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PHONE: (617) 495-9775 **FAX:** (617) 496-3692

EMAIL: info@harvardreview.org **ONLINE** at harvardreview.org

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Editorial

Organizations like *Harvard Review* are meant to have mission statements, but somehow I've never quite gotten around to writing one. So, a few weeks ago, I signed up for a CLMP (Community of Literary Magazines and Publishers) webinar on crafting such a text—an experience that quickly reminded me why I'd put it off for so long.

A mission statement is difficult because it's inherently reductive. One suggestion, for example, was that we try to come up with a set of adjectives that describe the kind of writing we like and that we choose to publish. *Okay*, I thought. *I can do that*. How about *smart*, for starters? I have always liked writing that is clever, but, of course, there are different kinds of clever. Joan Wickersham's essay in this issue about memoirists who recant is particularly clever in the conception, that is, it's just a great idea. But there are other writers who are clever at the level of the sentence, clever in the use of words: Ben Miller's essay on marriage, for example ("What attributes of our loving had waltzed us in the direction of longevity?"), or the virtuosic poet Sylvia Legris ("Chastise the botanically criminal Manchurian elms").

Then, again, you don't want everything to be sophisticated. Sometimes the virtue of a piece is that it's *simple*, both in the language and in the presentation of the world. I've always had a soft spot for directness, exhibited here in a story by Richard Carson, whose quiet, rather sad tale about caring for a cantakerous and decrepit father seems to speak a kind of bare-bones truth. But then there is also writing that is *forceful* and *authoritative*, like the work of Tracy K. Smith, who in a poem called "Hill Country" channels the voice of none other than God. Another bravura performance in this issue, this time by someone who is astonishingly young, is the story "No Spanish" by Moira McCavana, a recent Harvard

graduate who writes about language and family and faraway places with the grace and confidence of someone twice her age.

And then what about *funny*? It's hard to find funny writing, but in this issue we have several funny pieces, including one about being Jewish in Poland by Eileen Pollack (not inherently a funny subject, but funny in her hands), and another, a charming piece by Stuart Gelzer, about a Georgian immigrant named Zaza who turns up unexpectedly—and inconveniently—at the narrator's door. Then there is also *witty*, which is like a cooler, drier kind of funny, or like a cross between funny and smart. This is the category into which I'd put Hannah Rosefield's essay about being a stranger not so much in a strange land as in a land inhabited by strange birds. Another witty piece of writing which is also quietly *subversive* is Cecily Parks's "Texas Natives," a poem made entirely from Mexican, Spanish, and Native American names of plants.

We always want to be publishing work that is *ambitious*, including some that is occasionally *opaque*. And what about *suspenseful*? *Unexpected*? *Engaging*? *Elegant*? *Erudite*? What set of adjectives will ever do, when the task of editing is actually to recognize all the different ways in which writing can be great? But, wait, maybe that's it, maybe that's our mission— though I'm not sure our webinar leader would agree.



Before I sign off on this issue, I want to add one final note. In 2018 a member of the staff of Houghton Library will be retiring, someone who has been not only an administrative savior from my first day on the job (I will never forget his kindness to me in those early, rather awkward weeks), but a tireless champion and loyal subscriber of *Harvard Review*. That person is Dennis Marnon, and I want to say publicly that we could not have done it without him and thank him with all my heart.

—Christina Thompson

MOIRA MCCAVANA

No Spanish

WHEN I WAS TWELVE, when we still lived in that small, moldering farmhouse in the hills behind Guernica, my father outlawed Spanish from our household. Like a dictator, he stood at the head of our family table and yelled, “*No Spanish, NO SPANISH!*” waving his arms as though he were helming his own national uprising. “We will all forget about that language, is that clear?”

These demands, of course, he had delivered in Spanish, though not one of us had rushed to correct him. It was evidence that he, like us, spoke nothing else. To abandon Spanish would be to abandon the language in which all of our well-intentioned but still tenuous relationships had been built. It was like removing our field of gravity, our established mode of relating to each other. Without Spanish, it seemed entirely possible that one of us might spin out into space. How were we supposed to tell each other practical things? *Keep out of that corner; I’ve just spilled water and it’s slippery. Hold the door; I have too many things in my arms. Please, just leave me alone. Please, don’t even touch me.*

It’s obvious to me now that for my father, this impulsive vow to speak only in Basque functioned as a sort of double agent: a radical act

of political defiance masquerading as farce. When his lips split in a wily smile and his eyes flickered, I felt as though he were signing us up for a ridiculous play. On that first evening I was already calculating how soon I might be able to drop out.

Several days into our experiment, when he banished my brother to sleep outside for speaking Spanish offhandedly, we still didn't really believe him. My mother and I watched in silence as he pulled my brother's bedding from his mattress, and then we all followed him around to the back of the house. Until he set my brother's comforter down on the grass, his pillow at the head of it, I had been sure that he'd been joking.

Julen's makeshift bed that night had been placed right beneath my window, and I remember sticking my head out over him when we had all gone off to bed. Because my parents' bedroom was next to mine, we couldn't risk speaking, so instead we exchanged a series of faces, beginning with *our father has gone crazy*. Later, after we ran out of faces to make, and after a long period of just staring at each other, he fell asleep. At some point, the moon came across his face, and I watched for a while as all the lines of approaching adulthood became more pronounced. My brother was older than me by seven years and three months. Sometimes I wished that he were my father.

My brother was allowed to sleep in the house the next night, but his slip up had signaled to my father that we would need to actually learn our new language if we were ever to abandon Spanish successfully. On Monday, he drove us all into Guernica to go to the market, and there he led us straight to a booth in the back where a pair of homely older women stood behind a table piled high with antique electronics. We were all embarrassed by the way my father, in his fledgling Basque, bartered with the women over the price of various old radios that he held up before them.

"Three!" he proclaimed, with a rusted radio in hand, and one of the women responded with a sentence that sounded like pure static.

My father deflated a little. “Four?” he asked, innocently.

Eventually one of the women said to him, “Thank you, sir, for your efforts, but maybe we should stick to Spanish for the moment.” She gestured to the radio and the few coins I held in my hand to pay for it. “For doing this.”

“*Me cago en Dios*,” my father had hissed without thinking about it, and immediately he brought his hands up to his mouth in embarrassment—not for the swear (“I shit on God”)—but for his instinctive deference to our banned language. The light in his eyes sputtered out and he fled, walking hurriedly around all of the vendors, picking his feet up high to avoid crates of string beans and stacks of folded used clothing. We had had to pay for the radio for him, choosing the most modern-looking one, and letting the woman pick through our change, until she had collected what she determined it cost.

I think even my mother must have felt like an orphan standing before those women, disturbed as we were by the momentary loss of my father and what looked like the permanent loss of a language that we had never realized we might have loved.

I should be clear about this: to speak Basque was against the law. Of course, in some towns it was flaunted freely, even in the street. There was a certain social capital attached to speaking Basque, and an additional bonus, which I’m sure would translate into any language, if you could do so without giving a fuck. But it was still, in the eyes of our ruthless leader, illegal. How strictly the ban was reinforced varied with the ferocity of the local Civil Guard. In some towns, it was a hand to the throat. Elsewhere, your head into water. Across the river, near where my mother used to take us swimming, you stopped going to school, or work, then church, then disappeared. But I didn’t know much about that when we were back in the farmhouse. On the day of his big announcement, and in one of our last conversations together

in Spanish, my father explained to me only the simple overarching facts: our ruthless leader was General Franco. Our Spain—and we—were his.

“Franco doesn’t want us to speak our own language because he says that in Spain, everyone should speak Spanish,” my father had explained.

“Well, that makes a little bit of sense,” I said. He recoiled. “Doesn’t it?”

“Ana, we are our own people.”

“Okay.”

“A lot of people think that we should be our own country.”

“Okay.” At this point he was no longer waving his arms. He was sitting down at his place at the head of the table and was crumpling and uncrumpling the napkin in front of him.

“We can’t give our language over to them,” he said. He was bent over the table, all the earlier bravado drained from his body. My brother and my mother stayed, petrified, in their seats, but I went to my father and put my arms around him.

After a while I said, “It’s just that it’s hard to feel like it’s my language since I’ve never spoken it, *Papi*.”

My father kissed the crown of my head and thumbed his clumsy fingers through my hair. I watched my mother and Julen fidget nervously across the table, and in that moment I felt a little like a victor for the rest of us. Then my father brought his hand to the back of my neck and squeezed it, a sign of affection that I always pretended to hate. We had our routine: each time he did it I would bob my head furiously, attempting to free myself, while he would let out a series of squawks, transforming me into some kind of theatrical bird. If I was feeling generous, I would thrash around a bit more for his entertainment.

This time the charade ended like it normally did, with me surrendering to him in a torrent of giggles, and everyone else joining in too, though my father quit before the rest of us. Without moving, or raising

his voice, he brought his eyes up to mine and said calmly, “*Aita*. That’s what you will call me now.” In his face, any sign of apology was drowned in newfound resolve.

If we had been more prudent, maybe we would have been nervous about teaching ourselves a banned language, but it was not as if we could speak enough to ever set the Civil Guard after us. It was not as if we could even have a full conversation. For the first week or so, our pathetic vocabularies barely overlapped. I think we all assumed that at some point we would speak a word that someone else knew, and so it became a game, a test of our faith, to continue an exchange without revealing the meaning of whatever words we had spoken to the other person.

On the second or third day of our exile from Spanish, while I was eating breakfast, my mother came into the kitchen and spoke a string of sounds that I didn’t understand. When I stared at her blankly, she bobbed her head around a bit as though to say, *you know these words, don’t think too hard about it*. I raised my eyebrows, waiting for her to surrender to pantomiming whatever it was that she had meant, but instead she pulled her arms into her side as though bound in a body bag, shot raised eyebrows right back at me, and then slunk slowly out of the room.

It became our silent joke, our laughless gag. Julen adopted it too, pinning his arms to his sides in defense when our blank reactions clued him to the fact that he had spoken a sentence we didn’t understand. Imagine the stupid words we taunted ourselves with: *beans, bottom, salt, ear, fingernail, onion, sock*.

At that point, Julen had finished high school and I was in the middle of my summer break, and so during the endless stretch of those first wordless days, our hours became bent around breaking each other’s resolve. Even when my mother pretended to be busy frying peppers or

tending to our languishing garden, she would at any moment be ready to sprint after us and pry our hands from our sides if someone came up behind her and whispered *belarritik*.

From the moment we returned from the market, my father had planted himself at the kitchen table, and there, he took to repairing the radio. If we had been using Spanish, he probably would have declared something like “*esas malditas mujeres . . .* can you believe them? Selling me junk that doesn’t even work,” but after his slipup, he was careful to uphold his own rules. Instead he suffered silently, and upon this initial bed of frustration piled up layers of small annoyances as he struggled to make any leeway with the repair. Each time he thought that he had made some mistake he plunged into a hysterical cough and slapped his hand against the table, as though he had crossed some wires in his own body instead. During lulls in the game, we watched his strange behavior from our various perches: the top landing of the stairs, or outside, crouched beneath a window. When he tested it, and finally a tiny sound curled from the radio’s speaker, he pounded the table so violently that he left a spiderweb of cracks in the wood.

