical ability to promote discussion and constructive criticism. To learn something from the people I was about to meet, I, too, needed the right mixture of respect and skepticism, politeness and honesty.

The shelter was a one-story building with a chain-link fence in the back. Two cars were parked in the lot, and a woman in a beige suit with a knee-length skirt was getting out of one of them. I caught up with her outside the door.

“Are you here for the pet loss meeting?” she asked me. A petite woman in her sixties, she had the wan appearance of a smoker and a voice to match. Her platinum blond hair was cut close to her face, emphasizing her cheek bones.

“Yes,” I nodded.

“Welcome,” she said. “I’m Kathy. I lead the group.” While I was shaking her hand, she reached out with the other hand to press the buzzer on the security box. “Hey, it’s Kathy,” she barked into the intercom.

A young woman in a navy blue uniform opened the door and then walked to the only other car parked in the lot and drove away. The building was dark except for the fluorescent light above the now-unattended reception desk. I had been feeling guilty in advance about seeing animals waiting to be adopted, but they must have been behind a locked door or in another building. I heard no barking, meowing, or shuffling and clicking of paws as I followed Kathy into a room near the reception area and waited for her to turn on the light. The room had a yellow linoleum floor and was twice the size of the seminar room I had just come from.

Kathy pointed to the black plastic chairs stacked against the wall. “Do you mind setting the chairs in a circle? I should go and watch the door.”

“How many chairs do we need?”

“Maybe twelve? You never know with this group.”

The door buzzer went off as I was completing the circle of chairs. Kathy returned with a heavyset woman in a flannel shirt, a gray button-down sweater, and baggy jeans. The woman’s attire was as pointedly frumpy as Kathy’s suit was businesslike. In my long black coat, black dress, and tall boots, my hair pulled back in a ponytail, I, too, looked like a parody of myself: an aging hippie academic. Kathy seated herself in one of the twelve chairs and the other woman settled immediately to her left. I dropped my backpack on the floor, sat down, and realized I had placed myself clear on the other side of the circle. We were like characters in a one-act play. There were no voices or footsteps in the hallway. If more people were expected, Kathy would have stayed to watch the door.

“Let’s get started,” she said, nodding to the other woman before addressing me across the empty circle. “This is Jane. She’s been in this group for a few years and she now comes to help me with the program.”

“I lost my favorite dog three years ago and this group saved my life,” Jane explained. She had a wide serene face and shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair. “So I come back to help other people in the same boat.”

“Why don’t you start the meeting,” Kathy said to me, “by explaining why you’re here?”

The room was completely quiet. Nothing like this had happened since my senior year in college when I went to my American literature class—which had only five students—the morning after a big campus party. The professor waited ten minutes for the others to show up and canceled the class when they didn’t. I wasn’t going to get the same break now.

So I talked about how Algernon had died in April and Ernest in July after spending three days in and out of the animal hospital, throwing

up and coughing and refusing to eat. Finally, he had to be placed in an oxygen tent. When I visited, the technician turned up the oxygen so I could unzip the nylon tent and put my head and hand inside. Ernest was alert enough to press his head against my hand. I petted him and told him that I wanted him to get better. "But if you can't," I managed to say, "I'll understand. I'll always love you." The test results had come back showing that he had pancreatitis and a lung infection. I left to let him rest and to receive antibiotics through an IV. A few minutes after I got home, the veterinarian called to say that Ernest had died. If I had stayed a little longer, I could have been with him at the end. Once again, I had walked away as though the situation weren't already a crisis and there would be another chance.

Algernon had wanted to live to the very end, dragging himself around the apartment after he went blind, clawing his way up to the chair, but that's because Algernon loved being a cat. Ernest was more like a fairy-tale prince trapped in a cat's body: picky, sensitive, stubbornly indignant. His pale gray markings resembled a velvet jacket; his narrow face with a long nose could look sweet one moment and disdainful the next. He once spent the whole afternoon and evening inspecting the quilt a friend had made for our bed. For hours, he was huffing, sniffing, and pawing at the interlocking ladder pattern as though he expected to find one misplaced quarter-inch-wide strip of fabric. At midnight, he finally leapt off the bed and headed for his food bowl. I was half afraid that Algernon would start up in his place, but of course Algernon just crawled under the new quilt into my arms and fell asleep. Five minutes later, when Ernest hopped on the bed and settled in his usual spot on my legs I was so relieved I could have wept. That was our relationship in a nutshell: Ernest showed his devotion to Algernon and me by setting an impossibly high standard and acting like he was the only one capable of maintaining it.

After I talked about Algernon and Ernest, Kathy asked if this was the first time I'd lost my pets, so I told her about Dorian and Oscar. She gasped when I said that Oscar had died at three.

"No wonder you're feeling so terrible," she said. "You've lost your two cats while you were still mourning the loss of your last cat. I'm going to ask Jane to tell her story. You might find some help in it."

Jane plunged into her anecdotes without giving background information, but in time I figured out that she was married, that she and her husband owned two houses, and that they traveled between the houses with their Maltese terriers. They currently had three dogs; her favorite, Butchie, had died three years ago.

"My most important advice to you is Write Everything Down," she said. "You always think you'll remember, but you won't. I have notebooks all over both houses. Whenever I remember something about Butchie, I jot it down."

"Some people find it helpful to write a letter to their pets," Kathy interjected, "especially if they didn't get to say good-bye. You should try that with the cat who died before you could get to the clinic. It's never too late to do a ritual to let him go."

Kathy gave me more advice: accept that my cats are never coming back, let go of any anger I feel toward them for dying and leaving me alone, and know that it's not unusual for people to be grief-stricken for months, even years. "You've lost so much," she said. Then she asked Jane to talk about her spiritual experience.

"I'm not one of those New Age-y people," Jane began. "I'm a very practical person. I was surprised by what happened to me." A few months after Butchie's death, she said, she started seeing blue-and-yellow butterflies in her garden. Butchie had worn a blue collar and yellow was Jane's favorite color. She had never noticed butterflies like these before. Now they appeared among her flowers, always when she was thinking about

Butchie. “So I knew he was okay,” she continued, “but when I had an animal communicator in to help one of the other dogs, who had arthritis, I asked her to tell Butchie that I appreciated the butterflies but wanted more concrete signs that he was okay. The animal communicator said she’d relay the message and I would get three signs from Butchie.”

A week later, Jane heard a dog barking in the special way that only Butchie barked. Then one summer evening at dusk, she saw a white Maltese standing on the other side of her pool. Her three dogs were next to her and there were no other Malteses in the neighborhood, so the dog she saw could only be Butchie. By the time she realized this, he was gone. But on Thanksgiving, she was in the kitchen holding a large bowl of salad she had made, when she felt a dog bump her leg and push his head against her knee. Over the bowl’s rim, she observed her three dogs sleeping near the fire in the living room. She could still feel the dog’s weight against her leg, but she couldn’t see under the bowl. As she slowly lowered the bowl to the kitchen table, the invisible dog pressed his head harder against her leg for a second. Then the weight lifted and he was gone. The other dogs continued to sleep. None of them had stirred in the few minutes that Butchie had been with her.

“So now I know Butchie is okay,” she concluded.

“Some people believe that our pets are still with us,” Kathy said, “while others believe that only humans have souls and animals don’t, so our pets are just gone when they die.” She paused and waited for me to say which of these beliefs I held.

Although I didn’t believe in God, I hadn’t ruled out the possibility that the dead were with us in some abstract, molecular form. I certainly didn’t think that only humans had an afterlife and our pets just died. I could have emphasized our common ground, but the way Kathy presented the two choices annoyed me. If she’d wanted an honest answer, she should have asked me before Jane told her story.

"It's arrogant to assume that humans continue to exist after death and animals don't," I said. "We can't be that special."

Kathy was smiling and nodding in encouragement.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure that we all cease to exist. When we die, we're gone, we become nothing. I don't believe my cats are still around. I don't expect to be around, myself, after I die."

Kathy sat up straighter and didn't say anything for a long time. When she recovered her speech, she said, "If that's your view, then grief for you is going to be very different."

Different from what, I wondered. Over the years she'd been working as a counselor, Kathy must have encountered other agnostics and atheists. People who didn't believe in God or an afterlife had pets and grieved for them, too. But maybe they—we—didn't come to support group meetings because opening up to strangers required the most arduous faith of all.

Kathy proceeded to recap her advice—write everything down, do a ritual, accept that the cats are never coming back, let go of my anger, know that overcoming grief takes time—but with the repeated disclaimer, "Of course all this is going to be different for you." Isn't everyone's grief different, though? Otherwise, what would be the point of comparing our stories? I should have asked but didn't.

Outside the shelter's door, I thanked Kathy and said good-bye.

"You're doing really well," Jane said as we crossed the lot toward our cars, which were parked side-by-side. "Most people who come to this meeting can't sleep or eat. They have a hard time holding their jobs. I was like that for a couple of years after Butchie died."

Her eyes looked sad. She was trying to be kind. I should have apologized for my earlier comments. To insist that we all become nothing was to imply that the three signs she'd received had been illusions. I should have said that I respected or admired her faith. Only, that wouldn't have been true.

Every night of my life with Ernest and Algernon, I knew which cat was sitting on my chest without turning on the light. If I had gone blind instead of Algernon, I could easily have told who was purring into my ear or licking my face. Of course I, too, longed to feel my cats' heads pressing against my knee one more time, but I couldn't imagine asking for a sign or proof that they were "okay." Ernest and Algernon were not okay and never could be again: that's what death means. An "animal communicator" is someone who claims to understand your pets, dead or alive, through her psychic powers. Jane believed that this stranger with no veterinary training could tell more about her dog's arthritis than she could from observing him daily. In contrast, I found it utterly ludicrous to write a letter to Algernon that he couldn't have read even while he was alive.

Like most pet owners, I talked to my cats as though they were people, assuming they understood the gist—the essential intent and the underlying attitude—of what I said from the tone of my voice and my body language. Algernon clung to me that last morning when the veterinary technician entered the room to take him to the in-patient area. As I unwrapped his paws from around my neck and told him that I was coming back after my class, I'm sure I sounded scolding and dismissive, as though he had nothing to worry about and he shouldn't act so scared to be handed over and put into the cage where he was going to die. In my eagerness to pretend that we were having a normal day, I had belittled and betrayed him. No ritual could change that now.

So I thanked Jane, got in my car, and drove away.

Hal Herzog, professor of psychology at Western Carolina University, surveyed 109 students and discovered that 75 percent of them believed that people went to heaven, while 57 percent and 56 percent, respectively, thought that dogs and cats did as well. The other animals on the questionnaire he distributed—fish, rats, snakes, mosquitoes and other insects, etc.—would also be admitted, according to between 45 percent

and 49 percent of those who were asked. One student speculated that fleas and ticks might cross through the pearly gates by clinging to her dog's coat. Asked how predators and prey would get along in heaven, she explained they could easily coexist since the dead had no need for eating.

The students in the survey were predominantly white, southern, and Protestant, so their views weren't diverse. Still, Christians aren't the only people who picture an afterlife. But trying to imagine the afterlife of our pets—wondering what happens to the fleas on the dog's coat—reveals the absurdity of this whole effort. All we can say for certain is that after our death we will no longer be who we once were. Not only our need to eat but everything else—including our desire to understand how we could exist for eternity without eating—will also cease. Surely, that is the biggest heartbreak: to not be here anymore to think through or care about anything, and to accept that the dead no longer have that ability.

Although Kathy kept reminding me that my cats were never coming back, she, too, seemed eager to believe that we could be visited by our pets' spirits or reunited with them after our own death. Maybe she thought it was healthier for her clients to hold on to some hope. The brochure she handed me at the end of the meeting featured "Rainbow Bridge," a story about a green meadow located "this side of Heaven" where all the pets who died can "run around and play together" while they wait for us. When we die, the story promises, we will be reunited with our beloved animals as, side-by-side, never to be parted again, we cross the bridge into heaven. Most resources about pet grief feature this story and show the same picture of a rainbow connecting two white clouds, which can be purchased as an accessory—a porcelain pin, for example—or a poster.

Kathy must have concluded that my grief would be "different" because she understood the difficulty of devising a ritual without religious

symbolism. But my main objection to “Rainbow Bridge” isn’t its religious overtones or its appalling, flowery language. It’s that whoever wrote the story obviously knew nothing about cats. Ernest and Algernon were indoor cats. Even if they could get used to being outside in their afterlife, they wouldn’t want to “frolic” in a noisy meadow with millions of other cats, dogs, birds, rabbits, iguanas, and a host of small creatures—pocket pets—that they wouldn’t be allowed to chase, capture, and, ideally, eat. If I needed a make-believe story to console myself, I would rather write my own.

I have doubts about death rituals even for humans: the viewing of the body, the wake or “visitation,” with food, drinks, and receiving lines, special coffins for burial. In Green Bay, there were occasional news stories about hard-core Packer fans who’d arranged to be buried in football-shaped coffins lined with green and gold satin. Cemeteries had mausoleums that allowed bodies—sealed away from dirt and worms—to decompose more slowly, though even this option wouldn’t preserve all the soft tissue you’d need if the mass resurrections predicted at the Second Coming were to be a literal event.

If there is comfort in gathering the family and friends to remember the departed, it’s because human relationships have a public component. The people who come to console you are those who knew you and the deceased as members of their community. Ernest and Algernon, on the other hand, never left our home except to go to the vet. Although they helped me host occasional dinner parties, the part they played—keeping me company while I cooked, sitting on the laps of the guests—was through me and for me. My friends saw the cats as twin moons orbiting around me. In truth, Ernest was the sun, I was the earth, and Algernon was the moon. Either way, we were our own galaxy.

The farewell letter Kathy advised me to compose wouldn’t have given me “closure.” On the contrary, it would only have connected me back

to our lost galaxy. Write Everything Down and Do a Ritual. The two activities, always mentioned in tandem, are the two hands on the clock of eternity, circling its face in a perpetual motion of remembrance. Whenever Jane picked up the notebooks scattered around her two houses to jot down the smallest details she remembered about Butchie, she was retreating from her present life with the other dogs and her husband to be alone with Butchie's memory. Like someone who steps into a chapel in the middle of the day, she was seeking refuge in a quiet, timeless place to say a prayer, a prayer against forgetting. Each word she wrote was an act of devotion. Even though Butchie was gone, Jane was determined to hold on to her love for him. That was something I could have respected and admired.

Still, I am skeptical of the simple equations people make between writing and not forgetting, writing and honoring the dead, writing and understanding, writing and feeling better, writing and any one thing. No matter what writing is meant to do, it also does the opposite. Whether it is a grocery list or a journal entry, when I write something down to "remember," I'm actually giving myself permission to forget. I can't hold the whole grocery list or an entire day's events in my head. I have to let the list or the notebook do the remembering for me.

Besides, the writing whose purpose is *to* remember is only the first step toward the writing I attempt *because* I remember. I throw away the grocery list after I get home and put away the food. I only re-read old journal entries for information. What was the name of the café I visited with my aunt in Osaka? Was I really jet-lagged the entire eight weeks I spent in Japan in my thirties, or do I just remember it that way?

By the time I'm drafting an essay, I no longer try to Write Everything Down. On the contrary, I strive to Forget Everything That Doesn't Matter. Revision after revision, as I struggle to get to the essence of the experience, I'm dismantling and discarding the details that first claimed my attention, the thoughts that seemed important for a while. I have to

recall, reconsider, record, and then erase the words that turn out to be extraneous. After I'm finished, I remember the written version better than the actual event. The purpose of writing is to transform the memories, permanently, into words. To end up with a handful of words I can keep, I have to let go of the original event and its memory.

But before writing leads to truth, or understanding, or feeling better—if it ever does—there is a lot of confusion and feeling worse to get through. I can't compose a letter to the dead as a ritual. How can I say good-bye to Algernon when I wish he had never died? I wouldn't write one word about Algernon or Ernest if my silence could bring them back.

When I finally got to the animal hospital that April evening after Algernon died, my close friend and neighbor, Gail, was waiting for me. I had called her from the road. The two of us sat in the examination room with Algernon's body and cried, and Gail talked me into requesting the cremation of his remains.

A woman from the crematorium telephoned me the next day and directed me to their website so I could choose the box in which the ashes would be returned to the animal hospital. I was relieved to be alone to view the pictures of the tiny decorative boxes, which were ridiculous and pitiful and oddly moving all at once. When the box was delivered to the animal hospital along with the clay paw print the woman at the crematorium had taken before the cremation, I couldn't make myself go to pick them up, so I sent Gail to do it.

The wooden box was dark brown with a gold ribbon and silk flowers. I put it on a shelf in the foyer next to Algernon's picture. Gail made me a drink and we unpacked the small cardboard box containing the clay paw print. The round disk, wrapped in plastic, had four indentations where Algernon's claws had gone in. It was accompanied by instructions for decorating it further (with the pet's name or stenciled

flowers, etc.) and then baking it in the oven to set the print. In the decades I'd been making bread and desserts, I had never burned anything, but all I could think of was the batch of cream puff shells that my seventh-grade home economics class had turned into lava rocks. It didn't help that the disk was almost exactly the size of a sugar cookie.

"Gail, I just can't," I said.

"Don't worry," she said. "I can. I'll write Algernon's name on it."

Gail works as a collections manager at the American Indian Museum and handling fragile objects is what she does every day. She applied gold leaf to the disk for Algernon and found a small wooden stand to put it on. And three months later when Ernest died, she did all these things for me again.

I have no desire to linger for eternity. To continue forever as myself, a limited being in the infinite universe, would be a punishment. I'm not afraid of being nothing after I die when I remember that I was nothing before I was born. We go from an eternity of not existing to another eternity of not existing. It's like Algernon pressing his head against one chair leg, crossing the room, then touching the other. Back and forth between the two gates leading nowhere, he demonstrated the brevity of the span and the enormous energy he had to explore the small space.

On what would have been Ernest's fourteenth birthday in December 2013, my friend Stephen helped me install a platform-style bird feeder in the window next to my desk. The feeder is the size of a small baking pan, and Stephen had designed a board with brackets to hold it in place behind a planter filled with rocks. The arrangement elevates the feeder and makes it look like an altar or a miniature proscenium.

A few days after Ernest's birthday, I saw a blue jay in my window for the first time. In the spring, when mockingbirds returned, they came on cold days when the berries and insects they preferred were hard to find. The others, all regulars, are: mourning doves, house sparrows, house

finches, cardinals, goldfinches, chickadees, titmice, Carolina wrens, downy woodpeckers, hairy woodpeckers, white-breasted nuthatches, red-bellied woodpeckers. Among the few birds that are abundant in the area but never at my window are robins. Robins are not seedeaters, so they are not attracted to bird feeders. Though they forage on the ground around our building, our window on the third floor is too high to see them.

The only birds Ernest ever watched with interest were a pair of robins nesting outside the bedroom window of an apartment we occupied when he was four. They were so persistent and territorial, flying in and out to feed their young, the male singing to declare his dominion over the air space Ernest considered his own. Till the two fledglings finally left, Ernest was glued to that window. The parents might have returned a few weeks later to lay the second clutch of eggs, but by then we had moved away, so Ernest never saw robins up close again. Now, as I observe the daily drama of bird life—the pair of cardinals at dawn and at dusk, the doves jockeying for position, the red-bellied woodpecker perching on the side and hissing at them—the robins' absence is the silence around Ernest's disappearance. Even in a ritual, I cannot give him what he wanted. Outside our window, wings continue to beat against gravity. Feathers and hollow bones rise into the air. I am still watching.

GAIL MAZUR

Family Crucible

For 7 years, my sister has refused to speak to me.
It's biblical—
but are these the lean years, or the fat?

The one time we had Christmas at her house,
she seated me
in a corner away from the rest of the family,

at a little brown triangular telephone table.
Who would I call?
—I brought the bagels! I *made* a pie!

So I rebelled and moved my plate and cup near
to my nephew,
we sat by the burning Yule log video—

a mirage of coziness, without warmth.

He wanted to talk with me about Walt Whitman,
I was thinking,
If you want me look for me under your boot soles!

That's when my sister decided to make shunning me official—
she announced it
with magisterial authority to the flummoxed gathering.

One side of my family's always had a penchant for hostilities.

But when I think about one of us dying, I'm uneasy
about my sister.

I worry there's a conciliating gesture I ought to make,

something that calls for largeness of heart
or, failing that,
something harder, a willingness to "engage"?

Should I rue my puzzling role in this estrangement?

A voice tells me,

Just let it go, the voice of one no longer here,

the one who thought I could do no wrong.

I think she hates me—and longs for me to love her.

Would it be wrong

to rob her of the pleasure of shunning me—

me, her *nemesis*—and blaming me for the shun?

SONJA VITOW

Pillars of Hercules

18 days ago:

It is late and we are watching the lost city of Atlantis struggle to reveal itself after all that time underground. We have already seen this documentary three times together. I watch the television's reflection in Toby's eyes. The scientist, duplicated and miniature and glowing wet in Toby's view, narrates a re-creation of the tsunami that took Atlantis. Two volcanoes grumble from deep within themselves. Ragged waves come together in a synchronized tower, threatening to eclipse the city. Toby blinks, and Atlantis is buried for centuries under the weight of his lids.

I know she's not coming back, he says. He is nine.

27 days ago:

After my sister leaves, I let Toby decide what we do so I don't have to. When we aren't watching *Finding Atlantis*, we do puzzles. More accurately, Toby does puzzles while I watch. He has about twelve of them and I know he's already done them hundreds of times because of how quickly he works. He doesn't even have to look at the pictures on the

boxes. Some of the puzzles are missing pieces and he knows exactly where those gaps are and works around them, constructing a herd of dinosaurs around a floating set of T-Rex teeth or a school of fish being chased by a shark with no dorsal fin.

Even though he knows the puzzles by heart, Toby studies each piece for a moment before he places it. It's not that he's looking to see where the piece will go—it's never a search for direction—it's more of an examination, like he's analyzing data, trying to find new information in a document he's read many times before.

When I ask him why he plays with these same puzzles when he already knows how they fit together, he shrugs and tells me it's because he likes the pictures.

Why don't you glue them to some cardboard? I ask. We can hang up the ones you finish and buy you some new puzzles at the flea market.

But Toby shakes his head and says, I like the ones I know.

Even though you've done them a billion times?

I notice something different every time I put them together.

Even if they're missing pieces? I ask.

They weren't always missing pieces, he says.

5 days ago:

I wake up early, brew a pot of coffee, and go outside for a quiet cigarette while Hercules is still asleep. There is a green, sulfurous odor trapped beneath the house. It swallows me as soon as I come onto the porch, but I don't investigate. I don't want to know what it is or deal with it; in a few days, we can leave this place forever, let it sink deep into its own rubble.

I walk away from the house, but I can still feel the stench clinging to my nostrils, following me. I decide to be brave. I grab the broom from the kitchen, and get down on my stomach to peek beneath the porch. The smell is so much stronger down there that I have to cover my

nose and mouth with the sleeve of my sweatshirt, filtering my breaths through the thick cotton.

Sunlight trickles through the warped wood of the porch and illuminates its underbelly. There is a mound of dark fur behind the stairs. At first I am unsure, but then I know: it is the cat. I poke her with the broom's handle, and she does not move. I can see her limbs splayed rigidly. I poke her again and the body collapses, maggots spilling from her eyes and the crevices between her sparse ribs. The wriggling mass almost makes her look alive for a moment, like she might pull together all of this strange, quivering fur and run at me.

I hit my head on the porch as I crawl backwards. There is a tree nearby where I vomit twice in quick succession. I take a few shallow breaths. The sun is already heavy and pushes into my chest, through to my organs, my muscles, my bones. I vomit again. I smoke a cigarette in the neighbor's yard. A thick, gray cloud forms around me and for a moment I let myself disappear into it. My eyes burn.

I don't want Herc to wake up to this mess. I get a shovel and a trash bag from the garage and go to work burying his putrid friend by the mailbox.

Around ten he stumbles into the kitchen and pours himself a cup of coffee, which he drinks straight, even though it's lukewarm. He slept in his jeans, and I let him. I wonder if that's neglectful.

I found the cat, I say. She was under the house.

So she didn't run away.

No, I say. She died there.

He smiles. I think he's relieved.

29 days ago:

Toby, come give me a kiss good-bye, my sister hollers, watching her reflection apply lipstick in the hall mirror. She spreads the paste in broad, red strokes across her mouth. Toby clatters down the stairs.

Oh, hi, Aunt Caroline, he says when he sees me. His hair is darker than I remember, and longer. He is especially freckled now, as he is every year by mid-July.

He asks, Are you going somewhere?

Just for the weekend. My sister fiddles with the upright handle of her mammoth suitcase, which is especially large for such a short trip. She's always been bad at packing efficiently.

Why didn't you tell me?

I just found out. Your Aunt Caroline is going to stay with you.

Where are you going?

Just for the weekend, she repeats.

I asked where.

She pulls him close to her chest, and holds him for a few seconds too long. I wonder if he notices.

Be good, she says, without looking at either of us.

23 days ago:

I call again like an idiot.

Hi, it's your sister. Just wondering if you could please give me some sort of indication that you're still alive and breathing. Or tell me when you're coming back...you are coming back, right?

I hang up the phone, and Toby comes running in from his bedroom.

Was that my mom? Why didn't you get me?

I'm sorry, buddy, the connection was really bad. She says to tell you she loves you and misses you.

When is she coming back?

I'm not quite sure. Soon.

14 days ago:

I go to a website that promises to sell your house as quickly as possible, and I fill-in-the-blanks with the proper information.

Acres: 0.75

Bedrooms: 4

Bathrooms: 2.5

Pool? No.

Occupied? Yes.

Square feet: Too many to count.

Why are you selling? Why do you think?

The phone rings exactly twenty minutes later, and a small man in an ill-fitting suit arrives in the afternoon. You can sell a house really quickly if you don't care about getting the best price for it. I can tell the man thinks he's fleecing me, but you can't pull a fast one on someone who knows they're being scammed. I'm using you too, buddy. We just need some quick cash to get out of here.

It's a really nice house. Old. Full of history. The attic could be turned into another bedroom, I point out. Brick fireplace. Violet shutters. A big front porch like a mouth.

Honestly, that won't really matter, he says, We're in the business of rebuilding.

Oh. Well, it's in a decent neighborhood.

Yes, it is.

How quickly can we do this?

Two weeks if you sign the documents soon.

I inherited this house with my sister. She's a co-owner.

Well then she'll have to sign, too.

You'll have to find her first.

I give him her number before he leaves. He says he'll call me if he hears anything.

You think he'll find her? Herc asks.

I really don't know.

22 days ago:

I try my sister's number again. Her voicemail box is full. An hour later, I receive a text message.

Stop calling, it says.

16 days ago:

It pours in the afternoon, but Toby doesn't want to go inside so we sit in the front yard and let the same water that's been cycled and recycled over the Earth for millennia wash over us.

Where were you yesterday?

I had to go get the rest of my stuff from my old apartment.

So you're moving in?

I guess so.

Good, he says. He picks at a scab on his knee, which drives me crazy.

Toby, stop picking, it's gross.

Sorry.

Why do you do that?

I like to watch my body heal itself over.

Ew.

We are both quiet for a minute or so.

We don't have to stay here, you know.

What do you mean?

Would you want to sell this place?

He stops scratching his leg. Where would we go?

I don't know, I sort-of-answer, somewhere. We'd get a bunch of money for the house. We could go somewhere totally different. We could make up a story and change our identities.

Can I change my name?

Yeah, whatever.

And you'll call me by it?

Sure, I say.

Okay. I want to be called Hercules.

The rain eases, but continues to drizzle throughout the night. We head inside, drenched, when the yellow dye of the sun begins to melt pinkly into the horizon.

8 days ago:

We finish watching *Finding Atlantis* in the early afternoon, and Herc announces he's bored with puzzles. It's his idea to sort through the attic before we leave, to make sure there is nothing worth saving among all these boxes. I haven't been up there since just after my parents died. There is a half an inch of dust that has smoothed itself flatly over everything, and as we move around the room, it rises, scatters through the air, and settles again.

Are you sure you're okay with moving?

Yeah. This place is haunted.

I didn't know you believed in ghosts.

I don't.

One side of the attic is occupied entirely by some discarded lamps, a card table, three ceramic planters of various sizes, one broken marble birdbath. There are boxes of my parents' tax documents that span several decades. The forms still feature the bright black loops of my mother's handwriting, which I haven't seen in years. In one corner there is a mess of neon plastic, toys my sister and I swore we'd save for our own kids. I wonder if Hercules ever played with this stuff. He digs ceremoniously through dozens of cardboard boxes, repacking them delicately when he is done with their contents.

What are you looking for? I ask him.

I don't know.

A ladybug wades through the dust of one of the boxes. I wonder how it got in here. Its red shell looks obscene against the gray of everything in the attic.

After a while, Herc clears his throat and announces, There's nothing up here. It's all junk.

What do you want to do, then?

I think we should sign our names.

Where?

On the walls.

Of the attic?

Of all the rooms.

Why?

So people knew we were here.

Okay, I say.

We leave everything in the attic as we found it.

20 days ago:

Aunt Caroline

Aunt Caroline

Toby wakes me up at 8 a.m. He can't find the cat.

And she didn't eat her dinner last night, he says.

I rub my eyes. He is shifting his weight from one foot to the other like a pigeon encountering breadcrumbs for the first time.

Oh God

Oh God

Oh God

Hey buddy, it's okay. Why don't we go look for her? I say.

I already looked everywhere. I called her name, but I couldn't find her. She didn't even come when I shook her bag of food really loud.

Just let me get on some clothes and we'll check the whole neighborhood.

He waits outside my door. I can hear the alternating pressure on the floor, left, right, left, right.

Oh God.

Oh God.

We search for the better part of an hour with no luck. We are both grimy with sweat, although it is too early for the sun to reach its highest peak in the sky.

Maybe we should make fliers and post them around the neighborhood.

Yeah. That's a good idea.

Do you have a picture of her?

No. Oh God.

It's okay, you can draw one, I say.

He uses a black marker to outline the lopsided shape of a cat. MISSING, it says in bold letters at the top of the page, followed by my phone number. If found, please call. We make photocopies at the library, watch as the misshapen animal is cloned over and over in hot, flat ink.

I can't believe she ran away, Toby says, wedging a pushpin through a flier and into a telephone pole with his thumb.

12 days ago:

Again?

Yeah. Please?

I sigh. It's late.

Okay.

The scientists have located a site they believe might really be Atlantis, based on a literal interpretation of Plato's ancient descriptions. Skeptics say they don't know fact from fantasy, but now there are satellite photos of suspicious shadows, cameras affixed to kites, sonar that sends out its own echo like a boomerang and builds images from sound waves. They find man-made constructions, clipped grass, purposefully carved stone.

But then—and this is Herc's favorite part—there is a layer of methane trapped beneath the mudflats, an entire generation of plants and

animals and golden people giving in to the Earth and scarring it forever. Science proves that they all died at once. Science proves they are still there. Archaeologists can tell all of this without even disturbing the land that healed itself over this site, never suspecting what it was hiding. It will be years before they can unearth anything substantial.

When the documentary is over, we go outside and sit on the porch. Do you think Atlantis is real? Hercules asks me.

Yes. I mean, I definitely want to think so. I don't know. What do you think?

Yeah. I like to think so too.

Under the porch lamp, I notice that Herc's nose is beginning to take on the same stern arch as his father's. It feels strange to recognize this when he doesn't. It's as if I'm keeping a secret from him.

But what if it's not? What if those archeologists are just wasting their time trying to put something back together that's not even real?

I picture the city trapped deep in the ocean with its entire population floating perpetually above it in a methane purgatory.

Well even if it's not Atlantis, they've definitely found something, right? And trying to put it back together is the best way to understand it, whatever it is.

Yeah, he says.

I light a cigarette between two outstretched fingers.

Can I try it?

I hesitate, but hand it to him. He puts the tip of the cigarette to his mouth without examining it, inhales, exhales. He hands it back to me without coughing.

Do you smell something? I ask.

No.

Must be my imagination.

Yesterday:

Herc? Do you want to talk?

What can I do? Can I bring you something? Anything.

What will make you feel better?

Is it something I said?

Please let me in.

Please.

How do I know you won't leave me, too?

17 days ago:

Toby, will you be okay for a few hours by yourself?

The train ride into the city is forty-five minutes of strip malls, farms, and woods. It reminds me of how much I hate strip malls, farms, and woods. In the city, a subway train burrows its way underground like an enormous metal rodent. It reminds me of how much I hate the city. I wonder where Toby and I will go next.

My building is made of cheap paneling and brick. Climbing ivy browns in the sun across the northernmost facade. It sprawls more than I remember. The key sticks in the lock, and for a minute I'm afraid it will break off in there. At last, it gives, and I push through the determined friction and the rust of the hinges to reveal the bright linoleum of my apartment.

Somehow, my betta fish is still alive. I root around in the debris of my bedroom floor, unearthing a favorite pair of jeans, a turquoise sweater, my headphones, several photographs of Toby as a baby. I excavate the things I want, expertly avoiding what I don't want to see, the books I never read, the crumpled interview clothes I wore only once or twice, the sweatshirt Dave forgot here before he left me. I pack up everything I want in a small duffel bag, say good-bye to the fish, and head out again.

For a minute, I feel bad about leaving someone else to uncover my junk, the proof of my nothingness. I wonder what will happen to all the stuff that I'm leaving behind. I wonder if it'll be sold, or thrown away. If

the next person to rent my apartment just inherits it, moves in on top of the whole mess.

2 days ago:

Aunt Caroline, who do you think is going to live here after us?

Well, no one. Not until they build the new house.

What new house?

They're going to tear this place down.

What?

I thought I told you that. I'm sorry.

Why the heck did you let me sign my name in every room in the house if it's just going to be torn down?

To make you feel better, I guess. I did it too.

Hercules kicks the dining room table, and a few pieces of junk mail flutter to the ground. I pretend not to notice. He does it again and again, until the walls rattle and the table rocks and the floor is littered with squat white envelopes.

Hey, cut it out, I say at last. He turns from the table.

Where are we going to live after tomorrow? He says, challenging me.

I don't know. I figured we'd buy a car, drive somewhere without a map. Play it by ear. We can stay in motels and eat as much pizza as we want.

Well that's just great. That sounds like a really solid plan.

What's wrong?

I am a little worried, he says slowly, as if maybe I am dense, that we don't really know what the screw we're doing here.

Hey, I thought you wanted this too. Trust me.

Why should I trust you?

I'm the grown-up. I realize the absurdity of this as soon as it's too late to take back.

You're not even that much older than me.

I'm twenty-two.

Exactly.

Come on, Hercules. It's going to be an adventure. Who knows where we'll end up? Maybe we'll find Atlantis.

Atlantis is bullcrap. They're never going to find it, because it never existed. Just because a philosopher wrote something that survived all these years doesn't mean he wasn't just making crap up to begin with.

Herc, what is this really about?

I told you already.

Toby, what is this really about?

The door slams in response.

25 days ago:

I call my sister's number, but the phone just rings and rings and rings. Hi, it's your sister, call me back, I say, for the fifth time in four days. The phone beeps back at me rudely.

Today:

What if I adopted you legally? You'd have it in writing.

On paper?

Yeah. On paper.

Paper is too thin.

What does that mean?

We go to the shadiest tattoo parlor I can stomach. The large man at the counter is wearing a T-shirt with the sleeves chopped off, revealing his grotesque, fleshy arms. He has no visible tattoos himself, which concerns me immediately.

Nah, sorry, I don't do kids, he says loudly, in the direction of the customer studiously observing kanji characters on the wall. Peace or love? We are about to leave, when the man takes me by the elbow and whispers: You swear you're this kid's guardian?

Absolutely, I say.

And you've got cash?

Yes.

The bell on the door jangles. The unfamiliar customer leaves, and the fat man motions for us to follow him to the back of the store.

Are you sure you want to do this?

Yeah. Are you?

I mean, if you are.

I am.

Well then, yeah.

I go first. My eyes water and I grip the fleshy handles of the chair as hard as I can. I close my eyes, but I can still see my arm glowing, raw. After an interminable hour, the man pulls back and I am branded. For the first time I appreciate the permanence of this etching, memorizing the new landscape on my body.

Hercules doesn't say anything when the needle dives into him. He winces apologetically when the ink disrupts a particularly sensitive spot on his arm. Otherwise, he is cheerful, as if he is not being carved at all. This isn't as bad as I thought it would be, he brags. His hair has gotten long. When he is also marked, Herc holds his gleaming arm up to mine, admiring our matching battle wounds.

Shit. That hurt, I say as we walk outside. I light up a fresh cigarette.

Can I have a puff?

No way.

Why not?

You're nine.

13 days ago:

You're all set.

You found her?

What do you mean?

My sister.

She said she'll sign. We faxed her the forms.

And the money?

She took fifteen grand. Said to give you the rest.

The man drives back to our house. He is still small. His suit still doesn't fit him. With a great flourish, he hands me an old-fashioned ballpoint pen that sputters on the page before it agrees to sign anything. As soon as I lay it down, Hercules takes it, uses it to pattern splotches of navy all over his left hand. The dots pool on his skin before being absorbed and branching out with spidery arms, like some alien virus. He never asks about his mother.

24 days ago:

The cat comes home beat up, her fur matted with her own inky blood. She is nineteen, which Toby informs me is ninety-two in cat years; too old to fight raccoons. She is rigid and sour, but Toby loves her, this cat who was ugly even as a kitten.

He holds her down while I try to rinse her wounds. I apply iodine to her scratches, bandages that only stick to places where her fur has already been clawed off. She yelps and yowls and emits low, Jurassic growls. She almost bites me twice, manages to scratch an angry canal across the back of Toby's hand. He holds fast to the mangled bundle, despite her desperate writhing, her unapologetic whine.

Do you think she knows that we're trying to help her? Toby asks.

30 days ago:

My sister calls me.

I'm going out of town, she says. I need you to come stay with Toby.

Where are you going? I ask.

Upstate, she says, I need a break.

For how long?

Just the weekend, she says,
Is it really just the weekend this time?
There's a long pause.
Come on, Caroline, what else do you have going on?

10 days ago:

We were in Atlantis.

You and me?

Yeah. We were there. I could tell because we were standing right in the middle, next to Poseidon's temple, just like Plato said. Everything was marble. You saw something in the distance, and you grabbed my hand and pulled me and we started running as fast as we could, faster than the sacred bulls that wandered in the streets, until we were flying over the city. We flew to the shore, over the concentric circles and the bay. And then . . . and then we just watched it, we watched the volcano erupt and the humongous wave fall and crash over the whole city. And then it was gone, and we were just standing there with the other survivors, staring at the place where the city used to be, as if we were waiting for something to spring up in its place.

Then what happened?

I don't know. I woke up.

OCEAN VUONG

*To Junior, After a Middle
School Fistfight*

I won't call it dancing
as I came undone
by the train track's

troubled thrum. Your fist
on my throat
as I broke

through summer's hold
on skin. I won't call it
dancing, even

as the white boys cheered
from the edge
of their shadows.

Take down the spic,
Jackie Chan. & when
my knuckles found

the bone that shaped
your Inca jaw
& the sky unhinged,

your tooth falling
into it—how
they howled, eyes widened

at what they knew
but could not
believe we had

become. I won't call it
hunger—even
if it nourishes. Beasts

of burden beating the body
until it bloomed
the darker truths,

until we swung
leaning on each other's
shoulders, muscles

so slick I could see
my own face reflected
in your twisted cheek.

With each blow,
salt sparks shook
off our backs

like April rain.
My busted lip dripping
on the track's black shine.

Fuck up the spic, Jackie Chan.

& you did. I stood over
my only friend, the passing freight's

coyote wail louder
than your left eye—a burst plum.
It's hard to believe in god

when I know
what my own hands
have done. Because, Junior,

we both knew the winner
would be lifted
on their shoulders,

his immigrant name
reddening their mouths.
Because like you, I too,

wanted to crawl
to the other side, to sleep
in a bigger house—

to erect myself
among all
that whiteness

& vanish

PAUL CARROLL

Mustard Sweater

Had she lived, she would have seen
the police photos: the blossoms
of the ornamental plum showering
her car after the crash, petals tessellating
the silver hood and fresh-paved street.
Because she was an art student
(I later learned from my daughter),
she might have noticed the clash of colors,
her mustard sweater, the pink flowers;
or the patterns of the fractured glass.

It had happened minutes earlier,
across the street from the ice rink.
They had not yet removed her when
I got there to skate, her head angled but not
terribly, as if asleep, soon to wake
and see the splintered tree still
blooming like a pink sparkler,
the crumpled car, the nothings
that joined hands to kill her, no
skid marks, no drugs, no one to blame—

What was left to do but skate
and pretend the ice was frictionless,
one backward stroke gliding forever?