Reluctantly, we emerged from the shadows and hidden corners of the house to join him, and as I neared the radio, distinct voices separated out from the static. They hung there in our kitchen as though they were our own familial ghosts. Even after years—my whole life—living in the Basque Country, I still pinpoint that night as the first time I really heard our language. I still remember how my father’s eyes blazed wildly in the settling darkness. My mother put a kind hand to his back, but she looked pained. It was clear that it was the end of our game.

We all stayed around the radio for so long that night that I actually fell asleep right there, lying beneath the table, with my head upon my father’s feet. I woke up some time later, alone in the empty kitchen, my body splayed upon the floor.

Over the course of the next week, we gathered for three to four hours each day to listen, hoping to absorb whatever we could. My father perched himself over a blank sheet of paper and armed with a pen, he scrambled to copy down phrases as they spilled from the speaker, but they came out rapidly, and he was always left clawing after the end of the previous sentence while a new one dawned. And then there was the problem of no one knowing if whatever combination of letters he put to the page existed at all.

When it became clear that the radio was a failure—that it would never teach us any real Basque—my mother took to mimicking the woman that we always heard on the Basque news station. Like the announcer, she would say *arratsalde on*, in a delicate female newscaster voice, poised with clasped hands upon the table, and then she would continue her fake broadcast, beginning with the random words that we all had learned when we finally pooled our vocabularies, and then devolving into a series of ugly, made-up sounds. She once contorted her throat so extremely that she sent herself into a choking fit. Julen had rushed up and smacked her on the back until she regained control. Spit had dribbled down her chin.

My father never applauded at the end of these performances.

I have not shared any more about that early period of my childhood or the hours spent chasing my brother around the grounds of the farmhouse, because it does not belong here. But if it's important to know anything else about that time, know this: every night, the sun set behind us (it seemed like it was right behind us), and though it's simple, it's the truth: we were happy.

That period ended abruptly with my father's announcement that we would be moving into the nearby tavern, where he had found a job as the bookkeeper and general manager of the downstairs restaurant, my mother a job as a hostess, and guest rooms on the third floor of the

upstairs hotel for all of us. “And better yet,” he went on, “the man who has hired me speaks perfect Basque, and so does the entire staff. We’re offered complementary lessons every Sunday afternoon between the lunch and dinner shifts, which means that this,” he said, his whole face aflame, “will be the last time you’ll ever hear me speak Spanish.”

Would you believe me if I said that I hadn’t even realized it? That the initial shock of his announcing that he had quit his job at the shipyard had distracted me completely from the language? I hadn’t even recognized that of course he was speaking in Spanish until he mentioned it himself, but by then he had finished his announcement—at the end, I think he even bowed—and he was already silent, sitting down.

My mother and I found each other on the staircase later, when my father was asleep, and though I suppose we could have spoken Spanish, we didn’t. Julen discovered us when he got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, and stayed with us until we all departed in the early morning.

The walls of the Ibarra Tavern were plastered with purple wallpaper that slouched away from the molding in some places, like the last dying petals of a flower. When we arrived, a week after my father had made his announcement, we were greeted by the tavern owner in the foyer, and he paraded us through the whole ground floor with our suitcases still in hand. On the tour, he spoke to us in rapid Basque, but he gestured enthusiastically enough so that I was fairly sure I understood what he was pointing out: the range of wines on tap at the bar, the lacquered wood paneling that reached midway up the wall of the dining room, the corner of the room that could be closed off for private events, and the curtains, egg-yolk orange, that made the whole space glow as though it were the inner core of the sun when, toward the end of the day, the afternoon lent its longest beams of light to

the tavern floor. In the kitchen, the new industrial-strength dishwasher, the steel countertops for food preparation, the pots and pans and cooking utensils that dangled from the ceiling and the profusion of eggs, milk, and meat stacked in the fridge.

Upstairs in our rooms, my father repeated one of the few phrases in Basque we had all learned from the radio, *oso ondo*, which translated literally as “very good.” “*Oso ondo?*” he posed to us all, and then he repeated it over again to himself as he climbed into a bed that my mother had made a moment before. He whacked the mattress with both hands, grinning as they rebounded with each effort. “Very good,” he squealed. “Very, *very* good!”

The next afternoon, Julen and I padded around the upstairs floors, exploring what we hadn’t been shown on Mr. Ibarra’s tour. From down in the lobby, there was the distant chatter of a new group checking in. Julen pushed lightly on the nearest door and it opened to reveal a room identical to ours, with two twin beds sticking out from the wall. We both had the idea at the same time to swipe the pillows from the head of the mattress, place them at the foot, and then to turn back the covers accordingly so that it looked like all the beds had been set up for guests’ heads to rest where their feet should have been—to loll about exposed and defenseless in the center of the room.

When we entered the rest of the rooms on the floor to switch around the beds, we found them all unoccupied, except for the one at the end of the hall, where we found the tavern owner’s wife, naked, her drooping body framed perfectly in the outline of the door.

To make up for our misconduct, we were given our first jobs at the tavern.

Julen worked the bar, and I worked clearing tables. The rest of the wait staff were girls aged sixteen, maybe seventeen or eighteen, who were all friends of Mr. Ibarra’s daughter, Maite, and who spoke to each other urgently in fluent Basque. They were nice enough when Mr.

Ibarra introduced me; each of the five of them said *aupa*, in a scattered chorus, and afterwards Maite herself had shown me the technique for clearing customers' plates and balancing them down the length of both arms.

When a cascade of teacups slid from my arm at the end of my first shift, one of Maite's friends volunteered to sweep it up. She didn't complain, even as she stretched the broom into the far corners of the kitchen, collecting the shards that had escaped her. Even before that, when the teacups were just beginning to shatter, she had stayed calm; she hadn't even looked at me.

In the first of our Sunday grammar lessons with Mr. Ibarra, we began, somewhat randomly, with expressions of want. At the start, we only had access to our very small vocabularies and so were stuck making sentences like "I want an onion," or "I want a shoe," but after that we learned how to pair the "want" with other verbs, and then we became able to really sound our own thoughts in the language: "I want to eat." "I want to sleep." "I want to use the bathroom." "I want to do ____." "I want to say ____." "I want to forget ____."

But as it turned out, "want" was not necessarily a logical place to start. I suspect that we began there only by my father's request. I understood—it felt liberating to air our wants. We felt like we were real Basque speakers: people who could express not just their needs, but their superfluous desires. It was a luxurious point of entry, but after that Mr. Ibarra sent us right back to the very beginning, where we belonged. The next week, all that we were given to couple with "want" was "I am," "it is," "my name," and "this," "that," "there," along with a small bank of bland adjectives: "pretty," "short," "long," "small," "sad," "exciting," "skinny."

After our first lesson I had foolishly believed that I was on the cusp of being able to speak my own thoughts as they rose in my mind, but

no matter how I toyed with that second collection of words, they never brought me any closer to sounding like myself. And they were difficult for me, still. That was the tragedy. Even after the hour lesson with Mr. Ibarra and after another spent on my own in the confinement of my room, I couldn't even figure out how "I am" changes to "you are." I felt the limitations of the language all over again, fumbling through those conjugations, and I lost my desire to voice even my wants.

Mr. Ibarra had us working three shifts a week, seven to midnight. Initially, my mother had stood up for me. Fifteen hours was too much, she said; I was only twelve. I had never had a curfew of any sort at the farmhouse—there was no need—but if I had, it would have been well before midnight, or one in the morning, when I really got off work, having finally pawed through a sink of dirty dishes while two of Maite's friends would lazily dry the plates and return them to their places. But when my mother brought it up, my father responded in some combination of ill-conjugated words that we were still indebted to the Ibarras, that there was nothing he could do. Mr. Ibarra was a reasonable man. He even had children himself.

It was not until my fifth shift that I learned that Maite, Mr. Ibarra's daughter, was in fact one of four *Maite's* in the kitchen. I had called her name—I needed to know what to do with the steak knives that I had just cleared—but before I even finished speaking, three other girls turned around and stared at me with dull, probing eyes. Seconds later, the real Maite emerged from a corner of the kitchen with a potato skinner and a half-bare potato in hand. I held up the steak knives and the real Maite pointed to a soaking bin behind me. The other girls turned back to their work. I could never remember, later, who was Maite and who was not.

But the Maites loved Julen. That was true of all of them. After the night shift, they emptied into the stone alley behind the tavern and settled on the sloping bricks. They made use of the angle of the alley to

recline comfortably in provocative poses. Someone was always lounging on her side with her head propped coquettishly upon a hand; others lay on their backs, and kept their bent legs open wide enough to make a tent of their dress hems. From above, the alley would have looked an oddity: a narrow chamber of stone dotted all over with soft, heaping mounds of flesh.

The first time that I was invited to join, I sat a length away, on the back steps of the tavern kitchen. A blanket of smoke hung above us in the air. After ten minutes of the Maïtes talking around me, I got up to leave.

“Wait, Ana,” someone called out after me. I stopped and swung around on the stairs. I had been holding onto the metal railing with one hand, and I let my weight fall away from it so that my body dangled before them.

“Yes?” I said.

“What’s your brother’s name?”

Every night after that all the Maïtes cawed after Julen until he wandered to the alley and joined me on the back steps. He accepted one of their cigarettes the first time that he sat out back with us, but each time after that he declined. Some of the Maïtes tried to engage him in conversation, but his answers, by necessity and, I liked to think, by preference, were short. I still can’t remember feeling closer to my brother than when we sat together on the back stoop of the tavern kitchen. What had begun as a private silence, confined to our own house, turned public in front of the kitchen girls; it felt like an honest, unpretentious show of love for one another.

At this same time, in Mr. Ibarra’s lessons, I was discovering all the ways in which Basque differed utterly from Spanish. Even the order of words in a sentence was different, at times, nearly opposite. I had known that from the beginning, but as we continued to add new elements to our basic sentences, I began to lose my hold on even the most basic sentence

formulations. When we started out, I could handle *onion-the*, and then *onion-the-pretty-is*, but soon that turned into *give-to-me-onion-pretty-the*, which, when I wasn't paying attention, became *give-to-me-onion-pretty-the-otherwise-leave-will-I-and-ever-no-return*.

The lessons revealed in painful increments the full extent to which my father's whim had restructured our lives. I began to question the order of every sentence that I spoke. There was a period when I lost track of the modifiers entirely, both because I was confused, and because I really didn't care, and so every sentence that I tried came out scrambled, leaving poor Mr. Ibarra stunned and embarrassed when he listened to me speak.

At some point during this period, I was filling in for one of Maite's friends on an afternoon shift. A group of men lingered at one of my tables, doling out liquor in small doses until the rest of the dining room emptied and they remained there alone, exceptionally drunk. I watched them from behind the bar with the boy who worked when Julen and Mr. Ibarra were not around. When one of the men raised a wobbly hand for the check I started toward them, but just before I reached them, he pulled the tablecloth out from under their collection of glasses and all four drunk men charged together toward the door.

As I chased after them, I yelled, "TABLECLOTH-ME-IT-GIVE," then "ME-IT-TABLECLOTH," then "GIVE," and then, as my legs gave out beneath me and the men disappeared down the street, the ruined white fabric rippling out behind them, "Tablecloth tablecloth tablecloth tablecloth."

We canceled our Basque lesson on the Sunday of my thirteenth birthday, and instead the four of us gathered at a table in the corner of the dining room. My father was disappointed to miss the lesson—we were becoming relatively advanced, already moving onto the past tense of *to have*—and he sat there, pouring over his notes until my mother came in from the kitchen with a lopsided cake and set it down.