DANIEL TORDAY

The White House Blues

I.

Though it looks old as stone, Lloyd Loar designed the F-5 mandolin, the main style of mandolin used in bluegrass music, in the late nineteen-teens. While he built these mandolins for Gibson for fewer than five years, their design has been the standard for first-rate mandolins since. It is ideal for the distinct rigid sound of bluegrass because of its combination of volume and clarity when picking single notes and the bark of its strings when “chopped” for rhythm, a sound produced by muting all eight strings with the left hand and striking downward hard and fast with the right (pick) hand. Every mandolin Lloyd Loar built is now catalogued and tracked by mandolin enthusiasts, players and collectors. Only 326 were made. If one of these instruments, no matter how beat-up, goes up for sale, it immediately sells in the mid six figures.

When I was in my early twenties and living in Brooklyn, I bought a Flatiron F-5 mandolin. It was relatively expensive, made by a company later bought out by Gibson, purchased with money left to me by an old Hungarian aunt who’d emigrated from Budapest before the war, and built by a master builder named Bruce Weber. I bought it from a player

in Kentucky I'd found online. I was working as a magazine editor in midtown Manhattan at the time, and one day a box arrived at my desk. It was large enough to hold a coffin for a toddler. I took the instrument out. It smelled of lacquer, and I felt intoxicated. I could barely get back to my work, or shake the amber smell from my head. Soon, every Wednesday night, I went to the biggest bluegrass jam in New York, at the Baggot Inn, on West 3rd Street.

In the back of the Baggot Inn was hard-driving bluegrass music, people singing harmonies and, in between each verse, a chance for the fiddles, guitars, banjos, and mandolins like the one I played to take a solo, or a "break" as it is known. I was still learning to play, and the experience of leading a song could be nerve-wracking. One had to signal the harmonic structure of a song, sing, nod at a player to take a break and even take a break himself, while at least the bull fiddle player held the rhythm. Still, within a couple months of first coming to the jam, I began to lead songs. I could sing loud and high like a girl, and so when there was a lull in the music the dobro player, an old guy in a cowboy hat and leather vest known only as "the Sheriff of Good Times" (or, if you knew him well, "the Sheriff," or even "Sheriff Uncle Bob") would often look to me for a song.

The hardest thing for me once I'd grown competent on my instrument was, to my surprise, remembering the words. What felt like an infinite number of things would be going on at once—a group of as many as a dozen veteran players and three or four dozen people sitting around watching, too—and while I could keep the chords going, and belt it out, often I'd end up having to sing something like, "I've got a pig at home in a pen, corn to smush him smah-ahn, all I need's a smittle smittle girl, to sleep when I get ahn."

When I got to know songs better, often I'd have to take snippets of different verses and cram them together to make them go: instead of "I'm going up the mountain, to see my baby / and I ain't coming back,

no I ain't coming back," and then "If they ask you, where this poor boy went to / just tell 'em I'm gone, well, tell 'em I'm gone," I might find myself singing, "If they ask you where this poor boy went to, I ain't coming back, no I ain't coming back." It was an innocuous offense, and frankly still made sense if you didn't know this was an updated version of a nineteenth-century nostalgia song ruing the advent of the steam locomotive and the advances of technology, about John Henry, who out-shoveled a steam engine until he died on the track. This kind of anachronistic white-knuckled desire for the maintenance of a distant past—and for the past to, by some yogic back-bends, stay present—is endemic to the music, whose very aesthetic relies upon its practitioners to adhere to tradition to the point of pretending not to know there is such a thing as a drum kit.

Much of the time no one noticed. But when the good players came to play, they would sit and glare, hawk-like, interrogating your chops. A certain dogged interrogation of whether a player has his chops on his instrument might distract even the most traditional bluegrass musician from noticing an errant lyric here and there.

During this time, an older mandolin player with a beautiful eighties Gibson F-5 mandolin worth probably five times what mine was worth began to come to the jam. He had it in for me. He wore an authentic hard-straw cowboy hat and an equally authentic wizened frown. It was easy to see he didn't feel I played the melody enough when I took breaks. That was the refrain the traditionalists were always repeating when you heard them under their breaths: "Just play the melody." Over the years I'd improved at just playing the melody, but as I say, that was one of many things, and the words still dropped away more frequently than I might have liked.

Not long after this Scowling Mandolinist started coming to the Baggot Inn regularly, I found a song that always got a huge response, a tune I'd learned from a Bill Monroe record. It was called "The White

House Blues.” It’s a wildly fast song—the recorded version I’d learned is barely two minutes long but contains four verses. All I really knew about the lyrics was that it starts out, “McKinley he holler, McKinley he moan, Doc says McKinley, well, I can’t find no pulse / You’re bound to die, you’re bound to die.” Later in the song there’s a nice little rhyme in which the doctor “put on his specs” and “said Mr. McKinley, better cash in your checks.” I hadn’t given any thought to the meanings of the words. Given that most of the excitement of the song came from the fact I led the group in playing it at 140, even 150 beats per minute (about as fast as one could reasonably play while still having hands; at 440 bpm metronome just rings out an A tone), I felt a certain pride in getting through the song at all.

But each time I played this song in front of Scowling Mandolinist, his scowl seemed to grow deeper as the song progressed until, a month of Wednesdays into his deepening frown, he simply put his instrument down and shouted:

“No! No! That’s NOT the way it goes!”

I didn’t know what had happened. I was playing so fast I couldn’t take it in any better than I could remember the lyrics. I finished the verse I was singing: “Well, McKinley in the White House, doin’ his best, Roosevelt’s in the ground you know he can’t get no rest / Well, he’s gone, a long time.” I finished the thing, even put in a crafty instrumental tag at the end at doppler speed, and the crowd of forty-or-so drunken bluegrass lovers, tourists and New Yorkers alike, cheered. I went to the bar to grab a bourbon, pushing through the press of patrons, and after putting in my order with the bartender, I saw Scowling was right next to me.

He was staring at the side of my face like a magnifying glass concentrating light from the sun.

“You destroy that song,” he said. “Every damn time you play it you mangle it wors’n roadkill.”

I just sat and looked at him. Honestly, he'd always seemed a little unhinged—his black rose-embroidered cowboy shirt wasn't without its unidentifiable stains—but now I had no choice but to take him up. I didn't say anything back. I just met his eyes with mine.

"McKinley's not in the goddamn White House, goddammit," Scowling said.

I could smell something sour on him. I just wanted my whiskey.

"Roosevelt is the one in the White House, his vice president. Get it right."

I thought to tell him I was just trying to get through the thing without a train wreck, and that I was trying to find some songs in an idiom I loved and that had high harmonies that suited my vocal proclivities that weren't about Jesus, since I was a Jew singing a whole slew of gospel songs. But my drink came, and that was the end of it.

Until years later. I'd stopped playing bluegrass, for the most part, after getting a job teaching and having a kid. And for all the reasons one realizes he can't make a living as a bluegrass musician, I'd decided not to attempt to make it as a bluegrass musician. I'd begun teaching, Henry David Thoreau and Chekhov and Kafka, and writing full-time, an activity that takes place at zero bpm. In the classroom, in a writing workshop, I'd often find myself using the language of bluegrass as a metaphor for writing—"This story needs more backbeat," I'd find myself saying, or "You always have to sing your highest note loudest." I also found myself looking into the background of the folk songs I'd been singing all those years. Maybe something Scowling said had stuck in my craw. Maybe I just had time on my hands, instead of in them. There I was in the library instead of the bar.

Bill Monroe employed hundreds of Bluegrass Boys over the six decades he toured the U.S., and his version of "The White House Blues" was passed down for years. It told the story of the assassination of

William McKinley. McKinley had been considered quite conservative, doing everything he could to maintain the gold standard and to use tariffs on foreign goods to prop up the U.S., which was just coming out of a recession. In 1900, the same *fin-de-siècle* year when Chekhov was publishing “Lady with a Little Dog,” McKinley won a second term. But on a whistle stop engagement in Buffalo, New York, on September 6, 1901 at 4:07 p.m., a twenty-four-year-old named Leon Czolgosz walked up to McKinley with a Johnson-Ivory .52-caliber pistol in his hand. He shot three times into the President’s gut. A mob attacked Czolgosz, nearly killing him, until he was brought into custody. The President lived a week with the bullets lodged in his abdomen—his doctor briefly thought he might make it—until he succumbed to his wounds. While today the average wait on death row is more than a decade, Leon Czolgosz was tried, convicted, and hanged by the end of October.

The precise details of Czolgosz’s background aren’t wholly clear, but what is certain is that he had arrived in central Ohio with his family from somewhere in Eastern Europe two decades earlier. While he was assumed to be Polish because of his name (some reports had him from Belarus), Czolgosz told officials he was Hungarian. His family had emigrated from the Austro-Hungarian Empire—as had my aunt, the one who’d financed the purchase of that Flatiron F-5 mandolin shipped to my office in Midtown, and my Hungarian father—and sought a new life in the United States.

Czolgosz found little success in the U.S. In the years leading up to September 6, 1901, he had been working at a glass factory in Natrona, Pennsylvania. He’d seen repeated strikes there, strikes that were both violent and futile. He’d joined an anarchist group, even having met Emma Goldman at a meeting outside Cleveland, though he claimed not to have been part of an active cell of any kind. The echoes ringing out from the shots that killed McKinley began just days after the

event, as McKinley's vice president, Theodore Roosevelt, took over the presidency. Emma Goldman gave speeches in Czolgosz's defense. In a famous painting depicting the assassination, Leon Czolgosz looks like a swarthy, mustachioed madman; his mugshots show him to be handsome and serious.

From the moment Czolgosz was executed, government officials feared that McKinley's assassin might grow to be a symbol of anarchist victory. McKinley's supporters might exhume the body and burn it. They decided it must be destroyed.

This all took place before the widespread use of cremation. Rather than being burned in a kiln, Czolgosz's body was covered in sulfuric acid when he was interred. The coroner reported that his remains dissolved in less than twelve hours.

The memory of Leon Czolgosz's name didn't take much longer to be expunged. In 1923, a famous North Carolina folklorist and guitar player named Bascom Lamar Lunsford heard a song about the incident being played by an amateur musician named Willard Randolph. Lunsford was a lawyer and an amateur historian and his version of the song came to be catalogued both in Harry Smith's seminal *Anthology of American Folk Music* and in the Library of Congress. He titled his version of the song "Zolgotz."

Folk music can bear history along with it, but its mode of doing so comes in its ability to convey a simple story in verses that even simians like, say, me, can sing while concurrently playing an instrument. The more one tries to think about what he knows, the more one discovers the limits of his capacity to know anything at all. And what is memory but the measure by which we come to learn what we know? "A very meagre natural history suffices to make me a child," Thoreau wrote in his journal on February 14, 1839. "Only their names and genealogy make me love fishes."

The other song whose lyrics I always bungled is called “The Nine-Pound Hammer.” As I said, it’s one of a seemingly infinite number of versions of the story of John Henry, who used a hammer in competition with a steam locomotive, which it was feared might take over from the manual labor that was the livelihood for many Americans at the time. The song starts by telling us that “This nine pound hammer, it’s a little too heavy / buddy for my size, buddy for my size.” After each verse it has an optimistic refrain, sung as call and response: “Well, roll on buddy, don’t you roll too slow / How can I roll, when the wheels won’t roll.”

There are more iterations of this refrain than I could even try to list here (“John Henry cried captain, I’ll die with this hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord / I’ll die with this hammer in my hand”), but they all take up the same ideological conflict: It’s hard to make the coal in the train move when you’re just a man and not a steam-powered engine. You might die trying, but you can move it. John Henry does die in the end (“This nine-pound hammer, it killed John Henry, ain’t gonna kill me, ain’t gonna kill me”), but the listener rolls on.

In their influential book *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, John and Alan Lomax relate a story Carl Sandburg told about this song: once when he was in North Carolina searching out songs, Sandburg ended up in a boat with some locals. The boat seemed destined to sink. Someone began to sing of John Henry, who beat a steam engine. “Yas-suh!” one of the locals said upon hearing this story. ‘I jus’ been study about dat John Henry. If dat man could beat de steam, I t’ink I bring dis ol’ boat back to dat landin’ all right. If I don’t, I’ll die wid dese oar in my han.’” What kind of memory this variety of folk story belongs to I’m not certain, but it is, to be certain, one kind of memory.

The version of “The White House Blues” I used to sing at Bluegrass jams at the Baggot Inn in New York City, four hundred miles south of the city where McKinley was killed, six hundred miles north of North Carolina, and a solid thousand miles west of the Hungary, where Czolgosz

claims to have come from and where my father was, without question, born, has no refrain. Is it just that which makes the idea of memorizing nineteen verses of the version called “Zolgotz” seem so quixotic? Or is it that the story of McKinley’s assassination is so complicated? Unlike John Wilkes Booth or even Mark David Chapman, the name Leon Czolgosz carries no immediate association for any but the serious historian (a group that includes, it would appear, my Baggot Inn nemesis, Scowling Mandolinist). A Polish or Hungarian or Belarusian kid from Ohio then living in Pennsylvania who may or may not have been tied to an anarchist cell killed the President and then was hanged.

What’s the folktale?

Just four or five verses don’t quite constitute a narrative. The sole repeated line in the version I’d come to know well enough to sing fast in front of people was, “You’re bound to die, you’re bound to die,” which is so broad as to have not only no political weight but no real weight as an augury. Even the non-assassin, even the president, is surely aware this is true, though he doesn’t think of it daily without risking his sanity. It would appear to be an imagined quote from what Czolgosz—nameless in this version—might have said as he plugged three bullets into McKinley’s stomach. Or, at best, a kind of gnomic warning against the fear of anarchism.

In Bill Monroe’s 1954 version, Czolgosz has been excised from the narrative. But what has remained is one verse about McKinley’s vice-president taking over for him. This Roosevelt verse is the one I got so miserably wrong back that night when Scowling Mandolinist threw down his instrument and left the circle to get a drink and then to berate me:

Now Roosevelt’s in the White House, he’s doing his best
 McKinley’s in the graveyard, he’s taking his rest
 Well he’s gone a long time

Like the “bound to die” line, this verse seems to confirm the song has become about as broad a take on death as is semantically possible: when it comes, you take your rest. For a long time. But I’m willing to acknowledge it’s also about one further thing: Theodore Roosevelt assuming the presidency. Teddy Roosevelt, whose name anyone who knows even a modicum of American history should surely know.

So, sorry, Scowling Mandolinist.

You were right, and if you’re out there: I know I’m bound to die. I just don’t want to think about it too often.

2.

The first time the Sheriff of Good Times took me to his apartment, I was more than a little embarrassed to admit I was surprised to learn he had an apartment at all. There was something ragged in his face and jangly in his voice that did not suggest he would live in an enormous apartment on one of the most desirable blocks in Manhattan. It was nearly four in the morning, I had to go to work at my magazine job the next day—those bluegrass jams at the Baggot Inn were on Wednesday nights—and I’d had seven tequila gimlets, a drink known at the Baggot simply as a “the Sheriff.”

The night was a loss at that point.

So when the Sheriff asked if I wanted to come back with him and a guitarist and a fiddler to have a smoke I figured, Why not? I was going to have to call in sick the next morning anyway. I’d grown close enough to the Sheriff that we were playing in an on-again, off-again band called The Nieces and Nephews, and it seemed we’d known each other well enough that it would make sense for me to see his place.

We’d ridden up four stories in a private elevator in a place a couple blocks down from the Angelika and were let out into a cavernous brick-exposed room before I realized that this was the Sheriff’s apartment. Paintings and sketches hung on every wall the way they might be hung

at MoMA. There were two beautiful daybeds in the room's center, and a raised platform where a second living area was set up. I was drunk, but a part of my mind wouldn't stop suggesting to me that it was seeing a large Picasso hanging on a far wall. I shook the feeling. I walked over to a small sketch, smaller than the size of a magazine cover, hanging at eye-level.

It appeared to be a Paul Klee print.

I looked closer and it appeared even more to be not a Paul Klee print, but an actual Paul Klee, one not unlike those I'd seen regularly at MoMA and down at the Barnes Gallery in Philadelphia on a recent trip to cover the NBA All-Star Game for the magazine where I held my day job. The fiddler in our band, a red-haired Texan I'd come to know well in the past months, saw me staring and said:

"It's a Klee."

"It almost looks like an original," I said.

Redheaded Fiddler looked at me long and hard—she didn't need to resort to sobriety to put me in my place—and said:

"Not looks like. Is."

"Is," I said, not knowing what else I could say.

We retired to an enormous studio at the back of the apartment and after waking up the next day with a hangover like my brain wanted out of my head, I largely forgot about the event.

Months later I learned from a fellow mandolin player that the Sheriff's real name was Bob Saidenberg. I looked up Robert Saidenberg and discovered this: the Sheriff wasn't only a dobro player leading jams on West 3rd Street and officiating good times. A couple of years earlier, in the summer of 1999, the Sheriff Uncle Bob's mother, Eleanore Saidenberg, had passed. Eleanore Saidenberg had been the sole proprietor during her life of the Saidenberg Gallery, the exclusive dealer of Picasso's works in America from 1953 until his death. After his mother's death, the Sheriff had pulled off what came to be known as "The Saidenberg

Coup.” The Sheriff knew he was going to sell a lot of his mother’s paintings, including not just Klees and Brancusis and Juan Grises but also two very famous Picassos: *Femme Assise dans un Jardin* and *La Statuaire*.

The nature of the coup, in short, was this: on his own, the man I knew as the dobro player called the Sheriff of Good Times, who had a foul-tasting tequila drink named after him at a dingy West Village bar, brought these paintings to a number of prominent dealers. He suggested he would be willing to sell these paintings piecemeal, or as a group. When he didn’t like the numbers he heard, he brought the paintings en bloc to Sotheby’s, which in turn got more than seventy million dollars for the group. They sold forty-four of the forty-six paintings.

The gem of the group was *Femme Assise dans un Jardin*. The painting was one of Picasso’s finest, a Cubist masterpiece. It depicts his long-time mistress, the poet and photographer Dora Maar, surrounded by shapes and lines. Dora Maar and Picasso had a notoriously tumultuous affair, one that lasted for years but ended badly. The combination of this famous subject for the painting and its place in the development of Cubism gave it an estimated value of forty to forty-five million dollars.

Sheriff Uncle Bob and Sotheby’s sold it at auction in October of 1999, three months after the death of Eleanore Saidenberg, for forty-nine and a half million dollars, well more than what was expected. *La Statuaire* fetched another eleven million, but the story of the night, the fact that made it into The Saidenberg Coup, was the price the Dora Maar portrait drew. At the time of this writing, it was the fifteenth highest price ever paid for a painting.

That night in his apartment in SoHo, Sheriff Uncle Bob didn’t mention his coup, his real name, any of this. He didn’t mention that only three years earlier he had pulled off this coup, and that while he’d clearly been raised with means, he had just acquired seventy million dollars. He also didn’t mention that his father, Daniel Saidenberg, had been a world-class cellist. Daniel Saidenberg was famous for bringing

out a Stradivarius he owned—one that had its own name, “The Duke of Marlborough”—and when he arrived in New York City after meeting Eleanore in Chicago, he was invited to be an assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic, a job he turned down because he wanted to play cello.

So back in his apartment at almost 5 a.m. on a work night, we all had our instruments in hand, and as he did at the Baggot Inn every Wednesday night for years, and which he still does though the jam has since been moved to a venue nearby, Sheriff Uncle Bob led us into a version of “Roll in My Sweet Baby’s Arms.” It’s entirely possible I played a version of “The White House Blues” that night. It’s equally likely I didn’t. I had come to memorize (poorly) hundreds of bluegrass songs by that point, and it was five in the morning, and I was drunk and sitting among Picassos and Klees for the first time in my life in a private home while playing mandolin, and there were times after that first night when I went to play at the Sheriff’s apartment when I might have played that song. I’m certain not one of those players with me that night thought of Czolgosz and his anarchism while I sang it.

When I think of that night, mostly I wonder: when Sheriff Uncle Bob watched his famous father playing cello, what did he witness? The way one must execute each note when he’s playing classical music, reading diligently from a sheet of music? Did he already long for something looser, long for the freedom memory brings, a freedom that might make a man the Sheriff of Good Times, playing in the folk structures I myself had come to love in those years? When he was a kid, the Sheriff must have sat around his mother’s gallery, seeing paintings that had been executed twenty, forty, sixty years earlier, but which had been so thoroughly canonized that they not only brought prices in the tens of millions of dollars but, more important, contained images that would be burned into the cultural mind like a hypertrophied folk song. At his home, would he listen to his father play Mozart and Chopin, all the while

longing to stand in front of people with a sideways steel-stringed guitar, singing the songs of Bill Monroe and Hank Williams? What kinds of memory did these two worlds of music evoke and how did what they evoked differ from those evocative paintings, the proceeds from which allowed him such freedom?

All I know for certain is this: that first night I went to the Sheriff's apartment there was no cello in our midst, no sheet music before us. We played until the sun rose. Every note, every lyric, came by ear—or from memory.

3.

But, now, hold on a second: did I really, honestly, not think about the fact that the song “The White House Blues” was about the assassination of President McKinley? That seems somehow disingenuous. In fact, after writing this all down, I woke up in the middle of the night thinking, This all might be bullshit. It's more complicated. During the time I was learning to play mandolin, my mind had to change the way it created one kind of memory. It's a change I suspect is not wholly dissimilar from the change required for my grandfather to begin learning English back in 1951 when he picked up his family and moved them from Budapest to Long Island, a feat he never quite accomplished. It always drove my father to distraction, the way my grandfather struggled to speak English even after fifty years in this country, even after he'd succumbed to diabetes, thinned until he looked like a house left vacant to raccoons.

I began to learn violin when I was five and played it and the viola until I was thirteen. I've played guitar since. I hated playing the violin when I was a kid. I willfully chose not to practice until my parents had no choice but to let me give it up. It wasn't cool in middle school to be seen seated on a metal chair in a cafeteria playing Mozart, and I was tragically interested in being cool at that point in life. But I only began

to take on the mandolin in earnest when I was twenty-two. The first year I lived in NYC, I sat around practicing mandolin as many as ten hours a day on the weekends. I took occasional lessons, and unlike the violin lessons I'd had when I was a kid, using first the Suzuki Method and then learning to read music, these lessons were based on ear training. Folk music is about creating a collective memory, not just in its lyrics but in its harmonies and melodies as well. The mandolin players I studied with, one of whom had been one of Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys and the other of whom had played with nearly everyone you could name, both required you to bring along a recording device.

They did not write music down.

They played melodies, demonstrated chord changes. They talked about attack, which is the way in which the pick of a mandolin hits its string; or about accenting notes, which is just what it sounds like; or about thinking about how to keep time. Unlike art music, which might try your physical ability but which assumed you were reading from complicated scores that could simply not be memorized in their totality, one of the limitations of folk music was that it had to be memorizable. Whatever a song like "John Henry" or "The White House Blues" was invested in furthering, it had to be contained there: in memory. Whatever your brain capacity, if an entire song was only a repetition of a melodic line in twelve or sixteen bars, unless you'd gorged yourself on paint chips as a kid, if you could play the instrument physically, you could memorize the song.

Something began to shift after these lessons began in earnest.

I got better.

But my brain had to jettison something. New pathways were being created between old neurons. My brain came right up against its limitations. One was that if I was going to truly listen to the way Sam Bush played an instrumental fiddle tune called "Big Mon," and then see how it translated into the way he played over "(I'm Going Back to) Old

Kentucky,” a song with lyrics, I was going to have to stop thinking about something and listen.

So I stopped listening to the lyrics. I made a tacit decision to allow my brain to jettison whatever it needed—to forget other things—in order to cram those notes in there. So, sure, when I heard the “White House” in “The White House Blues” some part of my brain must have thought something like: Place-Where-President-Lives / Has-Lived + Sadness = Fast Tough Song. And when I heard “McKinley he hollers,” I’d have been able to consider that this was more likely the President who was hollering than the mountain bearing his name. But this was all being processed in the same way I’d been processing “Pachelbel’s Canon in D Major” as it played in the background of a Banana Republic in a shopping mall in Chestnut Hill when I was a kid. I’d played the song on the violin since before I’d read an entire book.

But if I was talking to someone, I didn’t stop to think about note intervals, or how the harmony worked; I took it in and moved past, while thinking about the conversation I was in. If I heard “Sweet Home Alabama” in the food court of that shopping mall, while I might have made a joke about the lyrics (“Now Watergate does not bother me, does your conscience bother you—tell the truth” doesn’t have the sting of “Zolgotz” but it’s actually more intelligent than you might assume a band called Lynyrd Skynyrd with three [three!] guitarists would be), I wasn’t thinking about the harmony of the song. I wouldn’t have noted that it appeared to be in the same key as Pachelbel’s canon, the note on which the country-rock song starts.

After a couple years of playing bluegrass mandolin, I did start thinking that way. If I heard that Skynyrd song, some conscious part of my brain would think, D-D-D-D, C-C-C-C, G...G-G-G-G-G-G. Bluegrass guitarists regularly capo their guitars, so rather than have to think about a song’s key signature they can think in numbers, in the simplest of harmonic relationships. If I heard “Sweet Home Alabama” now I’d actu-

ally say, Well, that's a pretty smart song. It's not in D but in G. It starts on the five (V) chord, the D. Then it drops back to the four, and down to the one—the G. This kind of thinking can quickly wear, turning beauty to quant. I can only guess it wears in a way that might have tired the Sheriff Uncle Bob, listening to his father playing cello—arduously eyeing sheet music, executing technical virtuosity. But something had changed in my brain, something necessary not because my conception of beauty had changed but because I couldn't both remember that version of beauty and play the music itself. I just didn't have the brain capacity for both.

On April 23, 1841, Thoreau wrote in his Journal, "Music is the sound of the circulation in nature's veins. It is the flux which melts nature. Men dance to it, glasses ring and vibrate, and the fields seem to undulate. The healthy ear always hears it, nearer and more remote." Has my own ear grown ill, turning music to numbers? Did the Sheriff's ear begin to suffer from some sickness that made him long for freedom, for nights of infinite tequila gimlets made bottomless by the sale of a fortune in Picassos? "When I hear music," Thoreau's April 23 journal entry ends, "I flutter, and am the sense of life, as a fleet of merchantmen when the wind rises."



Robert Rauschenberg in his studio at 381 Lafayette Street with Mint (Hoarfrost), 1974. Photograph by Art Kane. Courtesy the Art Kane Archive.

All of the following images courtesy of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York.



Robert Rauschenberg, *First Time Painting*, 1961, Combine: oil, paper, fabric, sailcloth, plastic exhaust cap, alarm clock, sheet metal, adhesive tape, metal springs, wire, and string on canvas, 76 3/4 in. x 51 1/4 in. x 8 7/8 in. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.



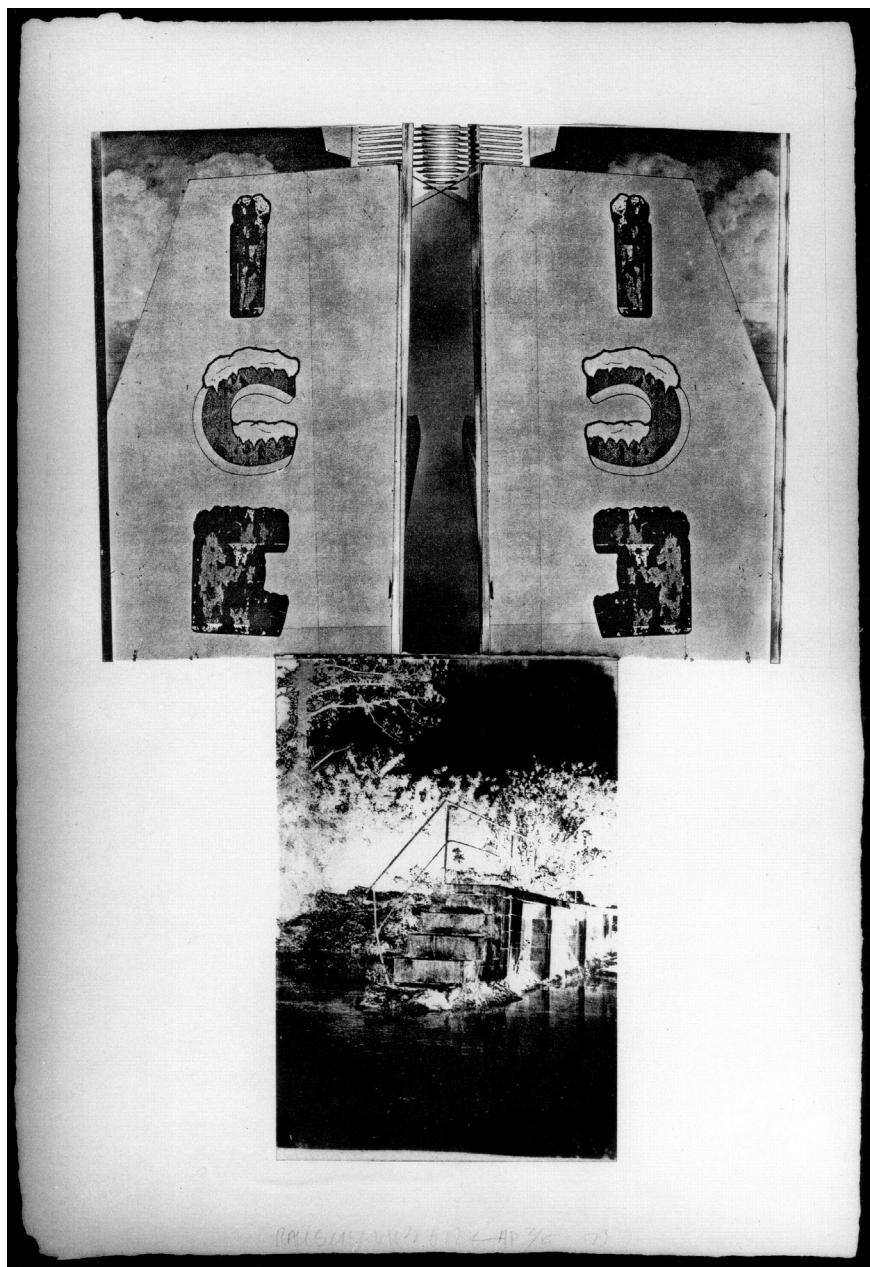
Robert Rauschenberg, *Reservoir*, 1961, Combine: oil, pencil, fabric, wood, and metal on canvas with two electric clocks, rubber tread wheel, and spoked wheel rim, 85 1/2 in. x 62 1/2 in. x 15 1/2 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.



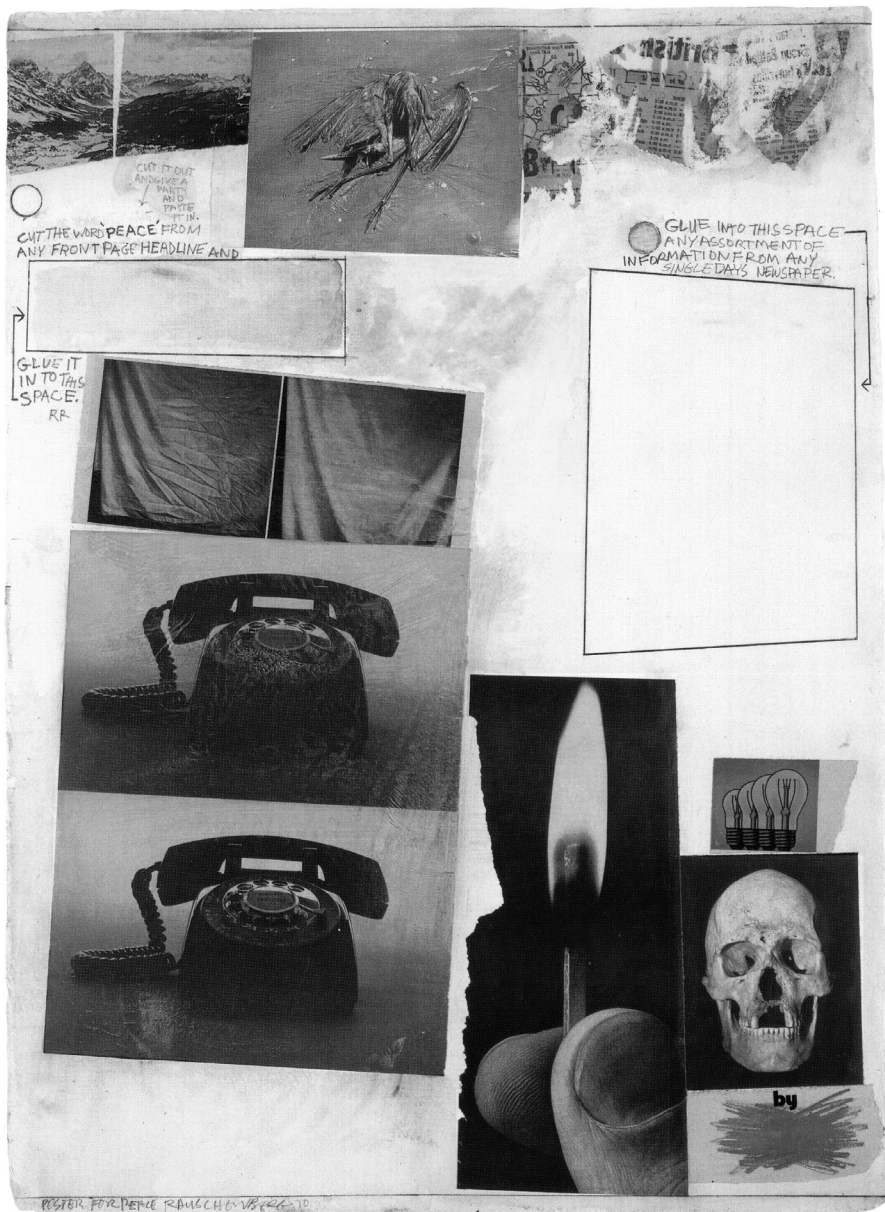
Robert Rauschenberg, *Trophy I (for Merce Cunningham)*, 1959, *Combine*: oil, graphite, metallic paint, paper, fabric, wood, metal, newspaper, printed reproductions, and photograph on canvas, 66 in. x 41 in. x 2 in. Kunsthau, Zurich.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Winter Pool*, 1959, Combine: oil, paper, fabric, wood, metal, sandpaper, tape, printed paper, printed reproductions, handheld bellows, and found painting on two canvases with ladder, 90 in. x 58 1/2 in. x 4 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Glacial Decoy Series: Etching III*, 1979, etching and photoetching on handmade paper, 24 5/8 in. x 16 3/4 in. From an edition of 22 published by Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, NY.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Poster for Peace*, 1970, printed reproductions, newspaper, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 31 in. x 22 1/2 in. Private Collection.





Robert Rauschenberg, *Gospel Yodel (Salvage)*, 1984,
acrylic on canvas, 81 1/2 in. x 118 in. Private Collection.

CORNELIUS EADY

The Death of Robert Johnson

Boys, my slick days are over.
I'm telling you now:
My high-fly is done.
Some of you will say
After I'm dead and gone,
That these fingers,
The ones that raised the poisoned
Whiskey to my lips,
Are the ones that signed
On the devil's dotted line,
The only way a no body
Gets to be a some body,
Could tease such evil facts
From a neck of a guitar.
That that gal I kissed,
And her husband seeing that,
Was the fine print,
The way things get
Paid off
When a no body
Gets to be a some body
Around these parts;
The tree limbs from time to time

Bend from uppity and sass back,
 Sways from *I ain't done nothing*
But look.

White men don't call that
 The devil,
 White men says that's
 The Good Lord's law.
 And a no body
 Singing how that feels,
 Making you want to laugh
 And dance to it,
 Inviting you to tap your feet
 To misery,
 Boys, that was my magic.
 And that pretty gal
 I shouldn't have messed with,
 Whose husband filled my guts
 With slow lye;
 That's the boy
 Who rows a small boat
 Towards a threatening sky,
 Calculates the ride
 Might be worth the soaking.

KRISTIN ROBERTSON

Haint Ceilings

The Gullah culture of the Lowcountry believes that spirits, known as “haints,” can’t cross water. Using light blue paint to symbolize water, the Gullah people applied the shade to porch ceilings and doors preventing evil spirits from entering.

—*Southern Living*

Your dead neighbor straddles your windowsill,
duct-taping her cardboard wings to her bathrobe,

determined to fly and then flying, this time,
like a swallow skimming your pool for a drink.

Someone’s grandmother cusses her cold cream
halfway up your staircase, and you glimpse

her painted-on stocking seams, her victory rolls,
a flicker of white gloves she wore only to the bank.

A stewardess leans against your repurposed pie safe,
tells you she worked three ships before they sank,

including *Titanic*, tells you her name’s Violet Jessop.
She rinses three scalloped aprons in your farm sink.

But you're really only painting your porch ceiling
to keep out two college students, a boy and a girl,

who were raped and tortured and left to die
the first year you taught writing. They're always

on your front lawn, asking to hand in their love poems
from the day they were buried, that missed class.

JOAN WICKERSHAM

The Program

THE PROGRAM REQUIRED you to call your sponsor every morning. Your sponsor told you to call at 5:45. When you called the first morning, she said, “It’s five forty-six. You’re late.”

The program required you to weigh and measure all your food. Four ounces of this, six ounces of that. No sugar, no flour. “Four-point-oh means four-point-oh,” your sponsor said. If you ate more, or less, than the stipulated amounts, it was a break. If you broke, you had to go back to Day One.

The program required you to go to four meetings a week. When you asked why, you were told, “Because that’s what is suggested.” When you asked by whom, you were told, “By those who have gone before you.”

The program had its own grammar, its own rhetoric. People did not refer to it as “the program,” but rather “program.” As in, “Before I came into program.” Or, when asking about someone who had not been seen in a while, “Is she still in program?” That “the,” the article exiled from its rightful place as a modifier of “program,” had instead attached itself to the word “food.” It was always “the food.” As in, “The food had me by the throat.” Or, “Before program, when I was in the food.” People were

in the food. They didn't eat it; they were in it. The verb "to eat" had its own prescribed usage and meaning. When used with an object—"I ate my dinner," or the even more strict and self-lauding "I ate my weighed and measured meal"—then it was innocent: you were working a good program, as laid down by those who had gone before you. But bereft of its object, the verb "to eat" became a wild, lonely offender, an outlaw. It was employed in whispered conversations about suspect third parties—suspect because they were getting bigger, or had stopped losing weight: "I think she's eating." The first-person form of the verb showed up in shamefaced after-the-fact confessions, as in "I had a spoonful of peanut butter. I ate." Or the even more shameful, "I've been eating for weeks." If you were working a good program you did not eat. When you ate only your weighed and measured meals you were abstinent; you were not eating.

The program held its meetings in church basements, in senior centers, in hospital auditoriums and conference rooms, in empty high school classrooms at night. The meeting rooms, no matter how small, were referred to as "these halls." As in, "When I first came into these halls twenty years ago, I had no hope." Sometimes people said "walls" instead—"When I came into these walls," as if you were termites. The meetings could be six people or two hundred. Even in a little meeting, the chairs were arranged in rows. Circles were frowned on: too therapy-like.

The program was full of women. There were people who'd gone to Ivy League schools and people who'd grown up in sharecropper cabins with illiterate parents. There were people whose parents had beaten them or burned them or locked them in closets or thrown them out of the house. There were people who had stolen, people who'd done drugs and sold drugs. There were many who'd been raped. There was a woman with five houses, and there were people who lived in public housing. There were quiet people who spoke little English. There were

people who used canes or walkers, and one woman who came to meetings rolling an oxygen canister. There were mothers and grandmothers, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law and girls still in high school. "The disease does not discriminate," people said.

The program was full of slogans. "Easy does it," you were told. "One day at a time." You were also told to live and let live, to get out of the driver's seat, and to let go and let God. You were told that the problem before you was never as great as the power behind you. You were told to put first things first. You were told to take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth.

The program had a language. "We" and "us" were its favored pronouns. We were addicts, and addiction was a disease of fear, doubt, and insecurity. We addicts were relief-seeking missiles. We had a God-sized hole inside us. When we came into program, we put down the food. When we put down the food, we were surrendering. When we surrendered, we started living life on life's terms. We knew that our addiction could not be cured; it could only be arrested a day at a time. We knew that for us food was a drug. We had to work the program or else we might pick up. We were only one bite away from being in disease. We knew that while we were in these halls our disease was outside doing push-ups in the parking lot. We saw that we were only as sick as our sickest secrets. We were not terminally unique. We were just another bozo on the bus. We began to live a life that was second to none. We became happy joyous and free. We saw that fundamentally all was well.