He scowled at her, but then he pulled my head in toward his and kissed my hair. “Today, you have a birthday,” he said to me. Then, growing excited, he said, “Tomorrow, you *had* a birthday *yesterday*.” His eyes darted around the room. “Today, we have cake—”

“Be quiet,” my mother said, cutting into it. On the top was written *Ana 13 urte*, which just meant “Ana, 13 years.” I wondered if maybe she hadn’t known the word for birthday until my father spoke it just then. We were all eating in relative peace when Julen came into the dining room, carrying a birdcage with a napkin haphazardly draped over it.

He shoved it at me and said, “For you.”

My mother and I spent the rest of the afternoon sliding our fingers between the metal bars of the cage, attempting to pat the bird’s head without getting nipped by its beak. The bird was petite and covered in ragged feathers that it seemed to shed indiscriminately. There could have been something wrong with it, but we didn’t care; for a brief period of time, my mother and I directed toward that bird all of our love.

In the hour that remained before the dinner shift, we insisted on parading it around town, and on the walk my mother and I shared the cage between us, each of us nervously holding it by the tips of our fingers. And though it was obvious, by appearance alone, that the bird was no relation to a parrot, when my mother set its cage down on my bed that night she attempted to teach it phrases, as though the bird were capable of repeating them back to her. “I have to go to the bathroom,” she said. The bird stared out at both of us. “I have to go to the bathroom,” she repeated again, forcefully. The bird was silent.

I yelled, “I really, really, really have to go to the bathroom!”

I had been planning to name the bird the next morning, but I woke up to find that it had escaped from its cage and was lying in a wreath of its own feathers on the floor.

Julen and I were the ones to bury the bird, because my mother had to stay at the tavern for work. We wandered the town for a little, look-

ing for the right place to perform a burial, but in the end we decided not to bury it at all, and instead to leave it in the dumpster behind the cobbler's shop. Julen swaddled the bird in discarded leather clippings.

We felt silly for having brought the bird over in its birdcage when afterwards we were left carrying the empty cage back across town.

My brother left us, six months into our time at the tavern, for an apprenticeship at a tailor's shop in downtown Bilbao. He had been looking for a full-time job for weeks, and while he could have easily picked one up at the tavern, he didn't.

We all mourned his absence in different ways. The bottom fell out of my mother's jokes; she could never be properly funny after that. My father took to doubling up on Basque lessons with Mr. Ibarra. I started hanging around with the Maite's until two or three in the morning, thinking of them, increasingly, as my own siblings. Maybe it was true that we had all spun out of orbit. Or maybe Julen had, and we, in the aftermath, each used it as an excuse to drift a little farther out.

A little after Julen left, I started going to the clandestine Basque-language school that Maite and her friends attended. Mr. Ibarra had signed me up, and he was the one who drove me there on my first day. The school was housed inside an old textile factory off of a road just outside of town. Its sheet-metal sides had rusted to the shade of dirt, and on the outside it bore no markings.

Inside, Mr. Ibarra led me through a hall of makeshift classrooms to a class of students who looked at least two years younger than me. I left the building during our break for lunch and stood out on the barren grass behind the school; I had thought I would need the time to cry, but I waited for a while, and it turned out that I didn't. At one point a rush of birds burst across the sky and I watched them near each other then separate in turns. I only remembered my own dead bird once they had all passed, and though I had never seen it fly, I imagined it dipping

drunkenly around them, and the thought became hysterical to me. I actually stood out there and began to laugh.

Later, when I returned to the building, I saw a flash of Maite going up the stairs between class sessions, and I realized that she hadn't been in the car that morning, when Mr. Ibarra had driven me to school.

Initially I was furious with Mr. Ibarra for having placed me in a class of fifth graders, but within a few months, without my even realizing it, my Basque flowered. At some point I understood the majority of what the Maites fired back and forth between each other, and I began to chime in in little ways: "You're right, he's a turd!" or, "Pass me a cigarette," or even just, "Yes, yes, yes. Yes. Yes—totally."

I don't even remember when I finally moved from the back steps to the alley with the rest of them; it happened seamlessly. I didn't try any seductive poses, but I did note my own pooling flesh upon the cobblestones and the growing downhill tow on different parts of my body over the course of the nights that we spent there.

The other barman at the tavern took over Julen's old shifts, and he always joined us outside when we all got off work. His name was Gabriel, and he was immensely skinny, almost a ghost of a boy. If you didn't know him, you could honestly confuse him and his chaste shyness for a sort of specter, haunting a place.

But he was also nice to me. Out in the alley, we spoke to each other in slow sentences. The Maites lounged all around us and we carved a void in the flood of their ceaseless chatter. When he talked, I could see through his skin to each muscle in his face at work. When he listened, the dormant muscles sometimes spasmed at random, revealing the places where they lay temporarily hidden.

No one had warned me that we were going to leave the alley on the night that we did. I was the last one cleaning up in the kitchen, and when I finally came out back I found a pool of people milling in front of the stoop. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw that the full assortment

of Maite were there—girls who had worked only one or two other shifts with me, whose faces still stood out as foreign.

The real Maite and one of her friends hovered at the top of the hill, detached from the group, and when they saw me shut the door to the kitchen, they began walking, and the rest of us followed them up and out of the alley. We turned left onto the broad central avenue, the closed storefronts appearing somehow naked and indecent, and then at the end of the avenue, where the street forked, Maite took us down the narrower of the two branches until it went all the way out of town. Somewhere, in one of those early chasms that stretched between the buildings, where the stone façades buckled into sky and weeds, Gabriel found his way to my side. I had already asked the girl nearest to me where we were going but I hadn't understood her answer.

"The quarry," Gabriel said. I shook my head. "The quarry—like the place where they dig for rocks."

"Oh."

He told me about the strange rock that had been discovered when they first began digging outside of our town. He described it like the inside of a raw piece of meat: blood red, roped with streaks of white.

"Ew," I said.

"No," Gabriel continued, "it's beautiful. Everyone thinks so. It was so popular that they over-drilled the quarry. They went down too deep one day and hit a water supply. Within hours the whole thing had filled up." He pantomimed water rising. The outline of his hands stood barely apart from the slate-colored clouds passing over us.

Eventually, I drifted from Gabriel. The road declined, and we sank down the mountain. Somehow I emerged at the helm. I still remember the view from below, as the Maite descended the road behind me, the whole group of them dispersed up the hill. I still remember the drone of the car engine approaching the sharp bend ahead, and its swinging headlights as it came upon us, and even after the real Maite

yelled *move*, back to her friends, I remember the light striking their white summer clothes and their clearing the street idly while the car sat there, stranded. Still, I can't decide if, caught in the sweep of the beams, the girls appeared as criminals unmasked, or if the swing of their skirts as they left the road made them look instead like a suite of doves disbanding.

At the quarry, everyone stripped down to their underclothes, and our shirts and pants and dresses lay heaped in piles upon the lip of sand. At the far end of the swimming hole, a wall of stone stretched high up into the sky. It was impossible, in the dark, to tell whether or not it was red.

I went into the water with everyone else, but it was cold, and it dropped off quickly. When I saw the point of someone's cigarette light up somewhere along the sand, I swam back to join them. One of Maite's friends nodded to me and exhaled as I settled down beside her. We lounged alongside each other for a while, then she asked, "How deep do you think it is?"

"I don't know," I said. "It drops off fast." She was silent. "Have you been in?"

Out in the swimming hole, orphaned heads skimmed the water's surface. I'm sure that they were talking to each other, or else they were probably laughing about something, but in my memory the menace of the stone wall above them canceled all their sound.

"Twenty-five meters," she said. She tapped the tip of her cigarette against a rock. "That's how far down they drilled before they hit the water." When she brought the cigarette back to her mouth she looked at me for a brief moment, and she said, "No. I never go in."

Eventually other bodies surfaced and joined us up on the lip. "Hey," Maite's friend whispered. She nudged me, then motioned toward Gabriel splayed out upon the sand in his boxers. "Are you guys going to kiss or fuck or what?"

I fake-slapped her like we were real friends.

“Okay, I’m just joking,” she said. “You’re too young to fuck, but what are you going to do? You like him, right?”

I shrugged. Stretched out and bent at odd angles, Gabriel’s spidery legs glowed.

“You like him.” She was talking louder now. “So go do something, don’t waste your chance. There are some trees over there.” She gestured somewhere behind us. Gabriel had obviously heard her, and he looked over.

“Look.” She grabbed one of my shoulders and pointed to him. “He wants to go off with you, too.” Gabriel had already gotten up and started loping over when she called out to him, “You want to, don’t you?” In response, sweet, spindly Gabriel said nothing. He just continued nearing, the whole time smiling at both of us.

He led me into the trees, and we stumbled through branches for a couple of minutes until we could barely make out the edge of the quarry. When I strained my eyes I could just see the tip of the girl’s cigarette flying about in the air. Gabriel put his back to a tree and stared at me affectionately. I realized how little I knew him.

“Come closer.” He grasped my arms. He whispered, “What do you want me to do?”

I don’t know how else to explain it: the question struck some sort of dormant reflex. I answered instinctively, as though I had always planned to say to him, “I want you to speak Spanish to me.”

He was silent. In the dark, I watched the familiar tremor of his muscles. Eventually he tried, “*Así?*” Like this? I nodded, and signaled for him to keep going.

“What do I say?” he asked, in Basque. I shrugged. Tears were already welling in my eyes. I waved my arms, to say *continue*.

It’s not important what he said in the forest behind the quarry, whatever stories he told with poise and animation almost embarrassing to

witness. I couldn't tell you what he said because I didn't even register the words as he spoke them. When he was several sentences in, I dropped to my knees, and listened to him like a child. I may have started crying when I heard the word *cucharilla*, unless it was instead *caserío* that began the flood. At one point, I may even have lain myself totally and completely upon the ground.

When we emerged from the trees, the Maïtes were all collecting their clothes and getting ready to leave. On part of the walk home, Gabriel's clammy hands held the tip of my fingers, but at some point they let go. When we reached the tavern, I slid inside without saying good night to him, and I felt no remorse for allowing him to walk to the far reaches of town. Upstairs, I tried to recover the words he had spoken, and that was when I realized I had never really heard them. I had listened only for their rhythm, for the shallow aesthetics of them, and alone in my room I had nothing to hold on to except for the fading memory of their sound.

After our visit to the quarry, Gabriel began leaving me little presents around the tavern. I wasn't purposely avoiding him, but I wasn't spending my nights out in the alleyway either. When I heard him go down to the basement to restock the liquor cabinet at the end of our shift, I would dart past the bar and up the stairs to my room.

First, he left me a bag of almond cookies that his mother had made, my name written in careful, feminine handwriting across the front. I discovered them sitting on one of the empty tables in the dining room on my way to the stairs. Sometime later I found a silver bracelet on the corner of the counter where I normally helped with prep work in the kitchen. There was no note, but I was fairly sure that I knew who had left it; a bracelet had been found on the floor of the dining room the day before. The next week I received a random assortment of glass beads, then a collection of tea bags, a patterned matchbook, a pile of loose stamps.

One Sunday afternoon, when my parents were downstairs in their usual lesson with Mr. Ibarra, Gabriel knocked on the door to my room.

"Ana," he called. "I know that I'm annoying you, but please let me give you one last thing."

I hadn't expected to feel nervous around him, but when he stood there before me I saw him again in his boxers, me again, in my underwear, on the floor. He apologized for his other gifts, and I told him not to be stupid, that they were very nice. He said no, they weren't right. What he should have given me from the beginning was this: he produced a small used radio from his bag.

"So that we can listen together," he said. "In Spanish."

The radio wasn't the same model as my father's. In fact, it looked totally different, but it prompted my first thought of that original radio in more than a year. I got caught up in assessing how each of its individual features compared to the original, whose body, I only realized then, I had committed to memory. When I didn't respond, Gabriel said, "Spanish, remember?" His face thawed into that same timid smile. "It's sort of...our thing."

I knew that I was being mean when I took the radio from Gabriel, thanked him, and told him that I couldn't listen that afternoon. I was sorry for a moment, when I closed the door on his sinking face, but there was nothing else I could do. When I set the radio on my bed, the hefty mechanical weight of it sank into the mattress and sprouted a crown of pleats in the covers. The whole time, I thought, that was how easy it could have been: I could have nudged the needle past the covert station that broadcast in Basque, and I could have found Spanish waiting there on any channel.

I thought then that if time were as flexible as it was in my mind, I would have done it all over again. I would have pulled a pair of my father's shoes from my parents' closet, while they remained in the dining room downstairs, cycling through their slow-growing vocabulary and

diligently practicing the construction of conditional clauses. I would have put the radio on the bed, put my head on those shoes, and listened for hours. And if I really arranged it all right, maybe the year would have bent back on itself, and delivered me back to the kitchen in our old farmhouse, and maybe my father would be there, waving around his arms, saying, “We will all forget about Basque, is that clear?”

Maybe my brother would be there too, coming in through the back door, his arms wound around a tangle of sheets and a comforter. Maybe they came straight from the clothesline, clean from my mother’s scrubbing, dry from a night suspended in the mid-August air.

CECILY PARKS

Texas Natives

Apache Plum
Mexican Blazing Star
Blue Agave
Cherokee Sedge
Mexican devil-weed
Mexican elderberry
Esperanza
Fall Obedient Plant
Mexican feathergrass
Gaura
Mexican hat
Indian blanket
Jimsonweed
Mexican juniper
Kingcup Cactus
Lluvia de Oro
Mexican Marigold
Mexican Navelwort
Oreja de Raton
Mexican panicgrass
Queendevil
Red-spike Mexican hat
Mexican silktassel

Mexican thistle
Una de Gato
Velas de Coyote
Mexican weeping juniper
Xcanchac-che
Mexican yellowshow
Yerba del Cancer
Zitherwood

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA
TRANSLATED BY SARAH ARVIO

The Guitar

The guitar begins
to sob
The goblets of dawn
shatter
The guitar begins
to sob
There's no way to hush it
It can't be hushed
It sobs monotonously
the way water sobs
the way wind sobs
over the fallen snow
It can't be hushed
It sobs for distant things
hot sands of the south
asking for white camellias
It sobs
arrow with no target
afternoon with no morning
and the first dead bird
on the branch
O guitar!
heart slashed
by five swords

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA
TRANSLATED BY SARAH ARVIO

Landscape

An olive
orchard
spreads and folds
like a fan
Over the olive trees
a sunken sky
and a dark rain
of cold stars
On the riverbank
reed and shadow tremble
The gray air curls
The olive trees
are fraught
with cries—
A flock
of caught birds
swinging their long long
tails in the dark

TRACY K. SMITH

Hill Country

He comes down from the hills, from
The craggy rock, the shrubs, the scrawny
Live oaks and dried-up junipers. Down
From the cloud-bellies and the bellies
Of hawks, from the caracaras stalking
Carcasses, from the clear, sun-smacked
Soundlessness that shrouds him. From the
Weathered bed of planks outside the cabin
Where he goes to be alone with his questions.
God comes down along the road with his
Windows unrolled so the twigs and hanging
Vines can slap and scrape against him in his jeep.
Down past the buck caught in the hog trap
That kicks and heaves, bloodied, blinded
By the whiff of its own death, which God—
Thank God—staves off. He downshifts,
Crosses the shallow trickle of river that only
Just last May scoured the side of the canyon
To rock. Gets out. Walks along the limestone
Bank. Castor beans. Cactus. Scat of last
Night's coyotes. Down below the hilltops,
He squints out at shadow: tree backing tree.
Dark depth the eyes glide across, not bothering

To decipher what it hides. A pair of dragonflies
Mate in flight. Tiny flowers throw frantic color
At his feet. If he tries—if he holds his mind
In place and wills it—he can almost believe
In something larger than himself rearranging
The air. He squints at the jeep glaring
In bright sun. Stares a while at patterns
The tall branches cast onto the undersides
Of leaves. Then God climbs back into the cab,
Returning to everywhere.



Mags Harries, *Acqua Alta*, 2015, 3D print, 4 in. x 6 in. x 6.5 in. Photo: Kathy Chapman.

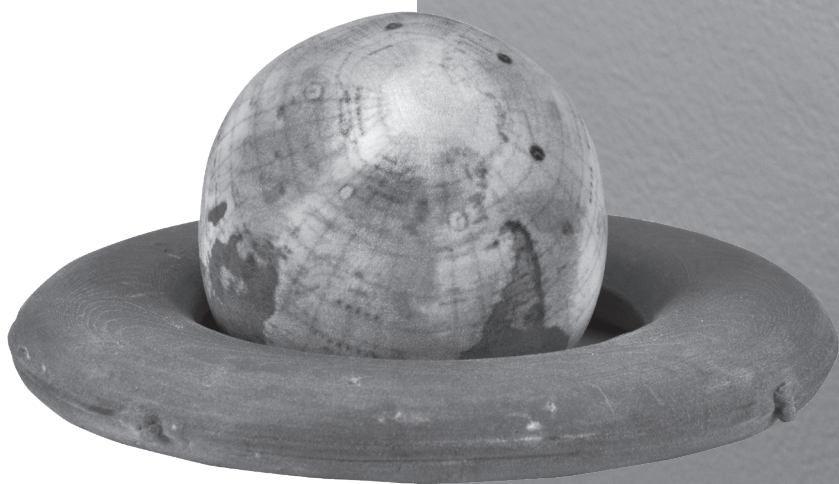


Mags Harries, *Water Rising*, 2015, 3D print, 4 in. x 3.5 in. x 5.5 in. Photo: Kathy Chapman.



Mags Harries, *Rising Water*, 2015, water, rope, bags, boots, hardware. Photo: Kathy Chapman.





Mags Harries, *Deflated Earth*, 2016, 3D print, 5.5 in. x 5.5 in. x 2.5 in. Photo: Kathy Chapman.



Mags Harries, *At a Pinch*, 2015, 3D print, 1.75 in. x 1.5 in. x 5.5 in. Photo: Kathy Chapman.

SYLVIA LEGRIS

*Epigaeus: growing close
upon the earth*

Hurl epithets at the manured, at the turf-margined,
at the word-dirty garden. Then the muddy, then the
worm-castigated. Chastise the botanically criminal
Manchurian elms (gung ho volunteer! go

the tendentiously tendinous roots). Intrinsic, the yank-,
the wrench-wrecked hand abductors, the fine-
motoring repetitive trowel and tug, the withering.
The non-onlookered atrophied, the involuntary.

.....
Note: Title derived from William T. Stearn's *Botanical Latin*, 4th ed. (Timber Press, 2004).

SYLVIA LEGRIS

*Terminalis: proceeding
from the end*

So bleed the billhook already.
Hillocks rheumy, pitiful, a spindly
that barely passes potato.

Rue the poison-flowered,
the soil-soured, the barbarically
disarticulated *rhubarb rhu-*

barb, the unintelligible
nephrotoxic hubbub. *Stop*
the babbling! Ruefully

boorish, the rudely
unweeded. Oxalic-fingered,
redly stinging.

.....
Note: Title derived from William T. Stearn's *Botanical Latin*, 4th ed. (Timber Press, 2004).

JOHN MINCZESKI

In Our End Is Our Beginning

People always want to own something
Of the past: an ancient tin of Calumet
Baking Powder, shoe tree,

The last time someone called you
By your childhood name. Every time I think
I've spoken a true thing, I've peeled

Another membrane of the onion.
My younger self, boarding a plane,
Embeds himself in the past like a reporter

In a combat unit. Astronomers have
Glimpsed the flaming gas bag
That was our beginning. Other researchers

Have preserved thin sections
Of Einstein's brain between glass plates
To discover that single variation.

It is August, the marigolds, doubles,
Have burst open at the garden's edge.
They're saving up for the future

In black and wrinkled seed pods,
To volunteer like snapdragons
Next to the garlic bed.

JOAN WICKERSHAM

Never Mind

IMAGINE A MULTIPLEX. Imagine we are standing in the lobby of a theater made up of several smaller theaters, and what's playing inside each of these little theaters is not a movie, but a memoir—a memoir that has been repudiated by the person who wrote it. In each of these darkened theaters there is a memoirist who, in one way or another, is squirming. Our ticket lets us go in and out of these various small theaters. We'll also spend some time hanging around in the lobby, smelling the popcorn, holding a drink in a clammy gargantuan cup, and talking about what we're seeing, how one memoirist relates to the others, and how looking at several repudiated memoirs together might start to show us some interesting things about the genre of memoir as a whole.

A note on methodology: This essay did not begin with a topic or a thesis. I was not questing for repudiated memoirs. I am going to look at four writers, Karen Armstrong, Emily Fox Gordon, Toni Bentley, and Ellen Douglas, each of whom I discovered years ago in the course of my own happy meandering reading, and each of whom, I realized as I continued to follow her work, was wrestling in some way with a memoir she'd written earlier or with the entire genre of memoir.

It takes conviction to write a memoir. We need to believe, when we write, that we are getting at something urgent and that we are telling the truth. When we write memoir—or, for that matter, fiction or poetry—we insist. We say, “This is how it is—join me in this dream, this version.”

So what would make a memoirist say, “Never mind”?

I am not talking here about discredited memoirs—memoirs whose factual content has been revealed as, or exposed as, false. We know what it is like when we find we can’t trust the memoirist. I am talking about what happens when the memoirist finds that she cannot trust herself.

I am talking about Emily Fox Gordon writing of her own critically acclaimed memoir *Mockingbird Years*: “The narrative of my memoir was a lie, and for some time it made my entire narrative history disappear.” And here is the religious historian Karen Armstrong, writing in 2004 about a memoir called *Beginning the World* which she had published twenty years earlier: “It is the worst book I have ever written and I am happy to say that it has long been out of print.”

Those are two pretty sensational statements—the teaser lines on the posters in the lobby that make you want to go in and see the movies.

Let’s begin in Cinema 1 with Karen Armstrong.

In 1981, Armstrong published her first book, *Through the Narrow Gate*, a memoir chronicling the seven years she had spent as a nun and her decision to leave the convent.

There is actually an entire genre, small but fascinating, of ex-nun memoirs. The elements of the genre are: entry into the convent; struggle to shed the bonds of self and worldliness; internal or overt rebellion against the Mother Superior who tells the novice to scrub the floor with a nail brush or a toothbrush; apparent conquest of rebelliousness, pride, and individuality; eventual appearance of cracks in the nun’s serene plaster mask; and finally a decision to leave the order.

Karen Armstrong does a simple, honest, and emotionally complex job of charting this trajectory. (One detail that delights me: the night before she entered the convent at the age of seventeen, she stayed up late reading an ex-nun memoir, Monica Baldwin's *I Leap Over the Wall*.)