The program did not want money. A basket went around at meetings and you put in a dollar or two. What the program wanted was your loyalty, your fervor, your faith, your love. It wanted you to marry it. You were told, "Program first, family second, work third." The program stiffened and turned chilly if you complained. It wanted you to be grateful. It wanted you to stay with it forever.

The program had a secret language, spoken quietly among dissidents. You wondered what the hell you were doing there. You wondered if it was a cult. You thought your sponsor was a harsh, rigid, power-crazy hypocrite. You were sick of the meetings, sick of the phone calls, sick of salad, sick of weighing and measuring, sick of the slogans and clichés, sick of being grateful. You wondered about the people you knew who had left—how were they doing? Were they eating? Well, yeah, they were. You had been walking down the street and seen one of them sitting in a pizza place, eating a big slice. You'd run into another at the supermarket, and she'd gained back all the weight. That's the thing, you agreed: if you left you might get fat again. The program sucked, but it worked. Fundamentally all was well.

The program did work. You came in and lost fifteen pounds the first month, and twelve the month after that, and it just kept going. The really big people—the ones over 300 pounds, and the ones who were even bigger, who hobbled in on canes, gasping, who couldn't sit in the chairs with arms and sat in armless chairs with the flesh of their thighs and buttocks hanging down beside them, who sometimes smelled because they couldn't reach around to wipe themselves, whose faces hung slack with exhaustion—they lost weight even faster. If they stayed, you watched them change over time: shrink and come into sharper focus, stand up straighter, ditch the cane, smile, reveal a sly sense of humor, talk about hope and gratitude. In their mouths this talk did not sound sappy or clichéd. It sounded like the truth. They spoke about miracles and you felt you were seeing something miraculous. Some of them stayed, but some disappeared. There was one woman you would always remember, who had lost 85 pounds and had another hundred or so to go. She shared at a meeting (people did not speak at meetings; they "shared") that a week ago she had flown down to Atlanta to see her son and he had walked right past her at the airport. He hadn't recognized her. She thanked the program, she thanked God. A few months later she

was gone. You thought of her sometimes in the years after that. What had become of her, of her giddy confidence, her newfound optimism, her sense that she'd been blessed? She had *gone out*, in program parlance. She was *out there*.

The program said, of people like her, "She's probably died by now of this disease." And maybe she had. Who were you to laugh at the solemnity of such a pronouncement? One of the people whom you'd sponsored had died. Her name was Roberta. She had come in at close to 400 pounds, and by the time you met her she had lost all her weight. But then she broke. She ate for a while and didn't tell anyone she was eating, but people could tell because she got bigger and bigger. Her sponsor dropped her. She kept getting new sponsors, eating, lying about it, getting dropped. Eventually she worked her way around to you. She called you faithfully on time every morning, and her manner was gentle, but she was cloaked, opaque. You couldn't get anywhere near her. You thought maybe it was because you were white, or because you were twenty years younger. Maybe she couldn't find a way to trust you. Maybe she was still eating, though whenever you asked her how things were going with the food, she said, "Fine." Finally she said that there was something weighing on her, something she'd never told anyone. Her voice on the phone was so quiet that you could barely hear her. Years ago she had driven through an intersection, she said, and killed a pedestrian. After she told you this, she stopped calling. After a year or two, someone told you that she had died.

The program moralized. The program shook its head. The program said, "It only works if you work it." It said, "This program isn't for everyone who needs it, or even for everyone who wants it. It's for everyone who does it."

The program closed like water over the heads of the people who left; they sank and were forgotten. The program welcomed the people who came back. They came back fat, tired, ashamed. This time was going to

be different, they said. And sometimes it was. They sat in the front row at meetings. When they reached ninety days of abstinence and became eligible to share again, they stood up and shared about how arrogant they'd been, how they'd made the mistake of thinking they could do this by themselves, how they'd let the gifts of the program take them away from the program. How they'd made the mistake of treating the program as a diet and not as a way of life. How they'd made the mistake of thinking they were God.

The program was full of perennial relapsers. "Chronics," they were called. They had come in, stayed for a while, sometimes for years, a decade. Then they left, then they came in again, then they left again. They came back fat and stayed fat. They sat in the last row. They couldn't get it. Abstinence, recovery. They'd had hold of it and they'd lost it and now they couldn't get it back. There was Bella, tall and dignified—bold jewelry, beautiful scarves; you and she smiled at each other. She told you she'd been in program for almost twenty years. She'd lost the weight, sponsored lots of people, served on committees. Then one night, late, at her office—a big project, a lot of pressure—someone had offered her a piece of chocolate and she'd taken it. "And that was it," she said. "Once I started I couldn't stop. I was back in the food." You mentioned to your sponsor that you liked Bella. "Stick with the winners," your sponsor said. But you kept talking to Bella, until she disappeared. As the years went on, you found that you'd been in on the beginning of other chronics' stories. You'd known them before they were chronics; you'd met them when they were still stars in the program's firmament. There was Margie in your Tuesday night meeting, who'd just finished losing the weight and who once, as part of her sharing, lifted the hem of her sweater and proudly, smartly, tapped herself on her flat tanned little belly and said, "I can't believe this is me"—she disappeared. And April, from Sunday morning, who had lost 120 pounds and was so pretty and fresh-looking, who talked all the time about how her fiancé had never known

her fat, never known her in disease: she got married and went on her honeymoon—a cruise—and ate, and came back repentant, and got abstinent again and then a month later said she was too busy to do the program right now and was going to take a break—“a *planned* break,” she told people, and they all looked at her coldly or pityingly or told her straight out that she was kidding herself—and then she was gone. You saw them both come back, over the years, Margie and April, those two pretty poster girls of your early days in the program. They came back huge, in huge dispirited stained sweatshirts. April was divorced. Neither of them stuck around.

The program said of the chronics: “There’s nothing worse than a head full of program and a belly full of food.” The chronics were the Marley’s Ghosts of the program; they appeared dragging their chains and warning of the fate that awaited you if you did not follow the program exactly as it was laid out.

The program said, “Thin is not well.”

The program said, “Come for the vanity, stay for the sanity.”

The program said, “‘God’ is spelled ‘G-O-D’—gift of desperation.”

The program was not religious, but people talked about God a lot. The ones who had the really thick Boston accents said “Goo-Wad.” Every morning they prayed to Goo-Wad to give them an abstinent day. When they didn’t know what to do, they asked Goo-Wad for help. If they found themselves on the pity pot, giving in to stinking thinking, they stopped and asked themselves, “Where’s Goo-Wad in all that?” Others did not speak of God at all, but only of a Higher Power. Sometimes it was “my Higher Power,” but sometimes people just said “Higher Power”—as in “I wasn’t sure what to do so I asked Higher Power”—and the omission of any article or possessive pronoun made the relationship sound chummier, breezy. Sometimes it went still farther, all the way to the intimacy of initials. “I asked H.P.,” someone might say; and then you couldn’t help it, you sat there thinking about steak sauce.

The program told you not to entertain food thoughts. You were not supposed to mention food by name at meetings. The program spoke in euphemisms. The big round thing. The big round thing that we all used to have on our birthdays before program, when we ate it along with the cold stuff. The cold stuff that we used to pull out of the freezer and eat a pint of, late at night, all by ourselves. “Flour and sugar products,” people said. Or “the boxes and the bags.” Or simply, “a dozen.” “I used to drive to Double Ds and get a dozen to eat all by myself,” people would say. The code’s effect was the opposite of its intention. Its elaborate avoidances were so vivid, so evocative, that you ended up seeing, smelling, tasting what it steadfastly refused to name. “Our family was Italian, and my mother used to make this stuff, this flour product, that you boil and then you lay it in a pan in layers with other stuff, spicy stuff and creamy stuff, and then you bake it and it gets kind of crispy, and I used to go into the kitchen late at night and eat whatever was left in the pan all by myself.” Lasagna-pitched horns were blaring in your head, lasagna-colored lights were flashing; you wanted to jump up and scream out the name like a triumphant player in a party game; but you were also mourning—oh, lasagna, I’ll never have lasagna again. You didn’t entertain the thought. You could laugh at the program, at its solemn reliance on crackable code; but you could recognize the danger of entertaining the thought of lasagna, and you moved on. “Thank you, God, that’s not my food,” people said.

The program went along, and you went along with it. You ate your weighed and measured meals, you called your sponsor, you went to your four committed meetings every week. The weight flew off. Eighty pounds in nine months, gone.

The program gave you the night when you went to the towing yard with your husband to pick up the car—he’d parked it illegally somewhere and when he came back it was gone—and he went into the little hut where the attendant sat, to pay the fine, and came out laughing

softly. “What is it?” you asked, and he told you: “The tow-truck guy saw you standing out here, and he said, ‘That your wife?’ And when I said yes, he said, ‘Nice.’” This was something other women had had, but not you, not as a girl, not ever.

The program gave you size-eight dresses and beautiful underwear and boots that zipped easily over your calves. It gave you a waist. It gave you a bathing suit. It gave you hipbones, and shoulder bones, and cheekbones. It gave you happy afternoons in bed with your husband. It gave you long walks in Paris and Rome, when you thought about paintings and churches and the conversations you and your husband were having, and you didn’t think about food. The program gave you hunger. You were actually hungry by the time you sat down to each meal; and you were full, or full enough, by the time you had finished. The program restored your belief in cause and effect. If you ate X, you would weigh Y. A certain amount of food was required to fuel a normal body; if you ate exactly that amount, your body would be normal. Your crazy, ravenous, fuming, erupting, masochistic, untrammelled, unruly, uncomfortable mess of a body had suddenly decided to make sense, to become and remain a body like any other. The program gave you comfort and dignity and a quiet sense of optimism. But it also kept reminding you how easily you could lose it. You were always one bite away from losing everything.

The program gave you nightmares. You dreamed that you were fat again. You dreamed you ate a cake while sitting at a table across from your sponsor and she didn’t say anything, and the dream kept on going like a ticking bomb: which of you was going to mention it?

The program gave you the creeps. It talked on and on about the one string bean: that one extra string bean that meant the difference between abstinence and breaking, between sanity and insanity, between recovery and disease, between life and death. “I’m sick,” people said. They referred to themselves in the third person, substituting “this sick addict” for the

word “me” in a sentence. “For this sick addict, the food became a way to stuff down the feelings.” They stood up and shared, one sick addict after the next, like perfectly drilled soldiers: slim, erect, immaculately groomed, fervent, committed to duty, united against the enemy. The enemy was the food. The enemy was the disease. The enemy was complacency. The enemy was unwillingness. The enemy was a life in which this sick food addict forgot to ask God for help. The enemy was forgetting to be humble. The enemy was your own sick mind. Whenever you asked your sponsor a question about the program, she said, “Because that’s what works.” Or, “Because that’s how my sponsor handed it down to me, and I pass along the program I’ve been given.” Or, “If you want what I have, then do what I do.” Or sometimes, when you had really exasperated her, “It’s very hard for intellectual people to grasp this program.” If you disagreed with her, she said, “That’s your disease talking.” Your disease got into an argument with her one day about beans. Not string beans, which were abstinent (as long as you did not pick up that fatal extra one), but legumes: kidney beans, navy beans. She told you not to have them anymore. Not a problem, you said, you hated them and never had them anyway. “And tell your sponsees not to have them,” she said. You asked why not. “Because they’re too stimulating,” she said. “Stimulating how?” you asked. Did she mean they were sexy and delicious and might tempt people to break their abstinence? Or that they caused gas? She told you it didn’t matter why not; she was handing it down to you and your job was to hand it down to your sponsees. You pointed out that beans were not sugar or flour and so you couldn’t see what the problem was. One of your sponsees was a vegetarian and beans were a good and inexpensive source of protein. Your sponsor said that you were trying to water down the program, and that you were balking and looking for the easier softer way.

The program forced you underground. You let your sponsees eat beans, and told them not to tell anyone.

The program spoke to you in a voice that was warm and cold, intimate and authoritarian, mesmerizing, scary, a dominatrix voice: your sponsor's voice. Were you going to your committed meetings? Were you reading the literature? Were you steaming your carrots, or were you secretly roasting them to try to make them more delicious?

The program worked. But you had always assumed that at some point you'd leave. The program's pronoun was "We," but you thought "They." They stood up at meetings and shared their gratitude. Someone had offered them a World Series ticket for tonight, but they'd turned it down because they knew they had to be at their committed meeting. Their child hadn't been feeling well, but they knew that if they didn't show up at their committed meeting, then they wouldn't be able to show up for their family at all. Their husband's retirement dinner was tonight, but they knew their place tonight was at their committed meeting. Their mother had died yesterday, but here they were. "Addiction is cunning, baffling, and powerful," they said. "We sick addicts will take a mile if we're given an inch."

The program took fat people and made them—you—thin. It took you, who had been in secret thrall to a cookie, but not so secret because your helplessness had been displayed all over your body, and it shackled you and gave you freedom. It was cold and harsh and rigid and extreme. It didn't give an inch. It touted itself as the only way—and who knew? Maybe it was. There was a story you told sometimes, when you stood up to share. "Here's where I'm coming from," you would begin. This phrase was how stories began in the program; this was its "Once upon a time." "I'm coming from a top weight of two eighty-five," people said; or, "I'm coming from sixteen years of bulimia." "Here's where I'm coming from," you said. You were coming from a New Year's Eve when you were planning to go on another diet the following day. You needed to get rid of all the leftovers in the house, all the sugar and flour stuff you'd baked for Christmas, all the stuff you'd stockpiled in your pantry in case company

ever dropped by but company hadn't dropped by. And the way to get rid of leftovers was to eat them. So you'd eaten and eaten all day long, and by nighttime you had a terrible stomachache. It got so bad that when your husband wanted to take you to the emergency room, you let him. The doctors had examined you and they'd asked what you had had to eat that day. And there you had been, naked on a gurney, well over two hundred pounds, and the doctors were asking you what you had eaten. And you had lied. You'd made up a modest fictional little day of food. You'd been ashamed to tell the truth, even though they really needed to know the truth. And your husband had known you were lying, and he'd had to sit there and choose between letting you lie, or ratting you out to the doctors.

The program nodded. The program understood. The program congratulated itself, and thanked God, for saving you. Where else could you have told that story? What else could have transformed it into a story, changed the hopeless ongoing present into the salutary past? The program knew where you were coming from, in a way that your friends outside it didn't—your friends who knew and loved you, who shared your interests, who liked the same books and music or had raised their kids alongside yours, who laughed at the same things you did, who said you looked great and admired your will power and the way you had not only lost the weight but kept it off, who would have found the program repellent if you had told them much about it other than the bare fact that you were in it.

"The program is my life," the people in it said. For you it was a secret life. You hid it, but it took the place of the old hidden life you'd had before you'd found it. It caught you up and kept you. It troubled you and fixed you. The program was merciless—but what was mercy, really? It held you for years, in its fists, in its talons, in its arms.

ANYA SILVER

Maid Maleen

After seven years of damp walls, entombed, no more food,
she and her servant knife their way through the stone tower.
Their first glance outside, a shock. All has changed.
The country's burned and smashed, the banners rent.
No one alive in the castle or village, the farms just soot.
No alarms warned them: abandoned by her own father,
the king who walled his daughter up and forgot.

Eventually, the tale will be made right again.
A prince will fall in love with Maid Maleen, she will prosper
in her gold necklace and never want for food or home.

Rip out the last pages. There will be no wedding today.
The sulfurous fields don't lead to paths or healing rivers.
Never safety again. Once the smoke's in one's lungs,
it remains forever. The charred trees. The murdered bodies.

ANYA SILVER

Snow White

How lucky to be pretty enough for a glass coffin,
to die with a full face and cheeks like cherry blossoms.
The poisoned apple must taste sweet in her narrow throat.
The dead I've viewed have never looked so lovely,
maybe because all their blood's been drained,
or their hair has lain too stiff and dark against their skin.
Usually, their bodies are very thin—or otherwise, bloated.
I've kissed their cold faces and they don't sit up.
If a pallbearer stumbles, they don't spit out their deaths.
I've never seen a glass coffin; though, as a child, the etchings
of caskets were often my favorites, such tender mourning.
I hoped beauty and sweetness would bring birds to my wake.
But then dying young happened, the spell came true.
Don't clamp satin over my face: simple burning will do.

KYLE MCCARTHY

Expect No More

WE HAD BEEN ON the same flight from New York, and in the shuttle van he pinged me with questions until I scrawled my number on the yellow Post-it he had copped from the driver. Why was I here, and did I have someone waiting for me at the hotel? Had I been to Miami before? Where did I live in Brooklyn, which neighborhood, was it Greenpoint? He had been to Greenpoint once. Had I seen the holiday fair in Union Square, had I seen a booth devoted to Israeli spices? He worked that booth, with his business partner, every year, although once they had gone to a mall in New Jersey instead. He didn't like New Jersey. Did I?

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"You won't be able to say it, sweetheart."

He was beautiful, I should say that right away, a beauty it's stupid to describe because you've seen it all your life, on billboards, in the pages of clothing magazines: the smooth features, the chiseled body, the brooding eyes. Only his lips were wrong, too big and swollen for a conventionally handsome man. I told him all the things you're not supposed to tell strangers, like the name of my hotel and its cross streets.

“Very nice. I’ll call you, okay? I’ll call,” he said, with a ferocity absent from our earlier conversation, and then the driver swung his overstuffed roller, loaded with gifts from Tel Aviv, onto the patchy grass.

I had come to Miami Beach to research the life of Dovid Utterback, a Cold War–era poet of minor renown. Nominated for the Pulitzer three times, anthologized in *Fifteen Great American Epics*, championed by Stanley Kunitz and Donald Hall, he had seemed, in the decade after his untimely death, safely enshrined in the pantheon of postwar writers. Yet while his contemporaries were detailing their sexual escapades in free verse and determining line order by chance, while they were forming the New York School and the Black Mountain school, becoming Confessionals and Beats, Dovid had insisted upon a classical prosody—hexameter, tetrameter, trochees—and a classical subject: mankind’s foibles. He had spoken like God just as God was going out of fashion, and the mistake had cost him immortality.

Now his son wanted rectification. He had the money, but I had the title. Already, a website had been established and a Twitter feed. Several works had been reissued and a documentary commissioned, but Samuel wanted more. “A short study,” he wrote. “More a biographical sketch. Your own commentary is of course welcome.”

For this last task he had initially hoped to hire my department head, but she had tactfully suggested that a more junior faculty member, with fewer commitments, would bring more gusto to the job. Gusto was precisely what I lacked in those days, but I didn’t hesitate before saying yes. Since the divorce, tenure—its hope, its golden light—had become the only star by which I still steered.

Samuel had suggested I come stay in his boutique hotel, where, I gathered, he had plunged his hedge fund fortune. He said he had some documents of his father’s, letters and lecture notes, mostly, some of them quite intimate; he hadn’t decided what exactly to share. He thought it would help to meet me first.

I resisted—the semester wasn't over—but, by email, Samuel Utterback was nothing if not charming. In addition to providing the finest in hospitality, The Nora also strove to bring the literary arts to South Beach. I must stay in their Writers' Room, no matter that I was neither a poet nor in the final stages of completing my manuscript, and enjoy a modest *per diem* in the hotel restaurant. Samuel wrote entirely in lower case letters, with ample exclamation marks, which led me to believe that he would be a flirt and an easy mark. Yet when I raised the matter of the letters again, he only said he couldn't wait to meet me. The remainder of my emails he left unanswered, and for travel arrangements I had to rely on the concierge.

My first night at The Nora, I ate dinner at the bar with a book. On the TV, the Heat played the Celtics. I asked for a taste of the Riesling and for the food menu. At the far crook of the bar sat two couples, the men beefy and pink from golf and alcohol, the women sharp like tiny birds, with slender strands of silver down their necks. The bartender seemed to know but dislike them: he stayed far away as he fixed the men's dirty Martinis, his hands flicking in an automatic rhythm.

As further tribute to his father, Samuel had adopted a line of his poetry as the hotel motto. "Expect No More. This is Happiness" in icy blue letters greeted me from every piece of Nora ephemera, from the cocktail napkins to the coffee mugs to the pad of paper beside the phone. A minor rebuke, this slogan. Indeed, what more had I expected?