Through the Narrow Gate got good reviews and did well enough commercially that after two years Armstrong published a sequel, the book she would later repudiate: *Beginning the World*. In this book, Armstrong looks at the seven years that followed her leaving the convent—earning an English literature degree at Oxford; her relationships with men and experiences with sex; struggles with anorexia, depression, cutting, and a suicide attempt; and the relief of being diagnosed, finally, with temporal lobe epilepsy, which explained the violent black-outs that her superiors in the convent had dismissed as hysterical bids for attention and her psychiatrists had later dismissed as psychosomatic symptoms of deep repression and anger. Up until that time, Armstrong had ascribed her difficulties and these episodes to madness—believing either that she had always been a broken person or that the convent had broken her. *Beginning the World* ends with the epilepsy diagnosis, the revelation that something was wrong with her body, not her soul or her psyche.

Twenty years later, Karen Armstrong published a third memoir, *The Spiral Staircase*, which is in large part a rewrite of *Beginning the World*. The two books even begin with the same sentence—"I was late"—leading into the same anecdote, about being late to a college dinner when, instead of merely bowing to the principal as Oxford etiquette dictated, Armstrong automatically kneels and kisses the floor, as she would have done to atone for a late arrival in the convent refectory. In the first version she tries to dramatize the aftermath of this moment.

Rose beamed up at me, her fresh, intelligent face alive with curiosity.

"What on earth were you doing?" she demanded. "It wasn't a joke, was it?"

“Good heavens, no . . . It was a mistake.”

“What kind of mistake?” Jane asked curiously. “You mean you just said ‘Whoops! Kissed the floor by accident! Silly me!’ What do you mean?”

. . . “Well, in the convent we always kissed the floor when we were late for meals.”

“What!” I had caught the attention of the entire table now. Nine pairs of eyes regarded me in scandalized incredulity.

In the second version she is more coolly analytical, explicitly rejecting the artifice of the earlier dramatization.

In *Beginning the World*, I made them all tease me good-naturedly about my gaffe, question me about convent life, and express shock and horror at such customs as kissing the floor, confessing faults in public, and performing elaborate penances in the refectory. Maybe there was some discussion along those lines; certainly people were curious, up to a point. But I doubt that anybody was really very interested.

If *Beginning the World* is nothing but juice—overly dramatized, clumsy, disingenuously earnest—*The Spiral Staircase* is thoughtful but juiceless. It’s a worthy corrective exercise in self-examination.

But the real differences between the two memoirs have to do with a radical shift in perspective. Armstrong admits that she wrote *Beginning the World* too soon. “Those years had been extremely painful, even traumatic. I had scarcely begun to recover and was certainly not ready to see this phase of my life in perspective.”

She’s not just talking about emotional distance. She’s talking about having written a memoir before understanding the overall shape of her life. In the two decades separating the second and third memoirs, Armstrong became a respected and successful author of many books

on religion, including the international best-seller *A History of God*; she has hosted several BBC TV series; and she has been in constant demand, since 9/11, to provide expert perspective on Islam and religious fundamentalism. She is famous: the Barbara Tuchman or Doris Kearns Goodwin of religious history.

Armstrong writes of *Beginning the World*: “It was not a truthful account. This was not because the events I recounted did not happen, but because the book did not tell the whole story.” The publisher didn’t want her to come across as an intellectual; so the earlier memoir made no mention of books or poems, no discussion of theology or the nature of God, or the purpose of prayer. She was told to stick to external events to make the story dramatic and accessible. Even the tone was false.

I was . . . told to present myself in as positive and lively a light as possible, and as I was still very unsure of myself as a writer, and assumed that my publishers knew what they were doing, I went along with this. But most important, I *wanted* this cheery self-portrait to be true. It was, therefore, an exercise in wish fulfillment, and predictably the result was quite awful.

She sees now that she had written a self-exposing book without yet understanding her own identity. At the end of *Beginning the World* she’d expressed a self-mocking fear of being known as “Karen Armstrong, the mad, epileptic ex-nun.” Now she understands that her failure to become a conventional academic and her failure to establish a conventional domestic life, which she had described so bluntly and uncomprehendingly in *Beginning the World*, were telling her something important. “I have remained an outsider,” she writes. In some way she will always be a nun, whose work is to contemplate God.

In *The Spiral Staircase*, Karen Armstrong is both repudiating an earlier memoir, and doing it over. She is glad the other one is out of print—

erased. She is writing over on the place where the old writing was. What Armstrong is indicting herself for is writing a book that too easily conformed to the trajectory of the life-after-the-convent memoir—really, the trajectory of the life-after-any-experience memoir: out of the darkness and into the light. *The Spiral Staircase* repudiates this trajectory—but only insofar as it applies to *Beginning the World*. Armstrong is not actually disowning the trajectory; she’s admitting that she tried to claim it prematurely. She didn’t know the full story yet.

“For years,” writes Armstrong, “I toiled round and round in pointless circles, covering the same ground, repeating the same mistakes, quite unable to see where I was going. Yet all the time, without realizing it, I was slowly climbing out of the darkness.” It’s as if, with *The Spiral Staircase*, she is saying, “*Now* my life conforms to that trajectory.” She repudiates one out-of-the-darkness-and-into-the-light memoir and, with the benefit of hindsight, replaces it with another.

Meanwhile over in Cinema 2, Emily Fox Gordon is repudiating the entire notion of a trajectory—any trajectory.

Her memoir, *Mockingbird Years*, was critically acclaimed when it came out in 2000, reviewed on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review* by Daphne Merkin, who called Gordon “a stunning writer... Her guilelessly understated memoir is as good an argument for the examined life—for the sustained construction of a coherent self that is the therapeutic ideal—as it is a dissection of the many ways in which therapy can go wrong.”

Mockingbird Years is a memoir about therapy. At the age of eighteen, sullen, depressed, unambitious, having made what she characterizes as a “feeble” suicide attempt—“a few swipes with a pair of nail scissors”—Emily Fox Gordon was sent to Austen Riggs, a private psychiatric hospital in western Massachusetts, where she stayed for three years. The hospitalization was an overreaction by her parents and doctors, although,

Gordon writes, “I willingly immured myself.” Her main feeling during this time was boredom, “a jelly-limbed ennui,” until a new psychiatrist showed up, Dr. Leslie Farber.

“His gravitas, his distinction, were so immediately and overwhelmingly apparent that even in my deteriorated and boredom-numbed condition I recognized them,” she writes. “It was as if another self continued to live inside the therapeutic self I had become, lying slack but fully jointed, waiting for some salutary yank to spring alive.”

Farber was a brilliant and unconventional therapist. He wanted her to be awake, curious, and morally rigorous. They talked about poetry, Joanne Woodward, *Oblomov*, and existential despair. Her descriptions of him are tart and novelistic in the vividness of their detail: “Dr. Farber was extremely sedentary; his idea of exercise was to fumble energetically for his lighter when it fell between the cushions of his red leather chair.” When Farber left Austen Riggs to move to New York, Gordon, who by this point had realized there was nothing really wrong with her, followed him. She continued on as his patient for several more years, while also becoming friends with his wife and babysitting for their kids. In some ways the relationship with Farber formed her tastes and helped her to grow up; but it was also messy and overly dependent. “I became a furtive taxonomist,” Gordon writes, “dividing the world into the Farberian and the non-Farberian. What was Farberian I would embrace; what was non-Farberian I would reject.” Eventually the relationship collapsed and the therapy ended.

Gordon goes on to describe her last therapist—a doctor she saw twelve years later—calling him a “mainstream middle-of-the-road therapist...the good-enough therapist.” He was earnest, predictable, well-meaning, and, to Gordon, infuriating. Again, she uses novelistic detail to convey the prickly character of their relationship:

I took out after his ties, particularly a forest-green one printed with a repeating pattern of tiny mud boots and the logo “L. L. Bean.” My

hostility toward this tie must have presented Dr. B with a problem. Wearing it frequently on my therapy days would have amounted to a provocative gesture, but banishing it from his wardrobe entirely would have signaled a failure to impose appropriate limits . . . He solved this clinical dilemma by wearing the tie regularly but infrequently—perhaps once every two months.

In the end, Gordon is done with therapy. She has begun to feel “an instinctive briddling at an ideology that would appropriate and colonize my internal territories, mapping and charting them so that no more internal wilderness exists for me to explore.” In therapy, she has learned to write, aloud. She stops being a patient because she has become a writer. So, like Karen Armstrong, with *Beginning the World* and *The Spiral Staircase*, Emily Gordon has written an out-of-the-darkness-and-into-the-light memoir. And that is what she repudiates in an essay called “Book of Days,” which appeared in the *American Scholar* three years after the release of *Mockingbird Years*.

Like Armstrong, she kicks herself for having been seduced by a publisher. A book editor had seen an essay she’d published about her experiences in therapy and had gotten in touch with her about expanding the piece into a memoir. “The editor had a voice like sun-softened caramel. He made it clear that the two of us had something very compelling in common: our interest in me.” She had misgivings—felt she had made a deal with the devil, queasy at the knowledge that her memoir fell into what she calls “a reliable subcategory of the ‘my story’ memoir—the therapy saga.”

The problem was not that she had invented material; the problem, she feels, was that she had shaped it. This is what memoirists do, and this is what Emily Gordon finds intolerable. “Everything that I say happened in my memoir happened, and happened more or less when I said it did: no fact-checker could catch me out. But in *Mockingbird Years* I distorted the truth of my life almost beyond recognition—my own

recognition, that is. I did so by implicating myself in the tripartite lie of the contemporary memoir.”

What Gordon goes on to say about “the tripartite lie” actually defines the genre of memoir. “First,” she says, “I presented what was only one of a multitude of possible autobiographical stories as if it were the story of my life.”

Next, I allowed this narrative to influence the selections I made from the nearly infinite set of possibilities—and ordering of possibilities—that my life history afforded me. . .

Finally, and most seriously, I wrote from an impossibly posthumous point of view, as if I knew the final truth of my life—as if I were confident that nothing that happened in the future might yet revise it.

Gordon is uncomfortable with the fact that memoir is selective, ordered, and implicitly definitive. It pins down something that is, in fact, still moving—always moving.

Like Karen Armstrong, she is cringing at the premature certainty of her memoir—she wrote a memoir that seemed to say, “This is the shape of my life,” without really knowing the shape of her life. But Gordon is going further than Armstrong: what she’s really saying is, “Lives don’t have shapes.” She is wrestling, I think, with the fundamental fact that a story—any story, any piece of writing with a narrative arc—is a kind of distortion.

The essay, with its blundering progression and its doubling back, its internal questioning, feels to Gordon like a more honest and accurate representation of experience than the memoir, with its insistent Point-A-to-Point-B trajectory. She writes:

The erratic zig-zag of essayistic thinking makes the essay proof against the triumphalism of memoir by slowing the gathering of narrative

momentum. The essayist *transects* the past, slicing through it first from one angle, then from another, until—though it can never be captured—some fugitive truth has been definitively cornered.

For Gordon, the essay replicates consciousness, whereas the memoir falsifies it.

Interestingly, in 2010 Gordon published a book of essays, in which she included the original essays that she'd expanded to create *Mockingbird Years*, as well as the repudiation essay that had appeared in the *American Scholar*, where she insists that she is really a personal essayist and not a memoirist. In this essay collection, which is also called *Book of Days*, it's as if she's rewinding the tape and getting a chance to redo it, or un-do it—dismantling *Mockingbird Years* and restoring the individual pieces to their rightful essayistic form.

Gordon also talks in that repudiation essay about the aftereffect of having written a memoir, of having taken something—her life—and transformed it into something essentially different—a story.

For two years after *Mockingbird Years* was published, I struggled to disentangle the triumphant narrative self of my memoir from my necessarily nontriumphant real self. I lost touch with my real past, and consequently lost access to the future; I was unable to live and consequently unable to write.

A story makes order out of something inherently inchoate and disorderly: an experience, a series of relationships, a succession of feelings, a life. When we write we are transforming something from one medium to another medium that is essentially incompatible with it. The writer's attempt to reconcile the incompatibility of words and experience is what Wallace Stevens calls "the maker's rage to order words of the sea" in his poem "The Idea of Order at Key West."

The song and water were not medleyed sound
 Even if what she sang was what she heard,
 Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
 It may be that in all her phrases stirred
 The grinding water and the gasping wind;
 But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.

A story tries to represent the mess of life, but it also replaces it—inserts itself between us and the mess, and changes the relationship between us and our consciousness. Writing a memoir interferes with our memories, the way looking at photographs of a trip makes you remember the photographs and not the trip itself. “Like a character under a fairytale curse,” Gordon says, “I had no choice but to wait until a sense of the actual past returned to me—until the season of my false triumph had passed and the weeds of authenticity had grown high enough to obscure the orderly garden of memoir.”

Again, it is the trajectory—the *storyness*—the orderly garden of memoir that Gordon is repudiating in “Book of Days.” You turn your life into a story, and then you look at the story and can’t recognize your life.

As we walk across the lobby to Cinema 3, let’s think a little more about the whole idea of trajectory. It’s true that when we write we often feel pressure to conform to the expectations of an imposed trajectory, as if the trajectory already exists and the memoirist’s job is simply to supply the particulars. Maybe the expectation is imposed by a publisher, maybe by our anxiety about what an imaginary reader might want—or maybe just by our having read so many stories: out of the darkness and into the light, out of the light and into the darkness,

the rise of Silas Lapham, the fall of the house of Atreus. Oh, we think, I know how that story goes.

One challenge when we write is not to succumb to that siren song of pre-existing trajectory. Another challenge, though, is not to be so determined to reject it that subversion becomes an end in itself. We have to find the right form for our story, or for our storylessness. Even if Emily Gordon says that essays are better than memoirs, what she's really saying is that the essay is the form that conforms most closely to her consciousness and to the storylessness of the stories she wants to tell. The point of experimenting with form is to keep trying until we stumble onto the form and trajectory that is true to the story.

Now let's go into Cinema 3. Whoa. What's going on in here? It's dark, really dark. The only light is a spotlight shining down on the stage. This is not a movie theater, it's a club of some kind. Leonard Cohen's "Light As the Breeze" is playing. And up on the stage a woman, a memoirist, is taking off her clothes.

Her name is Toni Bentley. She began her career in the New York City Ballet, where she danced for Balanchine, the greatest choreographer of the twentieth century. In 1981, at the age of twenty-one, she was in a career slump, dancing in the corps de ballet, not being given any solos: a non-leading member of the world's leading dance company. She'd lost her confidence and her appetite for dancing. She started keeping a journal, which turned into a memoir. Classes and performances that go well; classes and performances that don't; her reverence for Balanchine; her romantic yearnings; her desire to eat and drink more than a dancer should. Wanting to dance, but longing to have a life. The prose is understated, elegant, emotionally honest. In the last pages of the book, she is recognizing, without quite recognizing, that there is a metamorphosis going on: that she is becoming a writer, and that writing may offer the chance to create which she has

sought, and not found, in dancing. This memoir, *Winter Season*, was published in 1982.

A year later, Balanchine died and Toni Bentley got a career-ending hip injury. She wrote two more books on ballet. Then, in 2002, she published *Sisters of Salome*, a book of four scholarly biographical portraits of women who had danced naked: Mata Hari; Maud Allan; Ida Rubinstein; and Colette.

What's really remarkable about *Sisters of Salome*, though, is the introduction, a piece of memoir in which Toni Bentley describes her own fascination with the idea of dancing naked, which eventually led to her actually doing it, performing one night in a New York strip club as a lark. She describes the experience in a way that feels a little humorous and intensely erotic:

I didn't move too quickly or too much. . . I wore steep black suede pumps, black fishnet lace-top stockings, a black choker fashioned out of a toe-shoe ribbon from *Western Symphony*, deep red matte lipstick, and nothing else.

It's a turn-on to read, even for someone who's never had that particular fantasy. But I was also shocked, the first time I encountered this new, graphically sexual voice on the page, because I had read *Winter Season* and I already had an investment in Bentley's literary persona—Balanchine dancer turned elegant writer.

After *Sisters of Salome*, Bentley went on to write an even more overtly sexual memoir: 2004's *The Surrender*, in which she chronicled her discovery of anal sex, an experience she considers transformative and revelatory. In some ways, this is an even more naked book, though I found it less so, less vulnerable. The prose itself is armored, abstract and analytical, swaggering, polemical, jokey. "This is the backstory of a love story. A backstory that is the whole story. A second hole story, to be entirely accurate. Love from inside my backside."

Because the subject of this talk is repudiated memoirs, I will tell you, before we go any further, that Bentley did not repudiate *The Surrender*. In fact, she energetically defended it against its critics (the *Washington Post* called the book an act of “self-combustion”) and even against praise that seemed to her to be too damningly faint. When Leon Wieseltier said, of *The Surrender*, “I think it might be a small masterpiece,” Bentley published a reply: “‘Think’? ‘Might’? ‘Small’?”

Yet I would suggest that *The Surrender* is itself a kind of deliberate, if unspoken, repudiation—not of her earlier books, but of the persona she had created in her earlier books, *Winter Season* and the two ballet books that preceded *Sisters of Salome*. Twenty years earlier, in *Winter Season*, she had written: “I not only got in (to the company), I was chosen to learn things. Big, grand ballerina things. Pink things—I was definitely the pink type . . . Sometimes I think that pink is my fate.” In *Sisters of Salome*, she is beginning to take off the tutu and the tights. Look. I’m exposing myself to you, not just as a pink ballerina but as someone who sees dance as a vehicle of sexual power. And by the time she gets to *The Surrender* she is saying, quite literally, fuck the pink ballerina.

What she is repudiating is the incompleteness of that pink ballerina persona. “I understand so little of what I know,” Bentley wrote poignantly in *Winter Season*, at the age of twenty-one. In *Sisters of Salome*, she writes of her New York strip club performance:

I was in town for the publication party for my book *Costumes by Karinska*, a lush tome of text and photos about Balanchine’s closest costume collaborator, the woman who changed the way his dancers looked by her exquisite rendering of tutus, taffeta, and tiaras. I wanted to celebrate the end of the costume project by taking off my own.

And then in *The Surrender* she is continuing to perform, stripping herself on the page. It’s nakedness of a kind: not vulnerable, but rather

a stylized nakedness—full and confrontational but also highly controlled, done with artifice, like the dancers at the Crazy Horse nightclub in Paris, whom Bentley admires and who use makeup on their nude bodies to both conceal things and re-create a semblance of what is being concealed. She’s transforming herself from the writer whom the *Times* would ask to review a new dance book into the writer to whom *Vanity Fair* assigns a piece on the leading French dominatrix, who is also the widow of writer Alain Robbe-Grillet. It’s not a complete throwing-out-the-window of an old persona; it’s an evolution—a repudiating of the way a finished memoir stands still while the person who wrote it continues to change.

Memoir is like *plein air* painting—the artist captures a moment of light and shadow in the woods, but even while the painting is being painted the light and the shadow are changing, and if you went to that spot in the woods a decade later to try to see what the painter saw, you’d find that the trees are taller, or that some of the trees have fallen down; and so the painter—Monet, Hockney—keeps going out to the same spot to paint it day after day, year after year.

This brings us to the general question of writers who write multiple memoirs—serial memoirists. Let’s go out to the lobby, so we can talk about it without disturbing the people who are sitting here in the dark theater, watching a recent Toni Bentley iteration of a persona that integrates the intellectual writer with the priestess of sex: a video made by New York artist Clayton Cubitt of Bentley reading aloud while the artist’s assistant, stationed under the table, uses a vibrator on her. The women filmed for this project—the series is called “Hysterical Literature”—got to choose their own reading material; Bentley reads from Chapter Six of *Portrait of a Lady* for exactly six minutes.

Now let’s stand in the lobby for a few minutes to talk about serial memoirists. Each of the three writers we’ve been watching has written

multiple memoirs. Even Emily Gordon, professedly the least comfortable with the genre (though I think *Mockingbird Years* is a gorgeous book), wrote another memoir, this time about her childhood. (To be fair, that book, *Are You Happy?*, is really a book of essays packaged as a memoir, the way linked short stories are sometimes packaged as a novel.) Part of what's interesting to me about this topic of repudiation is how aware these three writers are of their previous books—how aware on the page, I mean. It's as if the later books are arguing with their earlier books.

This is so different from what we see with writers like May Sarton or Diana Athill, who keep on writing memoirs by bringing us up to date on what they've been doing or thinking, without seeming to worry about persona or form or how what they're telling us now might relate back to what they told us the last time. We have memoirists like the wonderful Patrick Leigh Fermor, who build books around expeditions—a walking trip from Holland to Constantinople, two trips to Greece, a trip to the Andes. We have Eileen Simpson, who wrote *Poets in Their Youth*, about her marriage to John Berryman; *Reversals*, about having dyslexia; and *Orphans*, about being an orphan. She is the most compartmentalized memoirist I know: if you read *Reversals* you would never know she was the orphaned wife of a poet; if you read *Poets in Their Youth* you would never know she was a dyslexic orphan.

So there are several ways to handle the problem of persona in multiple memoirs: one way is to continue it, from book to book; one way is to ignore it; and one way—the way of the writers we've been looking at here—is to explode it.

Are there any other common denominators between our three repudiating memoirists? Well, first, they are all writing about identity and consciousness: getting it wrong and finally getting it right. So, the trajectory again, and the word “finally.” The problem of using still photography to capture something that never stops moving.

Second, I would characterize all of these books as apostate memoirs, and I would define the category as follows: Young seeker, directionless and spiritually hungry, falls in with leader and/or concept that promises stability, glory, enlightenment, and transcendence—God, religion, and convent; therapy and brilliant, iconoclastic therapist; ballet and magnetic choreographer. The seeker goes through the refiner's fire, is somewhat damaged by the experience but also greatly strengthened—strengthened enough to walk away, clear-eyed enough to write about it, honest and sharp enough to expose its flaws and dangers. And yet she is also looking back, Orpheus-like, at something she once loved and, admittedly or unadmittedly, still loves. The memoir is simultaneously creative and destructive: she liberates herself from something and uses the strength it gave her to murder it on the page, mourning it even as she's killing it. She banishes it and reconstitutes it at the same time.

And then she feels she's gotten it wrong. The story is incomplete. It's partial, while implicitly professing to be whole. It's a story.

In 1940, H. L. Mencken had an exchange with a stripper who wrote to him asking if he could come up with a more palatable word than "strip-tease" to describe her art. He wrote back: "It might be a good idea to relate strip-teasing in some way or other to the associated zoological phenomenon of molting. Thus the word moltician comes to mind, but it must be rejected because of its likeness to mortician. A resort to the scientific name for molting, which is ecdysis, produces both ecdysist and ecdysiast."