The lobby's chesterfields had been upholstered in black and white stripes, the floor in glossy black and white marble. From white credenzas, plum-colored orchids dangled obscene tongues. Above a potted palm hung a poster-sized photo of a young Mick Jagger in tight red swimming trunks. Jazz leaked from recessed white speakers.

"So what do you think?" the bartender asked when he returned.

"Too sweet. I'll have the pinot."

Watching the straw gold fill the glass, I wished I could have asked for food instead, a smuggled steak or trout from the grill. The per diem—fifty dollars—barely covered the cost of a single entrée.

The man beside me ordered a French 75. His delicate features and petite frame intrigued me: he seemed carefully drawn, as if he were a mouse in a children's book, and his clothes, though unremarkable—blue jeans, a hoodie the color of sea foam—had a curated air. I could smell the money they had cost. The bartender, blocky, with ashy fingertips, hesitated at the man's order, and the man recited his drink's recipe wearily.

"Right, that's right." As the bartender moved away, the man angled towards me. "Nobody knows how to make those anymore. Not even that guy, and I trained him myself."

"Trained him?" I repeated stupidly.

Throughout our introductions I kept thinking that Samuel looked nothing like what his emails had led me to expect, and wondered at a clever, yet diplomatic way to allude to this fact. Onscreen, the giants ran in their fluorescent world.

"You have everything you need?" Samuel asked, and the sincerity of the question, its absurdity—I had been living for so long in need—caught me off guard; Samuel added, "Your room's fine?"

"Oh, just perfect." My hand, suddenly damp, curled up. As Samuel drained his drink and, with a polite nod, moved off, I felt what I often felt with men back then: that he had tossed me a sphere of spun crystal and I had let it drop.

Besides a piddling reputation and a closely guarded correspondence, Dovid Utterback presented other challenges to his biographer. His personal life had the tidiness of a dowager's kitchen. While his contemporaries had sat on oriental carpets in Greenwich Village drinking "yum-yum," he had married and raised a family in Rochester, New York. At

night, at his poetry desk, when he might have told something of his inner life, he had instead assumed the impersonal mask of sage. Gossip—the stuff of life, the stuff of book sales—was in depressingly short supply. Another problem: I hated his poetry. Some sample titles: “Of Objects Considered in a Baleful Space,” “Of the Great Horse Rotting on the Hill,” “Of the Airman Who Flew Over Chaucer’s England.” And these were *sincere*. It made me miss my usual guys, Creeley and Olson, those Harvard boys who were raw and jangly and full of jokes. Utterback thoroughly belonged to the school of the cooked.

But I needed this. My career had stalled, my field had balkanized, my publication record had thinned. Drifting at thirty-five thousand feet, *Aspects of Proteus* face down on the tray table, I had imagined myself before a conference audience, delivering the paper that would resurrect Dovid’s reputation and establish mine. What Samuel Johnson had done for Shakespeare, what Raymond Weaver had done for Melville, I would do for Utterback. I would save myself by saving another. Such nobility.

At the last minute I had added to my suitcase, along with the soft shapeless sundresses in cornflower and dusky rose, a vampish V-neck cocktail dress, black and ribbed, seven percent spandex. “Very nice,” Eitan said when he saw me. “Very nice. Now you look like you belong here.”

We walked past an American Apparel and a liquor store and a pizza shop. Inside this last, narrow boxes were stacked like coffins. Past a dive bar, we found a hookah garden, where the air smelled of watermelon and smoke and the waitress brought us two goblets of red wine so cheap that tannins stuck to the glass after we drank.

At the next table, four men in shorts shared a pitcher of honey-colored ale. I saw them see me with Eitan, saw the adjustment in their eyes. With my painted lips and lotioned legs I felt safe, hidden behind the facade of a woman I wasn’t. “You always go picking up girls in shuttle vans?” I asked.

"No." He gripped my knee. "When I saw you, I wanted to talk to you. Right away, I noticed you."

"But why? I was so gross from the airplane. I was in a horrible mood."

"No. I thought, this girl is special. She is a tiger. She belongs to me."

Rihanna came on the speakers. I tried very hard to look like a tiger, although I could sense behind me, all around me, other tiger-women, hiding in the tropical plants that flourish with humidity and heat.

"I love this song," I told him. "I think it's all about capitalism, and American-style excess, and addiction. Have you seen the music video? It's *crazy*."

He shook his head sadly. Already a pattern between us had been established: I sounded the cynical note that disguised my canyon of need, and he pretended a naiveté that disguised his relative indifference.

"Do you like magic tricks?" He held up three fingers. "You see this? I want you to close your eyes, and think of another number, okay? I'm going to read your mind."

Before I closed my eyes I saw the four men at the next table lower their beers. I chose the number ten, and thought so hard about it that I missed the subtle displacement of air that must have accompanied the movement of Eitan's face, the soft wind that came before his lips touched mine, and even as his tongue slid over my teeth, ten glowed like a candle in my mind.

"But what did you say to those men?" I asked later. We walked down Collins with our arms around each other, hurrying. Now that the need for conversation had been obliterated we could understand each other better. His accent seemed to be lifting, though he had spoken in Hebrew to one of the men for long minutes after our kiss.

"I love it, I love it, I love it!" he shouted. "I love this bone, oh my god, what do you call it?"

“Hip bone.” He had his hand cupped around mine, and I could feel it working into his palm as we walked. “Tell me what you said.”

“I told him we were married. I said we had two kids at home.”

“Ha.” The better magic trick belonged to me, I saw: he thought he could possess me, which meant he thought I was worthy of possession. I gave a little skip.

“You like that? No, I told him you were on vacation and he said I was lucky. He said, they don’t have girls like that in Israel.”

“They don’t have shikshas?”

“What is a—no.” He giggled. “No shikshas.”

“I’m a WASP,” I told him. “I only look Irish.”

“You are a bumble bee?”

“See?” I skipped again. “I love that.”

When I woke the next morning I stayed in bed a long time, letting the satisfactions of the previous night settle like snow around me, and then I rolled over and studied Dovid Utterback’s face upside down. Such shit luck, to die at fifty. It had removed him from history, taken him from the movements of his time. How dry my hands had grown this winter, how cracked and white; I could see, sometimes, the hands I would have as an old woman. Dovid never wrote about women, or betrayal, or lovers: he wrote about God, and when he died he must have thought he’d made it. That was what got me every time.

“So, you’ve got a boyfriend in New York,” Samuel said, the next night, up on the roof. He reached for a lime wedge and poured out the last of the Bombay Sapphire. He had no compunctions; he owned the place.

“Yep.” At night the deck was a dark promise, its table lamps throwing out meager pools of light. Servers in black circled amid dry, papery old men, trays of samosas and bacon-wrapped figs on their shoulders.

The ocean seemed closer in the darkness, as if, in the midst of cocktail chatter, we were also in primordial ooze. “He’s in LA a lot,” I said. “We pretty much broke up.”

“You don’t seem too upset about it.” Samuel motioned to a waitress, and she put a glass of pink champagne before me.

“Well, actually, divorce is more the word for it. But our marriage was like this unfortunate side effect of our wedding.” I smiled at Samuel. “The wedding was really fun.”

“The way you talk, it’s very strange to me.” From a narrow flute he drained the rest of The Nora’s signature cocktail, Expect No More, and I stole a glance at my phone: no Eitan. “It’s a thing, isn’t it, for women your age to talk like this?”

Towards the end of our marriage, when I could not get my papers accepted anywhere, when daily the mail brought rejection slips, Will had started giving me career advice. He wanted me to leave academia, reach a broader audience, go memoir. “You’re like a less funny Deborah Eisenberg,” he would say, or “Why don’t you write an essay about the decade you spent dressing androgynously?”

“I don’t really do self-revelation,” I told him, and his mouth continued to move, rapidly but silently. I knew then that he was thinking of other women he might have married, women with eating disorders or drinking problems, women who loved the fierce insistent *I* of the personal essay.

Before I could finish my drink Samuel touched my wrist with his forefinger and said, “I have a gift for you. You want to come see it?”

I smiled demurely, imagining—a hidden trove of letters, a legal document giving me total access to the archives, even an original manuscript. The bartender waved off my credit card, and I followed Samuel down a flight of stairs, past the hotel kitchen, to a small office behind the pool. The room was empty except for a desk, two chairs, and a giant framed photograph of Dovid mid-speech. “Okay,” I said.

“Okay.” He lit a cigarette. “Have a seat.” Away from the moonlit deck I was like a wild-haired daisy, revealed as a weed under the fluorescent light. “You understand that I have no memories of my father, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

“He died when you were very young.”

“Five.” He offered me a cigarette. I declined. He blew smoke out the window. I squelched the desire, almost physical, to check my phone again. On the far side of the building a car rolled past with its music cranked. “And in every story told about him he’s perfect. He’s the god of our family. Do you know what it’s like to grow up with a father like that?”

“He must not seem real to you.”

Samuel darted his eyebrows, as if he’d expected something wittier from me. Rather than answer he drew out from the desk a small wooden elephant, which he placed in my hand. “My father got it during the war,” he told me. “It sat on his secretary for years.”

The elephant, no more than four inches high, had a slender, curved trunk and two bright black eyes. The ears were soft and broad, and the withers were stained a dark gray, as if by the oil of a human hand. By Dovid’s hand, I realized, as he worried the figure and worked his formal, iambic lines.

“You can’t give this to me,” I said, but Samuel insisted, and then he added that he had something more for me, something I would really appreciate. Could I come to his place tomorrow night? He would tell the office to send a car.

When I said good-bye, and walked past the steakhouse with its leaping flames and the childish, chemical pool, I clutched the elephant so tightly that its yellow tusks left a crescent on my palm.

Back in my room, I opened Utterback’s long poem *Horatio* and began to read. In Brooklyn I had found it dull and stiff, hopelessly old-fashioned, but now my grudging respect began to bloom.

Dovid did have an ear for meter, a dry, withholding wit, and—the more I read, the more I became convinced of this fact—a talent for vulnerability not immediately obvious. No, he did not divulge his personal failings, he did not slop his emotions all over the page like those other, more famous poets, but his intelligence was more—how can I say this?—more *textured*, more intimate, than any crude confession could be.

Reading his poetry, reading and thinking about the four years he had served, loading bombs into the bellies of planes, I suddenly felt a rush of warmth, a reaching for this man I would never know. In the dip between its shoulder blades the elephant held its darkened patch, and I pictured Dovid in the basement of his Rochester home, counting syllables and tapping and trying to give full measure to his war.

Yet none of this meant I forgot Eitan. At the beach, as I dressed, upon waking, and when I went to bed, I looked, but there was never a text, not from him. The way he had called me tiger, and cupped my hip, and made me his wife in Hebrew had all become sweet sinkholes in my mind, quicksilver pits of kindness and sex. His silence unnerved me, though, and made me want him more, but despite this I nearly walked past the boy in Ray Bans and flip-flops standing across from The Nora the next morning.

“My phone’s dead.” He laughed at my confusion and kissed me while the doorman smirked. “I wanted to call you though, oh my god.”

“Nice shirt.” I tugged its hem. Marilyn Monroe stretched over his chest, her dark glasses like oil spills across his pecs.

“Yeah, it’s good, right?”

Jet lag had just about killed him, really, but he wanted to make it up to me, he wanted to take me to the beach, he wanted to know—he lifted up my dress—did I have my bathing suit on?

On the beach we rented two chairs and four towels, like any other couple, and Eitan tipped the umbrella man. I am ashamed to say

this made me proud. He stretched out, told me I looked sexy, and fell asleep.

Miami Beach, the morning after rain: rinsed white light, nodding palms, languid sparkle on the mild turquoise waves. A landscape of oiled flesh, still and bronzing; untied bikini tops, cheap magazines, water bottles caked with sand. Beside us sprawled four girls, talking in drifty low voices. They had waxed limbs, smooth brown thighs, twists of gold in their hair. One girl stood and stared down the beach, ear buds in her ears, cigarette in her mouth.

“God,” sighed her friend, looking up from her magazine. “I still can’t get over it. They look so good.”

The standing girl groped herself. “Want to see ’em?”

Down came her bikini top, out came her breasts, big and pink and plastic-looking, with an upturned thrust. “Oh my god, they look so natural,” her friend said. “They look so good. How did he do it? Did he go behind the nipple?”

“Hey,” I nudged Eitan. “Those girls are getting out their tits.”

He sighed a deep warm sigh and lifted his head, and then dropped it heavily onto the mesh lounge. He was like a lion from the city zoo, overfed on sunlight and breasts, too lazy to hunt anymore. “Want to give me a back rub, babe?”

“You’re shameless,” I told him, and straddled his back.

“What does it mean, shameless?”

“It means you don’t feel any guilt. You never feel bad about anything.”

Eitan moaned. “Oh no. I have a lot of guilt. Keep rubbing. Rub my legs.”

I pushed the heel of my palm onto his hamstring. The flock of girls, done discussing boob jobs, studied us. I saw myself as they saw me, on top of him, displaying myself.

“Tell me what you feel guilty about,” I said, but he wouldn’t; he said it was private and then he tried to pull my bikini strap down. I slapped him and told him I was going to go swim.

“Okay, babe.” He glanced at the staring girls.

The water that day was warm and heavy with seaweed. Far on the horizon a cruise ship sat motionless, like a toy boat set down by God. Baby blue jellyfish, propeller-shaped, bobbed in the waves beside me. I considered getting out, but their threat seemed abstract when placed beside their beauty.

For a long time I floated in the salty sea, my limbs long and white, the sun white and hot, drifting, daydreaming, thinking about Will, the hours we had spent reading, talking, our coffee mugs of merlot. We drank a lot, that first winter, and hummed with poetry, every line like a sweet arrow through us. I had thought he was the bow, the source of all those words; I had thought he would always be with me, always bound to my work. But he had left, and the work had stayed; the work had pulled me forward, to this.

When I finally pushed my way towards shore, Eitan came running past me, knees high, laughing. And behind him—the new tits girl. Comical, how stunned I was. I left him there, swimming in the sea, determined now to get from Samuel the letters that I needed.

After the beach, I stayed in the shower until my fingers puckered like contour maps. Only the hotel phone could draw me out. The concierge was apologetic. A car was waiting? Had been waiting? Ten minutes, I bleated, and rubbed the terry towel savagely down my legs. My stomach grumbled, discontent, but it would have to wait: there was no time for dinner, or for what had been passing for dinner—a roll, conned from the bartender—these days. Only time to pull on the slinky dress again, to strap into heels, to furiously blow-dry my salt-damaged hair.

In the car, Eitan lit my phone with texts: *Sweetie? Where did you go? You want to see me?*

I'm busy, I wrote.

Everyone was so horny at the beach today, he said. Oh my god.
That made me smile. And also reply: *Not me, babe.*

The lobby of Samuel's building resembled an Asian fusion restaurant in the suburbs: black swaths of leather, leggy chandeliers, golden tulips, and green crescents. Floodlights cast shadows over the mailboxes. After a brief, hushed phone call, the doorman nodded me upstairs.

Samuel had the seventeenth floor, not the penthouse, as I had expected, and the apartment was small and messy in the temporary way of hotel rooms: dress shirts on the floor, take-out containers by the sink. The red silk settee in damask, the golden clock and delicate emerald vases all suggested Late Empire antiques, but their lavish gilt couldn't make up for all the empty space in the room, all the furnishing he had left to do. In the kitchen Samuel made two gin and tonics. "Men here," I said. "All they do is give me drinks."

With one flick he poured my glass down the drain. "God forbid I should be one of them."

"I'm sorry. It's just that—I can't stay long."

"I won't keep you." His dismissive tone made me feel gauche. At the window I touched my forehead to the glass: hundreds of feet below us the black ocean stretched its foamy fingers on the shore.

"Come sit," he said, and because there was nowhere else I joined him on the settee. When he handed me another glass, I smelled him: beer and rainwater and sweat, a deep masculine scent. We clinked.

"I can't believe you gave me Dovid's elephant." I sipped. Water—he had given me water. Gratitude flooded me. "It's too much."

"Oh, come on, now. You don't have to say that," but I could tell he was pleased. "It's just a little thing. I have half a dozen more."

I leaned over to set my drink down, and when I straightened a black cloud rolled across my vision. I hadn't had lunch, either; I had spent my per diem on beer for Eitan on the beach. "What about—" I drew an

unsteady breath. "The letters. Are you going to let me see this correspondence? I came all the way down here."

He smiled in a way that reminded me of all the decades he had already lived. I smelled again that rainwater. "It's not really that shocking. I don't think it's going to help you."

"Please." The black clouds hesitated at the edge of my vision, like stage actors waiting for their cue. "You said it was important. For understanding Dovid's character."

"Well, that's probably right."

My skin had gone tight and hot, as if I had been zipped into a bodysuit two sizes too small. I breathed unevenly, willing the nausea to pass. "Even if I could just read them," I said. "I don't need to quote them, or take notes. But please. I just—I could really use something going right, for once."

He put his hand on my knee, just a few fingers, and looked into my eyes. I stared back desperately, my stomach twisting and sliding like a slinky weasel. "Please," I said again, and then the black clouds, hovering nearby, thundered across my vision and became complete.

I woke nestled into the couch. Samuel stood at the sink, his back to me. The sweat on my face had dried, but a sour taste lingered in my mouth. "Oh," I said. "I'm so embarrassed."

He turned. "Thank God. You went out like a bell."

"Gross." I felt drained, scraped with a spoon.

He came and knelt beside me. I turned my face, shy about my breath. "Do you have low blood pressure?"

I winced. "Maybe."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Here, stay put."

From the couch I watched the careful way he poured out a glass of orange juice. "You know, I used to faint all the time," he told me when he had brought it over. "I seem to have gotten over it, though."

I nodded, too preoccupied with drinking to answer. "More?" he asked when I had drained the glass.

"No, no, I'm good. Thank you. That was delicious."

"Oh, Alicia," he said. "What's going to become of you, anyway? Showing up drunk and hungry to a strange man's apartment?"

"I'm not drunk," I pointed out. "You invited me."

"Yes, but you accepted. You shouldn't say yes to everything. You know that, don't you?" He leaned over, close enough that our shoulders touched, and snagged my glass. In the kitchen it slipped from his fingers and clattered into the sink.

Was he nervous? At the bar his tiny frame had seemed sophisticated, a rebuke to all the beefy American boys, but to most other women he was probably just short. Maybe he was not the Casanova he seemed. Maybe it thrilled him to have me here.

When he returned I said, "So, now that I've been at your mercy, are you going to give me the papers?"

"Why would you think that?"

"I don't know. Seems fair."

Abruptly he stood and paced his apartment, touching first the Bose remote, then a gilded shepherdess cradling her clock. "It's just that. Well." He examined his dusty finger. "My dad was such a private person. He didn't write those letters for any of us. He gave us his poetry, and it seems like that should be enough."

"But his poetry's been forgotten. It can't survive without something from his life."

"Then it probably can't survive with it." He picked up the gilded shepherdess and tilted her over. "What did you mean when you said you just needed something to go right? Are you unhappy?"

I snorted. "Yeah, of course. Isn't everybody?"

"No, it's coming off you, in waves. It's like a light. That's the first thing I noticed about you, that night at the bar. That's why I left."

Whenever he looked at me I sensed his recalibrations, as if he were rotating me slowly, trying to see every angle. Clearing his head so he could know me more.

He poked my shoulder. "Tell me. Do you even like his work?"

"Don't you?"

"He has a whole epic about a woodchuck. It's so grandiose."

"I think it's kind of genius." I explained then my theory of literary history, how it had been the poets born too late for the war who had wanted to destroy convention, rip up decorum and make a new form, and of course we loved them, with their slang and exuberance and bawdiness, but it seemed wrong to ignore those born in history's cross-hairs, who had liberated the camps, who had seen Europe burning, who had hungered for a God who would answer. If Dovid Utterback's verse seemed impersonal, I said, if it struck us as cold and stilted and formal, then perhaps we had forgotten how to listen for the range of a human voice. We liked our poets arch, or we liked them bare, but we didn't want them grand. But in Dovid, in that Shakespearean tone, I could sense the effort to say something true, and it touched me. It reminded me what language was for.

As I spoke, the words pushed against my throat, as if I had been silent for years, as if I had never had these thoughts before, as if I were discovering the terrain of my own mind as I spoke. Samuel sat very still with his eyes wide, occasionally nodding or tapping his lip, or once, lighting a cigarette, but mostly listening.

Following my speech he stubbed out his butt and left. When he returned he had a thick manila envelope, which he dropped gently on my lap. "It would mean so much to me if you would stay here while you read them."