After this exchange went public, "ecdysiast" became a kind of smug, chuckly, in-the-know word for "stripper" in mid-century America. And certainly the memoirist—not just Toni Bentley, any memoirist—is a kind of ecdysiast, exposing and presenting herself or himself to an audience. But I am fascinated by Mencken's connection of strip-tease with ecdysis, with molting. Think about memoir and listen to this, from *The Lobster Conservancy*:

Since the shell of the lobster is hard and inelastic, it must be shed periodically in order for the animal to grow. The act of escaping from the old shell is known as *ecdysis*. . . For lobsters, molting is a continual process because lobsters show indeterminate growth; that is, they grow throughout their lives and therefore spend much of their time either preparing for or recovering from *ecdysis*.

We've been here, in this multiplex, for a while, but I'm going to ask you to come with me to take a brief look into Cinema 4. And I will not be able to resist telling you, as we walk across the lobby, that when Karen Armstrong first started doing broadcasting for the BBC, a decade after she left the convent, a talent agent asked her if she would be interested in doing an act called "The Stripping Nun."

Okay. Cinema 4. The memoirist in this theater is seventy-seven years old, and she has just written her first memoir. The year is 1998. Her name is Ellen Douglas. No it isn't. Her name is Josephine Haxton, but for almost four decades she has been writing novels under the name Ellen Douglas so that she wouldn't upset her family, in particular two old aunts. The aunts have been dead for some time, and the first book of hers I ever read, the stunningly beautiful 1988 novel *Can't Quit You, Baby*, had a note on the back flap that said, "Ellen Douglas [is] a pen name for Josephine Haxton," which at the time struck me as an odd instance of hiding in plain sight. Now that I have read her memoir I understand better what all those layers of hiding, all those stages and years of emerging, were about.

Her memoir has one of the best titles ever: *Truth: Four Stories I Am Finally Old Enough to Tell*. On the surface it sounds as if she's saying that she has finally outlived all the people she wants to write about. I think of the English novelist Henry Green wondering in his memoir *Pack My Bag* how one might go about writing a memoir without offending

anyone: "Another way is to mention only those who have died but my trouble here is that not enough have died yet."

Is that what Douglas means by "old enough"? Longevity? Survivorship? Partly. But she also means she is old enough to have perspective. And old enough to have the audacity as a storyteller, to tell these stories in the way she feels they need to be told. "As I grow older," she writes,

the past is an increasing weight in the balance scale of my life, and the present lighter, ephemeral. . . . But although I call up these memories, although they are my own, I have reservations. I know that I put words in the mouths of people who did not speak them. I imagine scenes at which I was not present. I know that this is my word and no one else's—my stories, my history. Or myth, perhaps, one among the myths that form the lives of families and sometimes of larger worlds.

Douglas's four stories are stories of her family's past—stories of white Mississippians and their relationship to black Mississippians. Each story is more tense, more painful, than the one before. It is a harrowing book, one that questions truth-telling all the way through, as if testing the strength of the floorboards before putting its full weight on the floor of the last, terrible story, about a resistance and rebellion plan that may or may not have been formulated by slaves in Natchez in 1861; about how those slaves were interrogated and beaten to death or hanged; about the possibility that some of her ancestors may have taken a direct part in these murders.

"All history and all fiction is a tangle of truth and lies, facts and purported facts, imaginary and real events," writes Douglas. No one ever talked about these events; the single written record is scant and cryptic; there is no way for her to know the truth of what happened. She lets the written record stand on the page, eloquent in its elisions and secrecy.

She goes to visit an old lady, a distant relative who might remember someone who remembered something. She tells you about the visit and

casts doubt on her account of the visit. She's had to make up some details to make the story of the visit make sense. "It is impossible to make sense out of stories that purport to be true. Something is always missing. To give them form, extract their deepest meaning, one has to turn them into fiction, to find causes, or if, as is usually the case, causes are unfindable, one has to invent them."

This is a writer who is repudiating memoir as part of the act of writing memoir. It's not a repudiation in hindsight, it's a simultaneous unfurling of certainty and doubt—an acknowledgment that truth can only exist when certainty and doubt intertwine. It is the uneasy simultaneity of this which, in its tension and laborious fastidiousness, seems to tell the truth—not only about Douglas's subjects and their stories, but also about the genre of memoir. Her title is not about finally being old enough to tell the truth. It's about finally being old enough to recognize that when we are telling a story, there is no truth. It's the very idea of truth that Douglas is rejecting in her memoir. The repudiation is not incidental; it is essential.

So now let's leave the theater and go outside, blinking. Let's take a moment to allow our eyes to readjust to the daylight, while we think about what we've just seen.

Four memoirists and a number of different kinds of repudiation. Karen Armstrong, repudiating a premature trajectory, repudiating her earlier lack of perspective. Emily Fox Gordon, repudiating the idea of any trajectory. Toni Bentley, repudiating her own previous literary persona. And Ellen Douglas, repudiating the possibility of truth—repudiating the idea that there is ever a definitive version—repudiating the idea that a true story is ever free of invention.

Watching them arguing with themselves, implicitly, over decades, or explicitly, on the page, we sense that these writers are feeling with particular acuteness what all writers of memoir and fiction and poetry—all writers—are struggling with all the time. The overall incompatibility of

life and language. The challenge of putting life on the page when we know, or suspect, or might come to feel in hindsight, that it is neither fully possible nor impossible to put life on the page. The nature of writing; that it is selective and subjective, that it's hampered by limited perspective or knowledge or personal agenda, that it is artificially shaped, and that we are always molting.

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NOTE: This essay was originally presented as a lecture at the Bennington Writing Seminars.

HANNAH ROSEFIELD

Birdsickness

I SPENT MY FIRST night in Massachusetts with Bob and Nancy, friends of my parents who picked me up at the airport and gave me dinner and told me they would take me shopping the next day for furniture for my new room. Before we went to bed, we stood in the lit doorway of their house, looking out onto cars sleeping in the wide drives of their neighbors and trees whose names I would not know for many months. It was the last day of August, and in a few weeks the leaves would begin to crisp and fall. In England, the time was 3:30 a.m. I had been awake for twenty-two hours, and my eyes were red and itchy and my skin dry. There was an electronic hum in the air, loud enough so that if I spoke in a whisper, Bob and Nancy, standing beside me, would not be able to hear.

“What’s that noise?” I said.

Bob and Nancy were silent a moment. “What noise?” they said.

Thirteen months before I moved to Cambridge, when I was living in London, I pitched an idea for a monthly column to an American women’s website. The column was called “Bird of the Month,” and each

month I would choose a bird and write about its actual existence (habitat, appearance, mating rituals) and its cultural one (the bird's place in art, mythology, and religion). I had always liked birds, mostly without thinking much about it. When I was a child, my grandfather had taught me the names of the species around the streets and parks where we lived. He died when I was eight, but the names stuck with me, so that as a teenager I could point out a jay or a starling in a way that my classmates could not, although it was a long time before I realized this.

Twelve years after my grandfather's death, I stood in the quad of my college at Oxford waiting for a hawk. The college had a pigeon problem. Pigeons lined the roofs of the buildings, their droppings ruining the chapel and the dining hall and creating unrelenting work for those whose job it was to keep the quad looking as if three hundred students didn't live and work and drink there. Someone had the idea of planting plastic snakes in the flower beds to scare the pigeons away, but when the snakes didn't work, the college called in a hawk. Her name was Hazel and she visited twice a week. She circled the building and occasionally touched down on a roof; she was trained to ignore the pigeons but of course the pigeons didn't know that and, in theory, they would be so frightened by the sight of her that they would fly away and never come back.

Although I have no great love for hawks, it was Hazel who led to me registering birds as a particular interest, creatures I stopped to watch rather than merely half-noted as I moved through the world. Her first visit was at lunchtime, and the entire student body seemed to have gathered on the stone steps that led up to the dining hall, waiting for the bird to describe unhurried circles in the air before dropping to land on her handler's glove. I watched with my friend Daisy, and the excitement that spread from student to student transformed our nascent interest in birds from something we had into something we did. While the rest of the college was getting back to work, Daisy and I were setting up

a ramshackle bird society, which did good business until we both left Oxford and neglected to find anyone to take it off our hands. I built up a modest but varied collection of bird books, including my grandfather's small and faded hardback edition of the *Reader's Digest Book of British Birds*. It was a beautiful book, illustrated with watercolors rather than photographs, and the only one of my grandfather's possessions I can remember him using. I loved it and took good care of it, until I lost it bird-watching with a boy I had a crush on, distracted first by his arm next to mine and then by the discovery that he was going on a date with someone else that evening.

Because my growing interest in birds got folded into whatever else I was doing at the time (friendships, crushes, extracurricular activities), it seemed natural that, when I became a journalist, I would find a way of writing about birds as well as watching them. When the editors of the American website told me to go ahead with the column, I settled down to make a list of candidates. In the unscientific way that characterizes most of my interactions with the natural world, I divide birds into two categories: "big" and "little." These categories do not refer to size, although there is a correlation. Big birds are showy birds, the kind that throng the cultural imagination: eagles, owls, hummingbirds, hawks. Little birds are garden and city birds: sparrows, thrushes, robins. These birds are easy to overlook. They are also the birds that I love because of the way they share your space without asking anything of you or seeming to notice you—and if they do notice, they either don't care or they fly away. Hold out your hand to a strange cat and it will come over, however tentatively. Watch it closely enough and you can think your way into its mind, or imagine that you do. Hold out your hand to a bird and it will ignore you, its mind forever sealed off from human imagination. Birds, like other non-mammals, resist anthropomorphizing, and encountering that resistance makes the world

seem a little stranger, sharper, bigger. Because little birds don't have the cultural baggage of big birds, their distance from the human is more evident. I hoped the people who read my column would learn to see the little birds in their own gardens, and to love the strangeness within them.

I soon realized the problem with this plan. The birds in my garden in London were not the birds in the yards of the mostly American readers of the website. Birds migrate, so that the same cuckoo I see in England might be seen weeks later by my cousin in Italy, and weeks after that by my former roommate, who now lives in Zambia. But birds migrate along fixed paths, and none of these paths lead from England to the United States. I learned that Old World migrating birds fly from Europe and Asia to Africa, and New World migrating birds fly from North America to South America. I learned that there are some species common to England and the United States, but that these species are not among my favorites. I started to read about the acorn woodpecker (California) and the northern cardinal (much of North America and Mexico) and the American goldfinch, which looks quite different from the European goldfinch.

I wrote the bird columns for a year. Three months in (hoopoe), I submitted applications to PhD programs in the United States; two months later (raven), I found out that I had a place at one of them. The last column (swan) went up three days before my flight to Boston. I had applied to four graduate programs in cheerful expectation that all of them would reject me. This would enable me to put academia—a path I was seventy percent sure wasn't right for me—decisively out of my mind, instead of every year spending the four months leading up to application deadlines agonizing over whether I should be paying attention to the other thirty. After I had accepted the place at Harvard, I was so consumed with regret for what struck me, by that point, as a disastrous

career choice that I barely thought about what it might mean to live in a different country. Even though I had spent a whole year reading and writing about American birds, I didn't once think about the fact that the birds in New England would not be the ones in old England, or that this might bother me even more than a questionable career move.