"Really—" I half rose. "You don't have to. You said you didn't want to. I'll be fine without them."

"Please. I've changed my mind."

What could I say but yes? With my legs tucked beneath me I began to read. Samuel made us toast. I realized how hungry I had been, how hungry for days. When he brought out crackers and Brie I ate those, too, and then I sat with my back against the settee's arm and Samuel sat opposite, reading *Harper's*. After half an hour our toes, in the valley of the couch, touched.

Since that night I've spent countless evenings reading, countless days in libraries amid their archives, but all those subsequent hours have seemed like copies of that first night, reading Dovid's letters with my Samuel beside me. Whenever I work past midnight now, whenever the house is quiet and the kids long gone to sleep, there comes a time when the black glass shines back a watery, blurred woman, and I think I see in her the girl sitting on a French Empire antique in Miami Beach, photocopied pages spread over her thighs.

She is intent, and happy, and falling in love; she is reading about a man her own age recovering from heartbreak on a Connecticut farm. Soon he will be swept into a storm much bigger than anything he can imagine; soon he will see enough evil and mystery to fuel a lifetime of work, but right now, he is only embarrassing his family by courting, fruitlessly and endlessly and from afar, someone else's wife. Compared to what is coming—global war—it is nothing. To his family, and to his wife's family, and to his son, who will grow up under the myth of a perfect father, it will be a tawdry lapse they cannot tolerate, and to his biographer, the girl on the couch, it will be a disappointment, something that seemed like the key but was later revealed to be a distraction.

Maybe we are all like this, shuffling and reshuffling the papers before us, trying to make sense of our partial deck, the unrequited love, the unacknowledged work, while all around us great storm clouds gather. If we would only look up, we would see that soon it is going to rain.

Valerie Eliot

“It’s 3:15, you’re late!” ushering me into the dark hallway of the flat.
I can’t remember where. It’s years now. We sat
her mum beside her as we rocked on sherry straight
and told me tales and showed me Ansco-colored snaps
of Tom vacationing Bermuda
sallow like the sand surrounding him
and smiling awkwardly. Who knows
what that smile revealed, not looking back beyond decline
years from when they met. A long line
of hopefuls in the chill. The interview at Faber for that job
would take her far and far beyond those years,
and all for that one faked broken arm.
The plaster cast won him over nonetheless,
revealing no less a truth professed
when she became keeper of the flame.
Tom’s books in the next room consumed by the same
embers listened in. A chilly air. A draughty street. It’s getting late.

EUGENE GLORIA

Nighthawks Oceania

In a city of loners men in suits
hunker over bowls of ramen.
You must forgive my useless glimpses,
to draw conclusions would be unfair.

They're taking up room.
Our ramen bar an extension domicile
between time off and work time.
What Hopper saw in his American city

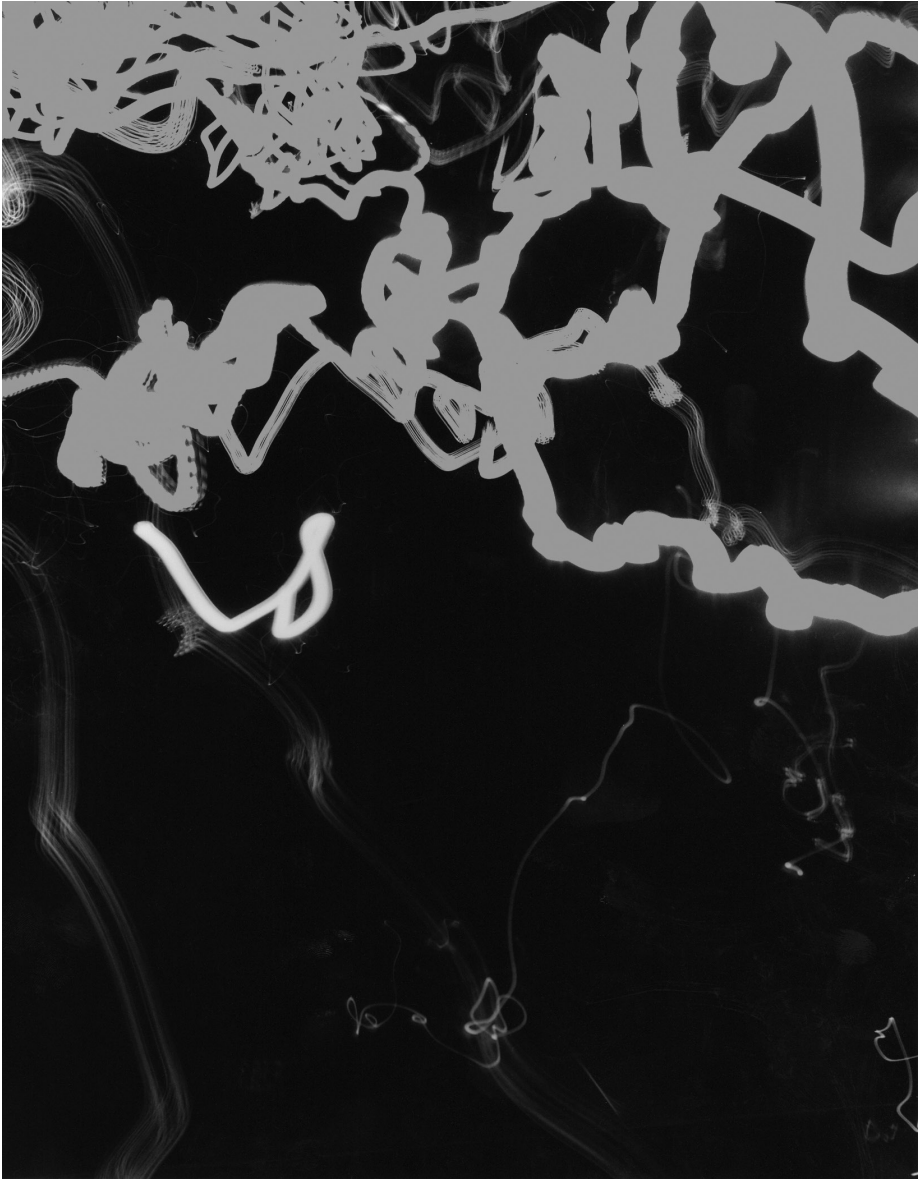
is my version of elemental awe.
Night and no one to pass judgment.
I'm here with my bosses, dear Monk,
dear Coltrane. We're happy and unfound.

Take this colored sheet of paper and fold it
in the prescribed creases then pull out a bird,
a solitary vireo, a swan, no, a woman
turned into a swan and a god in hot pursuit.

I want Monk to stop spinning like a lonely planet,
I want Coltrane to assure us that we're an island—
that we're the night and also the ocean.



Joanne Dugan, *The Turning Point Series*, created after the blackout in New York City following Hurricane Sandy. This image: 40th Street and Park Avenue, Facing North, #01, 9:42 p.m., New York City, 2013, archival gelatin silver print, 16 in. x 20 in. Courtesy Schoolhouse Gallery.



Joanne Dugan, *View from a Bicycle, Irving Place, Study #02*, New York City, 2013, archival gelatin silver print, 16 in. x 20 in. Courtesy Schoolhouse Gallery.



Joanne Dugan, *Corner of Wall Street and Broadway, Facing North, 9:11 p.m., New York City, 2013*, archival gelatin silver print, 16 in. x 20 in. Courtesy Schoolhouse Gallery.



Joanne Dugan, 33rd Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenues,
Facing South, #1, 9:49 p.m., New York City, 2013, archival gelatin
silver print, 16 in. x 20 in. Courtesy Schoolhouse Gallery.



Joanne Dugan, *University Place, Facing North, 11:06 p.m., New York City, 2013*, archival gelatin silver print, 16 in. x 20 in. Courtesy Schoolhouse Gallery.

CHARLES HARPER WEBB

*People Think That I'm a
Gourmet Chef*

My first girlfriend thought I was her future
husband, when I was a boner with a face inked on.

My first wife thought I was a rock star,
when I was a trout bum. My son thinks

I'm Superman. In a few years, he'll think
I'm a money tree, then a clueless dodderer
dumped on the earth to spoil his fun.
No one mistakes me for Lord Carnarvaron,

or Mickey Mantle in his prime, or Elvis—mistaken,
himself, for many things. Nor am I taken
for a rock star, CIA assassin, or Dr. Keith Black,
world's foremost brain surgeon, who is black,

so people hand him shoes to shine,
so who can blame him if he wants to crack their heads?

The first person who thought I was a chef
believed, because I preached subject / verb

agreement, I'd satisfy at table and in bed.
The sight of me scarfing a Swanson's TV
dinner would have sent her to the dean
with a sexual misrepresentation complaint.

(Could “Good points, but support with examples,”
be psychic rape?) I heat Thai food
in my office microwave, and colleagues think
I’m chopping chicken, dicing mushrooms,

peppers, leeks in a sleek miniature kitchen
bought with royalties from my best-selling poems.

Yet I misperceive, too. Sometimes I try
to unlock the wrong (right-colored) car.

Sometimes I drive to the wrong house,
or climb in bed with a woman I’ve just met,
hoping she’ll gaze at me and say, “Thank God.
It’s you.”

MARTÍN ESPADA

The Shamrock

For Frank Espada (1930–2014)

My father was a Shamrock, not the kind blooming everywhere on Saint Patrick's Day, but a Puerto Rican Shamrock, wearing the white clover emblazoned on green trunks, loping down court with the Maloney twins, Fitzgerald and Plunkett. My father was brown as an Indian Head penny, the center on the team, flipping his hook at the backboard, shoving two-handed set shots from the chest, elbows sharp wings on the rebound beneath the basket at PS 165 on West 108th Street. Another boy yelled *Hey, Pancho* and slapped him off the brick wall behind the basket. Pancho swung as he bounced off the wall, bursting the boy's nose like a hydrant of blood, spraying red on a summer night in the city.

My father was a Shamrock all his life. He hammered up the backboard and the basket in the driveway for me to practice free throws, the only Puerto Rican at Central High in Valley Stream. I listened to the echo of the ball on concrete, the clatter off the rim. The day a boy yelled *Foul, you spic*, I swung and scraped my knuckles on his belt buckle, too far away to stain his teeth with blood. I set picks, standing still as defenders rammed blindly into me. My father was a Shamrock, and so was Anaya, the other Pancho from West 108th Street, the day the three of us took the court against the unknown men

who swaggered up the driveway, who hooted at the two-handed set shots, the ball sailing from another century, till it plopped through the net. The Shamrocks flipped the ball behind the back, twirling layups in the air as I set picks, speared by the shoulders of the invaders. We won, and my fingers traced the bruises on my chest.

My father was a Puerto Rican Shamrock, the only atheist in a Catholic neighborhood, debating the miracles of the saints with the baffled Irish boys on the team. Now, his ashes sit in a white box on a chair by my desk, an altar without saints or candles or holy cards. Atop the box there is a snapshot of the Shamrocks, the Maloney twins, Fitzgerald, Anaya and Espada, in suits and ties for Christmas dinner on West 108th Street. When I had to sign for the box at the doorstep, ball-handler that I am, I dropped it. I ask for forgiveness at the altar. In the photograph, my father kneels. His hand spreads to grip the grain of a basketball on the floor. He is the center of the team. He is seventeen.

MARTIN CLOUTIER

Auntie Grandma

THE PLATES MADE a satisfying thump as he tapped them into the garbage: three-quarters of a steak—gone, half a fish—gone, and dish after dish of tiny fried potatoes—gone, gone, gone. He checked if anyone was looking and popped one into his mouth. The restaurant had a strict policy against eating from the plates. Anyone caught was automatically fired. He chewed quickly while scraping the food into the garbage. When Moshul had first started, the amount of waste filled him with anxiety; every morsel that slid off a plate seemed like blasphemy. But now he pounded plates into the garbage with pride. Already tonight he had dumped what amounted to six whole chickens and fifteen pork chops. In this country, a man was measured by what he could throw away.

He walked into the dining room. A customer stopped him and asked if there was a bar in the neighborhood.

“Across the street is bar.” He pointed out the window. “And two blocks down is bigger bar.”

“Are you from India?” the man asked. “My wife and I just returned from there.”

"From Bangladesh. Next door neighbor to India."

"We were going to go to that big beach in Bangladesh."

"The most long beach in the world. I live not far from there. In Chittagong. A big port. So many ships come to the water."

"How's everything here?" Maggie interrupted.

"Oh, fine," said the man. "Delicious."

Maggie held Moshul by the elbow and led him away. "Don't blather at the guests like that. This isn't The Everybody Loves Moshul Show."

"Yes, Ma."

"And what's on your shirt?" She scratched a spot on his chest.

"That from bus tub."

"Well, be careful. We can't have you looking like a street urchin."

He continued to his section, wondering what a "street kitchen" was. Maggie had many unusual expressions; she was over forty and one of the older waiters on the floor. Most of the other busboys hated her and called her Grandma behind her back. On busy nights, she would get flustered, tell the busboys to set a table with steak knives and then change her mind and make them replace everything. It seemed like she was always in the middle of a crisis, but Moshul didn't mind rescuing her.

Back in his section, Jenna was scurrying around with the water pitcher. Watering tables was supposed to be his job. She peered over a customer's head and made a face.

"Moshul. Where have you been? I need you to clear 301 and reset 310." Jenna was the only Asian he had seen with yellow hair and talking to her always flustered him. She wore her white shirt unbuttoned so you could see the top of her bra. Today her bra was light blue with tiny pink sea shells embroidered around the edges.

"Get busy. Go go go."

For only twenty years old, she had a mouth as mean as a mongoose. He stacked the plates in the crook of his arm while Jenna watched him

with her angry smile. Maggie would never speak to him like that. He thought about her rubbing the stain on his shirt. Something about it reminded him of Auntie Vani. She was always fiddling with his clothes, making sure everything he wore was clean, washing and ironing his work shirts. Though more than twenty years younger than his great aunt, Maggie was also a small woman. This was the first time she had touched him in so intimate a manner. Her short, ragged nails reaching up to his greater height. He felt like an elephant under the command of a strict mahout.

Before he left for the night, he found Maggie adding up her paperwork in the back room.

“Good night, Ma,” he said.

“Good night, Moshie. She pushed a plate of chocolate squares towards him. “Take some brownies, why don’t you?”

He lifted a brownie off the plate. The pastry chef distributed these, but she never gave any to the busboys. At the end of the night, there was an unspoken hierarchy about who got what: managers could have wine, waiters sweets, and busboys got the leftover bread.

“Take them all. I’m getting way too fat.”

“*You* getting fat? Look at me.” He patted his belly, which protruded like a small melon. “You are tiniest thing—skinny-mini.”

She stopped writing on her papers and pushed the brownies closer to him. “Here. Take them. They’re giving me chocolate fever.” Her dark red hair reminded him of the red powder his auntie had worn even though her husband had left her some forty years ago. *I am not a widow. So I will wear the sindoor until someone tells me that bastard is dead.*

He took the brownies to the barista station and put them in a plastic container, making sure the pastry chef did not see. If his auntie were still alive, it would have been a nice treat for her. But her ashes were now in Chittagong, divided in ceramic pots among her many sisters. He had not even thought to keep any for himself, even though

for the last two years he had been the closest person to her. He had come from Chittagong to live with her. She was his grandmother's sister, and he called her Auntie Grandma when he wanted to tease her. "I may be old, but I'm nobody's grandma," she would say and pull at her jeweled sleeves. His family had been worried, her health was failing and she feared American doctors: she thought the men were all lechers and the women incompetent. He did not realize how sick she was until he came home one day and found her in the bathroom, pants around her ankles, a puddle of blood spreading a question mark on the floor. The doctors said she had a perforated ulcer that had eroded the wall of her stomach.

When he got home, Moshul removed his shoes at the door as usual. His auntie's shoes were still placed underneath the coat hooks, just as she had left them two months ago. He did not know what to do with her things. He offered to send them home to his mother and aunts but they did not want them. They considered Vani bad luck—a husbandless, childless woman who died alone in a foreign country—*who wants to wear these garments of misfortune?* The thought of throwing away her shoes pained him. The mirrored velvet slippers, her beaded sandals, and the pink backless shoes with rhinestones were like welcoming talismans waiting for him to come home.

Before he came to America, everyone warned Moshul that Vani was a *marouny*—a depraved woman, perhaps mentally unstable. That she would prefer to live her whole life with strangers rather than her own people was an insult to the family. They imagined her a prostitute-turned-madam or the concubine of some married politician. When he first arrived off the bus from LaGuardia airport, he was fully prepared to walk into a bordello or a nuthouse. His relief could not have been greater when he encountered this proper lady in a turquoise sari, waiting for him with a pot of tea and a plate of *cham-cham*, one of his favorite sweets rolled in pink coconut powder.

Her shoes looked sad on the thin piece of carpet from the dollar store. He slipped his feet into the pink backless ones. They felt cold through his socks. His large feet overlapped on all sides and his toes stretched the straps. He took the sheets from the drawer and made his bed on the couch as usual. He still did not want to sleep in Vani's bed. Then he went to the phone and called Deshi Biryani and ordered goa fish curry and samosas.

While waiting for dinner to arrive, he walked around in the shoes. He went into Vani's bedroom and opened her closet to stare at her beautiful handmade clothes. She had supported herself sewing and worked her way into the alterations department at Macy's. He took out an emerald green salwar kameez with a burgundy silk border and burgundy pants. He wondered if Maggie would wear it. She and his aunt were the same height and looked to be the same size. He pictured Maggie's white freckled form moving in the flowing fabric, walking down Canal Street, a little bit of Bangladesh melded with America.

Mr. Aboud came with his food and they spoke Bengali at the door. He was an older man from Chittagong and knew Moshul's family and their many acquaintances. If Moshul acted the least bit interested, Aboud would start rattling off the news from Chittagong: who was marrying, who had died, and when the next flood was coming. And by the time he finished, Moshul's dinner would be left in the bag, cold and congealed. He tried to discourage Aboud by looking over his shoulder into the hallway as if someone were approaching. His gaze raked over the dirty mosaic tiles and came to a stop when he saw Vani's shoes on his feet. Fortunately, Aboud was too involved recounting an elaborate wedding ceremony of some cousin to notice. Moshul shook his bag of food and held it close to his stomach; Aboud got the hint and said his good-byes. Inside, he slipped off the shoes and placed them back on the mat.

The next day, in the lunchroom at work, he brought his plastic container of noodles to the microwave. Most of the seats had already been

taken. Usually the busers sat at two tables: one group of Latinos and one Bangladeshi; the waiters occupied the other two tables. Maggie sat at a table with Max and Jenna. She and Max were looking for apartments on her phone. He wondered if Max might be interested in her as they were close in age. But then he remembered the waiters teasing Max about not being with a woman in years, and some kind of bet they all made to find him a woman.

He watched his noodles spin in the microwave and hoped a seat would soon vacate at the busers' tables. Most of the Spanish busers had finished eating the staff meal of meatballs and mashed potatoes and were lounging around talking in their language and watching funny videos on their phones. The Muslims could not eat the meatballs because they contained pork. Some bought sandwiches at the deli, but Mosul went to Whole Foods for Asian noodles because it was cheaper. The aisles of Whole Foods were peaceful compared to the Met Food Market in Queens, and he enjoyed wandering in their air-conditioned comfort. He had always thought rich people were rude and inconsiderate, but here, the opposite was true. People placed their items neatly on the belt to make room for others. They did not argue with the cashier about the price of a box of crackers. They did not search their purses and pockets for extra change. Or make the cashier subtract certain items from their bills. Or slap their children while waiting in line. At the store of the rich everyone was polite and calm and full of goodwill.

The microwave dinged and still there were no seats with the bus-boys. He took a chair at Maggie's table.

"Do you really want to live with a roommate?" Max said.

Maggie took a small bite of food. "I can't afford to live by myself anymore."

"Have you looked in Newark?" said Jenna. "My director has a studio there for like nine hundred a month."

Max spoke with his mouth full of food. "There're rooming houses in Harlem. I lived in one when I first moved here."

Moshul stirred his noodles and listened to the talk. He did not know Maggie owed so much money in back taxes or that the government was deducting it from her paycheck. He wanted to say something helpful but knew nothing about American taxes or New York real estate. Whenever his aunt was in a bad mood, he cheered her by making a pot of tea and telling stories about their relations in Chittagong: how Auntie Aparna's husband got secretly drunk at their daughter's wedding and vomited on the bridesmaids; or, how Auntie Bithie was not speaking to Auntie Priya because Priya said her *Kacchi Biryani* tasted like monkey brains. But even if he could put all the English words in the right places, he did not think Maggie would be interested in these stories. In America, everything you said had to be funny or filled with information like a TV program.

Maggie cut her meatball into tiny pieces. After every bite, she laid her fork and knife across the plate at eight and four o'clock respectively. This was the indicator for "still-working" she had told him. The fork and knife together at four o'clock was the indicator for "all-done." He took small bites of his Asian noodles and tried not to spill on his shirt.

The conversation turned to ways to save money on food. Of course, Moshul knew that a large pot of lentils and rice cost less than five dollars and would last a whole week, but something stopped him from mentioning it. It seemed like it would bring shame on him to know this. Auntie Vani used to tell him about how she survived in New York after her husband had left. Back then you could buy large bags of lentils and rice for less than a dollar. Vani told him which stores in Queens had the best deals, and where to find fenugreek and black mustard seeds. She warned him never to shop in Manhattan because everything cost "more than Allah himself could afford." He was pleased that in her last years she didn't have to economize on food. She ate fish or chicken most every night and, in the mornings, cooked him a breakfast of *lu-chi* and *cholar daal*; she sometimes mixed the lentils and pancakes with American-style eggs.

"You should go to family," he said. They all turned and looked at him as if he were a bird just landed on their table. "Family will help."

"I haven't seen my family in years," Maggie said. "I probably wouldn't even recognize them on the street."

"This is terrible. Do they beat you?"

"Nothing terrible, Moshie. We're just very different." She went back to looking at apartments.

He didn't understand how she could talk so lightly about such things. Whenever he would ask Vani about family, she would say how her heart was breaking for her sisters. And after speaking with them on the phone, she couldn't stop talking about her childhood home with its corrugated tin roof, and her pet monkey, Sangita, and how she almost drowned in a rice field because her leg got stuck in the mud. Still, it was curious that she never went back. Not even for a vacation.

"Parents are so overrated," said Jenna. "I hope I never see mine again."

"How you say that?" said Moshul. "*You* more than all should respect mother and father."

"Why me more than all?"

"Because. You are young girl."

"I'm a woman. Thank you."

"Oh. Okay. You are woman."

"And I don't need people telling me what to do."

This girl needed a slap to the face. But it was not for him to teach her. He bowed his head and shoveled noodles down his throat.

"Here's a place," said Max. "Only nine hundred a month in the East Village. It's with three other females."

"Four females living together isn't an apartment, it's a women's shelter."

"How about twelve-hundred in Murray Hill with a creative artistic gentleman?"

"Pervert, you mean." She took the phone in hand.

"I have apartment," Moshul said.

"You're looking for a roommate?" Maggie focused on her phone screen.

"My auntie went back to Chittagong. So I have her room empty. Is very cheap."

"Where is it?" asked Max.

"In Jackson Heights. Nice place. Very clean."

"Oh, Queens." Jenna rolled her eyes.

"Jackson Heights is kind of far for me, Moshie."

"She live there long time, so rent is small. I can pay by myself, but with roommate is only three seventy-five."

They all looked at each other.

"Three seventy-five?" said Max.

"A month?" said Jenna.

"If Maggie doesn't want it, I'll take it," said Max.

"Well, I could take a look." She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin. "See how far it is on the train."

They made arrangements to meet the next day. Moshul brought his plastic container to the sink and began washing it. Telling Maggie about the apartment was a mistake. His mother would be furious. She had three local girls lined up for marriage and wanted him to come home and choose. She sent him their pictures with the plan that he would marry in Chittagong and then take his new wife back to America to live in Vani's apartment. He could not bring home a wife to live with a strange American woman.

He dried his hands with a brown paper towel and looked around the lunchroom at all the people who had come here, from close by and from far away, shedding their families like a skin, rejecting their mother's love, turning themselves into exotic creatures with different languages and beliefs. Only to be isolated and bereft, never belonging anywhere, never to see beyond their own new-formed scales and feathers. He wondered if he could be such a person. He remembered the

restaurant's holiday party. It was a celebration with loud music and everybody dancing by themselves, not looking at each other, trying to be whatever was in their heads.

These people were alone in everything they did. They should dance together, he thought. Not the American dances, but Eastern style, looking at each other in groups, matching movements for movements with one another. The strings of the dotora would begin slowly, then the high-pitched whistling of the bansuri, then the tabla drums would start and everybody would rise from their seats. They'd lift up their hands and move their hips. The music would swell and onto the rooftop they would go, their bodies a mass of angles: one hand to the sky, one to the ground, wrists at ninety degrees, fingers on thumbs. The women would twirl in unison, weaving in and out of each other. The men would flash their palms and roll fists in the air. All across the city, New Yorkers would come onto the rooftops, point their hands to the ground and then to the sky, circle around and through each other, twirl, dance, spin.

The next day, Maggie buzzed his door exactly on time. He had spent the morning cleaning the floors and dusting the surfaces. And just as Vani always did with company, he set out little pink fingers of *cham-cham* on the good plates.

"That seven train just kept running," said Maggie. I thought I was going to fall off the edge of the Earth."

"That seven goes even more far. To Kew Gardens—those poor people."

Maggie looked at the shoes on the mat. "Should I take off my shoes?"

"No. Those are for my auntie."

"Oh. Is she still here?"

"She in Chittagong."

"Well, I hope she's not barefoot."

He stretched out his hand in a grand gesture. "This is main room. For living."

"And all this is your aunt's furniture?"

"Yes. Couch. Chairs. TV. It is very heavy—this furniture." He lifted up a chair to prove it.

She inspected the sketches of evening dresses on the wall. "Oh. Halston."

"She was making sewing for Macy department store. Here is Jackie Kennedy, her favorite." He pointed to a black and white photo of a lady in a pillbox hat. "Come. I show you bedroom."

At Vani's door, he bowed and motioned for her to go first.

"Is all this furniture staying?" she asked.

Moshul looked at Vani's prized bedroom set: the shiny panels of inlaid wood set in different colored squares, the grooved moldings that curled around the edges, and the big circular mirror rising up from the center of the dresser. Art Deco, she called it.

Maggie opened the armoire and ran a finger across the hanging clothes. "Such great fabrics."

"Yes. She make by hand most of these." He took out a brown and gold American-style jacket and hung it on the back of the door. The sunlight caught in the beadwork and sent shimmers around the room. "Once, a rich lady at Macy's saw her wearing this and paid her four hundred dollars to make for her." He held up an emerald salwar kameez. "This she wear to Carnegie Hall with her lady friends."

"They're all so beautiful," she said. But her face looked perplexed and dissatisfied.

"I can put in storage." As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted them. He saw Vani's bed taken apart, her semi-circular headboard stacked against some concrete wall, buried underneath the mattress and box spring.

Her hip bumped the dresser and Vani's perfume bottles clicked together. "Three seventy-five and we split the utilities?"

"Yes." He watched Maggie picturing her own furniture in the space. He tried to imagine what the room would look like without the long

dresser, or the nightstand with the beaded fringe cloth, or the tapestry bedspread Vani had made from scraps of upholstery fabric. It was impossible to contemplate. "Come. I show you kitchen."

On the way, he opened the door to the bathroom where he could still see Vani lying on the floor in a puddle of blood.

"Good size," Maggie said. It smelled of the Pine-Sol he had just used to clean it.

In the kitchen, he put on the kettle. They sat at the table. Moshul smoothed a wrinkle on the plastic flowered cloth.

"So where's your room?" Maggie asked.

"Me? I sleep on couch."

"Oh." Maggie fingered the gold tassels on the silk curtains. "Just one bedroom."

He shrugged. "In Chittagong I sleep on cardboard on floor."

The kettle sounded and he got up to make the tea. He used Vani's fancy teacups with the tiny violets.

"Your auntie has very good china."

"These were her favorite."

Maggie removed her fingers from the edge of the cup; her eyes grew wide. "Moshul? Has your auntie passed on?"

He took a sip of tea. "Yes. Two months ago. I should have said."

"I'm sorry." She pushed the cup into the middle of the table.

"I know you would not like."

"Dead people give me the willies." She smoothed her hair back from her face.

Moshul cradled his cup in both hands. He should try to say something funny like "the willies" but all he could think of to say was, "In Islam, we do not believe in ghosts."

"Oh, I don't think the place is haunted. I just can't...the idea of it." Maggie put her hand around her neck and shook her head.

"Someone is always dead in someplace." His cup rattled in the saucer when he set it down. Although he believed her reasons foolish, he saw

from her expression that he could not change her mind. A fly landed on one of the pink cakes and cleaned its wings. “Now I will have to marry.” He told her about his mother’s plans. On his phone, he showed her pictures of the three village girls.

“This one has a mean mouth,” she said about the youngest and prettiest of the girls.

“What you think of her?” He scrolled down to Malika, who looked like a giant potato wrapped in a flimsy red sari. She was well past marrying age, but he fantasized about her big thighs squeezing his waist and her breasts filling his hands.

“Well.” Maggie held the phone at a distance. “She’s not going to win any beauty contests, but she has a kind face.”

He tried to imagine living here with Malika: sleeping in Vani’s bed, performing their marital relations. It seemed wrong. His mother would say: *Get a new bed. It will be our wedding present to you.* Though it still seemed wrong to set up a new household on top of all these memories. He would have to throw away all of Vani’s clothes; Malika surely could not fit into them. She would have her own clothes to put in the armoire: cheap saris and polyester pantsuits from the bargain merchants on Jubilee Road. She would not know much English. He would have to teach her everything: how to ride the subway, how to work the stove and microwave, how to use toilet paper. She would be totally dependent on him.

And, of course, she would want to redecorate: the photos of Jackie Kennedy and the sketches of Halston’s would be replaced with pictures of Mecca and the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina. He might even have to start praying five times a day. Next would be children. And then cousins and uncles would come; he would have to find them work. They would bring their petty family squabbles and ask him to adjudicate. His life would be just like life in Bangladesh except with better appliances.

“You don’t have to marry anyone if you don’t want to,” Maggie said.

"Not so easy for me." He arranged the fingers of *cham-cham*.

"My family wanted me to marry too. They wanted me to find a steady job upstate and a husband and make babies. But I came to New York anyway. They think I wasted my life." She brushed a few crumbs into a little line on the table.

He wondered how does one waste a life. A life was just something to be lived. It was not possible to waste it like the garbage he scraped from the plates every day.

"Maybe they're right." Maggie put on one of her big smiles that seemed like a kind of protection. "But I wouldn't be happier had I listened to them." She got up and gave his arm a playful shake. "It's your life and your choices."

At the door, she looked down at Vani's shoes like they were a cluster of wild snakes. He stood in the threshold stupefied, not knowing what to say.

"You have some ...on your shirt." She rubbed a spot on his chest with her nail and then started down the hall. Halfway, she turned around and said, "Bye. See you tomorrow."

He went back to the bedroom and confronted Vani's clothes hanging from the armoire. They needed to go. He threw the jacket and kameez on the bed. The other clothes he bunched in his arms and lifted off the bar. He grabbed a turquoise sari and realized it was the one Vani had worn on the first day he saw her. It fell limply from his fist and puddled on the floor, the silvery beads blinking up from the ocean of fabric. He gathered it up and wrapped it around himself. The bed was piled with clothes like some mass grave. He could see Vani in each of these garments and remember the days she wore them: the pink pantsuit at the mall, the beige sari shopping at the Indian grocery, the brocade dress for weddings and parties, the gold-trimmed kameez at lunch with her lady friends. He could not bring himself to throw these away. He lay down on the bed and curled his knees to his chest.

From the street, came the low hum of a truck shifting gears. Someone flushed a toilet upstairs. On a floor below, the faint sound of TV voices came through the heating vent. He had never cried for Vani. Not while he waited over her body for the 911 people. Not at the hospital when the female doctor told him they did not save her. Not when he was cleaning her blood from the bathroom floor with an entire roll of paper towels. Not when her ashes came from the funeral home in a cardboard box marked Private and Confidential. Not even when, in haste, he took Vani's ashes to the post office and mailed them to Chittagong without saving any for himself. When he felt like crying, he would lie with all of her things on the bed and it was as if she were right there with him.

He must have drifted off to sleep because when he awoke the room was dark. He called Deshi Biryani to place an order. Still wrapped in the sari, he looked at himself in the mirror. His white shirt and jeans seemed to clash with the delicate blue fabric so he took them off and stood naked in the mirror: his ball of a belly lightly dusted with hair, his thin arms, his penis a curled tuber looking for the light. Again, he wrapped himself in the sari, but this time properly like a Bengali woman on Shaheed Day. He rotated himself in the fabric tucking it around his waist, then he made the pleats as best as he could and draped it over his shoulder, leaving enough fabric to cover his head. His brown skin came alive under the cloth and glistened with the silver beads and pearls.

The buzzer sounded and he went to the door to wait for Mr. Aboud. He stood at the entrance as Aboud's footsteps sounded in the stairwell. His face looked confused when he first saw Moshul, as if seeing perhaps a female relative or acquaintance. But as he walked closer, Aboud's face froze in shock and then looked at the floor.

"Good evening, Swami," Moshul said in Bengali.

Aboud dropped the bag at his feet and shielded his eyes with his hand. He did not even wait to get paid, but hurried down the stairs shaking his head.

It would not take long for this news to reach Chittagong. His mother would be emailing him soon. His father probably would not speak to him. The girls of the villages would quietly find other suitors. Yet, he could not help but think the worst consequence was that he could no longer order from Deshi Biryani.

He removed the sari and put back on his jeans and T-shirt. In the kitchen, he cleaned up the tea things and arranged the curry on a china plate. On either side of the plate, he placed a knife and fork. He poured himself a glass of water and set it just above the knife like at the restaurant. In the cupboard, he remembered Vani had a bottle of wine. He opened it with the corkscrew and poured himself a glass. Though he had taken sips at the restaurant during wine tastings, this was his first full glass of wine. It tasted bitter, and he wondered if it had gone bad. He opened the paper napkin on his lap and alternated taking a bite of food and a sip of wine. While sipping, he laid his knife and fork at eight and four o'clock. He was an American now.

The next day, he waited until most everyone had left the lunchroom before approaching Maggie. She was eating with Jenna. He set a white box on the table. "Is for you. I want you to have."

Maggie looked at the box. "For me?"

"You like my auntie's clothes, so I want you to have."

Maggie opened the box. The turquoise sari shimmered under the fluorescent lights. "Oh Moshul. This is too beautiful. I can't accept this."

"You take. I know you will like."

Jenna fingered a corner. "The beads are coming loose."

Maggie gave Jenna a silencing look. "Thank you, Moshul. This is the best." She got up and gave him a hug.

He felt embarrassed by the hug. Over Maggie's shoulder, he saw one of the busboys openly laughing at him. But he did not care. This was his American friend. They would share dinners—go to movies—maybe

even attend Carnegie Hall. Moshul patted her shoulders twice and then went upstairs to the pre-shift meeting.

He did not see Maggie for the rest of the night. He was assigned to work a party in the private dining room. It was a wedding reception with many courses, lots of speeches, and drunken people constantly getting up from their seats. The timing of when to clear and when to bring the next course was difficult. At the end of the night, he was exhausted. The bride's family was very drunk and stayed late. By the time their party left, all the other waiters had gone home. In the main dining room, the cleaning staff had put the chairs on tables and were mopping the floors with long string mops. They were thin African men who never spoke a word and worked so quietly you almost forgot they were there.

He weaved his way through the empty corridors of the downstairs kitchen. Garbage bags lined the walls. Empty boxes were flattened and tied in bunches like bales of hay. Outside the women's locker room, bins were lined up waiting to be emptied. Inside, he could hear the janitor's mop slapping the floor. Something blue was in one of the bins. He lifted a wad of paper towels and looked closer: it was Vani's sari, out of its box, bunched up in the garbage. He pulled it out and held it in his hands like a lifeless thing. There were some marks on it: red beans from a discarded salad, a few wet spots, but other than that it looked fine.

He carried it back to the men's locker room, dragging part of it on the floor behind him. In the locker room, every sound echoed off the white tile. The clicks of his combination lock seemed gigantic, the opening of the steel door, painful. Now he understood why people married and had kids, did favors for family and paid visits to relatives. Why they kept believing the things their parents believed. Why they fasted for a month and prayed five times a day. It was all to avoid this feeling.

He started to put the sari into his backpack but stopped. He took it in both hands and held it over the garbage. Gradually, he let it drop, inch by inch into the black plastic. It spiraled down to the bottom without a sound. When he was done, it couldn't even be seen. He tapped the side of the can with his hand just to hear that satisfying sound, like he had heard so many times tonight, so many times these years. The sound of something being thrown away.

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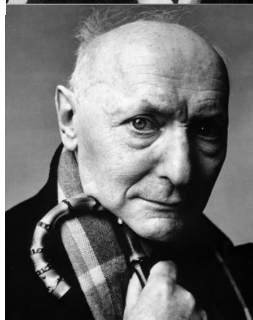
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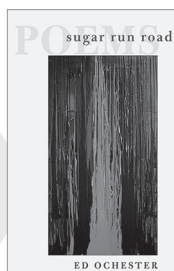
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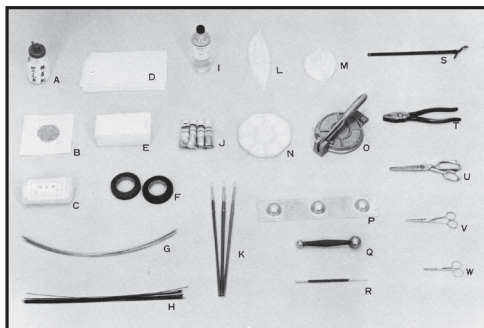
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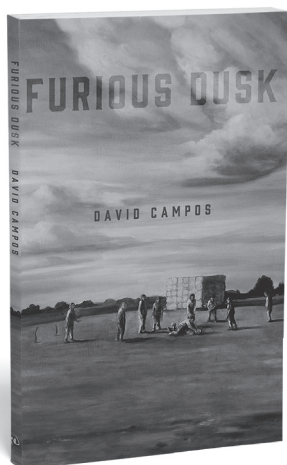
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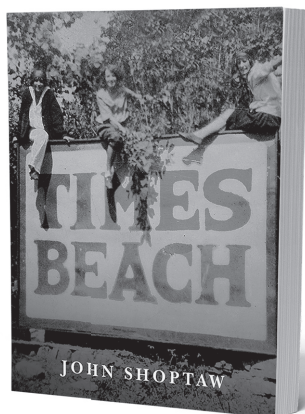
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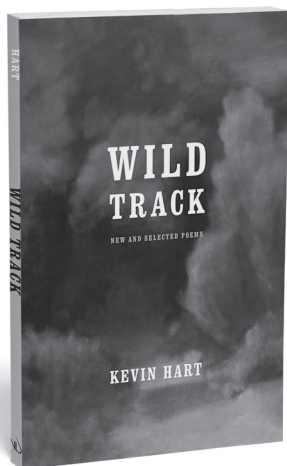



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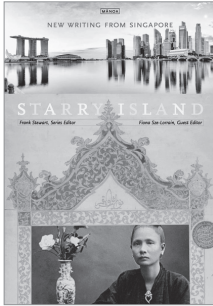


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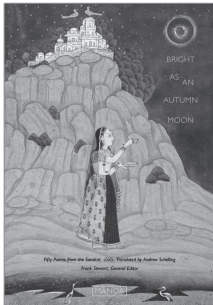
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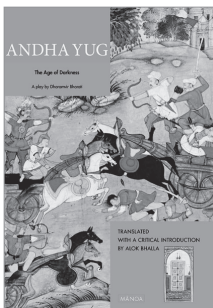
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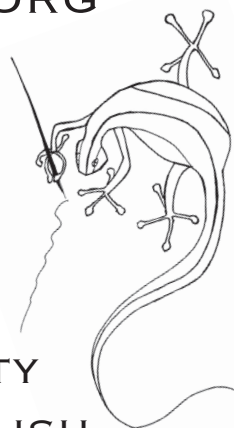
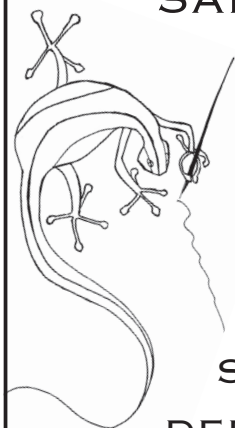
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