One way to orient yourself in a new place is to learn its geography: names of streets, order of subway stations, the quickest way to get from your apartment to campus, or from campus to the grocery store. Another way is to learn the people: arrange coffee with your classmates, join a running club or an online dating site, keep lists of the things they don't say (trousers, clothes horse) and the things they do (waste basket, crosswalk, a hot second). But my spatial ability is poor and unhappiness makes me antisocial, and though I liked learning to say *backpack* and *sidewalk* and *call number*, knowing these words didn't make me feel at home. I wandered in the enormous supermarkets and came back to my apartment marveling at what I had seen there. Did you know you can buy *half a pie* at Whole Foods? I asked my patient roommates. Did you know they sell Advil in bottles of *a thousand*?

A third way to orient yourself in a new place is to learn its nature. In every place I had previously lived, I had found the nearest park and gone there every day. In Oxford this was Christchurch Meadow, where deer stood among the long grass and I counted the goslings in the spring, checking week on week that all of them had survived. Once or twice a term I saw the blue dart of a kingfisher. A couple of weeks before I left Oxford for good, when I was learning quotations to produce in exams, I recited some lines of medieval mysticism aloud to a pheasant, which pushed out its chest and whirled its wings at my words, raising its beak to the sky. In Glasgow I ran along the river in Kelvingrove Park, looking out for herons and ducking under branches, arriving home with mud up to my knees. Google maps showed me little green rectangles and

crescents spotted all over Cambridge and Somerville, but when I went to visit these places I found them paved over, a few trees and a bench the only things that suggested they had ever been or could ever be considered parks. The Charles River runs along a main road. I gave up on finding parks and instead stood on my porch and watched rabbits in the yard two houses away, intent upon their mysterious business, flattening their bodies to slide under the garden shed. The squirrels were thinner in America and more agile. I saw one run along a telephone wire strung high across a road and envy left me unable to breathe. I wanted badly to be that squirrel.

I had thought I would miss my friends and family, but it turned out that I spoke to them almost as much as I had before. I Skyped and texted and Whatsapped, and I had a strange kind of jetlag that dragged on for weeks, so the five-hour time difference barely affected the window within which I could communicate. It should be obvious that when you move places, it's the place, not the people, you leave most thoroughly behind—but it somehow wasn't obvious to me until I found myself looking for the kinds of green spaces I had grown up with, and missing the blackbirds and magpies and holly bushes. I searched Google images for "wood pigeon," admiring the bird's purplish breast and white collar, and remembering how the ones in my parents' garden were so fat that when they landed on a branch of the oak tree, it dipped and swayed as if about to break. There are no wood pigeons in America.

Worse than the wood pigeon's absence was my inability to name anything. I started to recognize the stringy grayish-black bird with the dirty orange stomach that stretched from its neck to its tail, and the tree whose long, peapod-like seed containers hung outside my bedroom window, but I didn't know what they were called. In a different frame of mind, I might have found this liberating—engaging with nature beyond the arbitrary distortion of language!—but in fact I found it hope-

lessly alienating. Without having words to attach to my surroundings, I found it hard to distinguish one species from another or to keep track of what I saw. Had I paused last week to look at that flower or tree or bird, or was I merely confusing it with a similar and similarly nameless one? Which bird made the harsh call that woke me up in the morning and kept me from concentrating on work? When I described the noise to my roommates, they denied ever having heard it.

I remembered what I had been told about New England nature and tried to map it on to my experience. In mid-September I took the bus from Boston to New York City and watched the trees out the window. Some of them were turning yellow. Is this fall? I wondered. (A month later my parents visited and we went to Mount Auburn Cemetery, where I climbed Washington Tower and, looking out over miles of red and orange, realized that no, *this* was fall.) I stopped strangers in the street, saying, “Can you hear that sound? Do you know what bird it is?” They seldom did, but they didn’t seem to mind me asking. One day in late fall, crossing one of the bridges that lead from Cambridge to Boston, I looked over the water to some floating structure on which were sitting eight identical birds, large and black and thin-bodied, with hammer-shaped heads and thick bills. I took a photo on my phone and zoomed in, but they were too far away to see clearly, either in the flesh or in the image. Several joggers passed me. I stepped in front of the next person who was walking. “Do you know what those birds are?” We stared out together. “I’m sorry,” he said, and we continued to stare until we turned to each other and, at the same moment, said, “Cormorant?” We laughed and the man kept walking and I kept looking at the cormorants.

The first snowfall came three weeks later, at the beginning of November. People had been warning me about the return of the polar vortex and the need for a good down jacket since my arrival in Cambridge in the damp heat of late summer. (My roommate’s girlfriend

tried on her jacket in front of me in order to demonstrate the essential features of such an item: toggles on the hood, holes for your thumbs, ribbed cotton inner sleeves that fit snug around your wrists.) But I discovered that, no matter how many warnings you've heard, it's impossible to imagine four months and seven feet of snow, when the most you've ever experienced is a couple of weeks and a few inches. My legs ached from packing down the snow step by step in five-pound boots, and reaching the end of each day uninjured felt like an achievement. Every journey was exhausting and exciting and claustrophobic, every sidewalk transformed into a narrow corridor between two head-height banks of snow, melted and refrozen into ice. When the last of the snow finally slunk away and the trees shivered into blossom, it was so thrilling that it didn't matter at all that the blossoms weren't the blossoms I knew and the trees still lacked names.

And I did learn the names of some things. The electronic hum that I had noticed on my first night in Massachusetts, and that Bob and Nancy have learned not to hear, turned out to be crickets. The harsh cawing that bothered me so intensely during my first weeks in Cambridge, and that my roommates no longer hear, turned out to be blue jays. I heard them for a long time before I saw them, and when I did, they were so beautiful that I stopped minding their noise.

That summer, back in London, I went to a talk by Nell Zink, perhaps the second most famous living bird-watching novelist after her friend and mentor Jonathan Franzen. Zink is American but spent many years living in Germany. "American birdwatchers who move to Europe struggle," she said. "They're used to seeing red birds and blue birds—amazing birds—and suddenly they're surrounded by LBJs, and it's impossible to know what they're seeing." LBJs—little brown jobs—is a British bird-watching term that refers to the numerous species of small brown birds that are everywhere in Europe. I felt a pang

for these emigrant Americans, longing for the cardinal and the blue jay and seeing only the wren and the dunnock and the garden warbler, LBJs that even I find hard to tell apart.

I've been in Cambridge for over a year now. Seeing everything happen for the second time—the drop in temperature, the leaves beginning to fall, the rabbits more active now that it's not so hot—is a kind of familiarity. I know that the grayish-black bird with the orange stomach is a robin. We have robins in Britain too: they're about a third of the size of American ones, with soft brown backs and gray-white stomachs. The only thing the two species have in common is their orange breast. I imagine someone arriving in Massachusetts from England many centuries ago, homesick and disoriented, fastening their attention on the almost-familiar breast of an unknown bird with no English name yet, and saying: "Robin." The British robin is more loveable than the American one, in my opinion, but I've grown fond of the mourning dove, which pecks around the streets of Cambridge, and the gusts of sparrows that suddenly lift from a bush or tree. I still Google the wood pigeon from time to time.

WILLIAM WENTHE

*An Exhibit of
Audubon's Paintings*

For Bob Cronan

My friend trained in painting and drawing
who makes a living making maps, observes
how these shorebirds, shown in profile, set
on mud or rock, might open a small window
on a time when things were seen
as objects, and understood that way: a thing
among other things. A bittern among reeds.

Which seems only obvious, at first,
till I wonder, what was it like when,
some fifty years later, James McNeill Whistler,
seeing watery twilight sky reflected in water,
thought, I want to paint that; and by *that* he meant
a luminous movement, what we call,
because we insist on nouns, *light* and *time*.

I'd thought of Whistler last night—
the sky that lambent, urban, rose-gray tone,
inset with blue-silver medallions of cloud...
I don't know that Whistler ever painted a bird
(aside from a couple of allegorical, gold-leaf peacocks)
but he painted waves, and evening.

The sky

in Audubon's paintings, when there is one, is token—
 a cliché cloud, likely painted by an assistant;
 an object to designate “sky,” a reference point
 to situate a bittern firmly on the ground.
 If dark clouds loom, it's to enclose
 some white bird in its whiteness—pelican, gannet, snowy owl.

Still, there's no doubt how Audubon
 loved these birds. He would paint them alive,
 when possible. Maps of Florida and Labrador
 mounted on the walls trace his travels
 to seek them in their habitats;
 while even now, he's drawn us in
 to the landscape of the frigatebird's back
 by giving each barb of each feather its own
 glossy stroke of the pencil.

At last, when we think we're done with looking,
 we leave, and wander Central Park,
 walking paths we haven't walked
 in decades. It's early May, a Whistler sky
 of rainclouds dissolving into light
 above trees and gardens punctuated
 with migrant birds: close in, the redstart,
 yellowthroat, and ovenbird delineate themselves
 unmistakably; and others, higher,
 I can't name. In the rivery
 motion and breadth of park and city and weather,
 our eyes range from catbird to atmosphere,
 stirring a slowly welling thrill, as our talk
 moves back and forth between us.

CARL DENNIS

At Emily Dickinson's House

What I remember now of the rooms
Where she spent more than half her life
In self-imposed seclusion
Is her writing table, just two feet square,
Which made my massive desk at home
An embarrassment, an oafish boast
That the work I did there was monumental.
Her table: easy to move to a bedroom window
When she needed more light or another glimpse
Of the garden she loved to work in
When the weather permitted.
What a pleasure it must have been
To plant and prune in the afternoon
After a long morning at the table
Ample enough to serve as the field
Where she stepped out early to welcome Eden
Or rode alone to meet the enemy: the dark
That snuffed out her bright dear ones.
How much comfort she took in the hope
That the poems she didn't try to publish
Would cast a light one day is uncertain,
How much faith in a word as remote
And bloodless as "posterity." I'd like to tell her

I've climbed the stairs in my heavy boots
To the room with the little table where once
She sat in her slippers, summoning her reserves
To "charge the cavalry of woe."

GARRET KEIZER

First African

Georgia, 1855

A humdrum *via dolorosa*,
this women's work of bearing
man-made bricks up from the riverside
barefoot over cobblestone streets

to build a church for slaves,
the drum distant in memory,
the hum close by in the Savannah heat,
a humdrum way of tears

familiar in the brick-making
of Joseph's captive descendents—
“Out of Egypt have I called my son,”
whose feet also would bleed

on slave-ship ballast emptied out
and spread for paving stones: bones, names,
and sundry redemptions mixed like sand
in the mortar of unhealing time.

Time was, free time was for hiring out
oneself for wages, put aside grain

by grain to purchase freedom—that promise
now squandered for beams and nails

to build a church for slaves,
in their free night hours less free
than they were before—and more so,
the sacrifice of freedom freely chosen

for a humdrum *via dolorosa*,
the drum beating in the chest
and the hum like honey in the mouth
clenched tight against the bruising climb,

every woman her own Veronica,
wiping sweat with a kerchief also her own.
Hers too the still-born, back-borne pregnancy,
man-formed bricks like the first man

formed in God's image, flesh of the King
who took upon himself the form of a slave,
that at the mention of his name
every knee shall refuse to bow

under its yoke—and did refuse
in the prescient, backward-casting change
of name from “First Colored” to “First African,”
recalling sinless Lucy, mother of Mary and Eve,

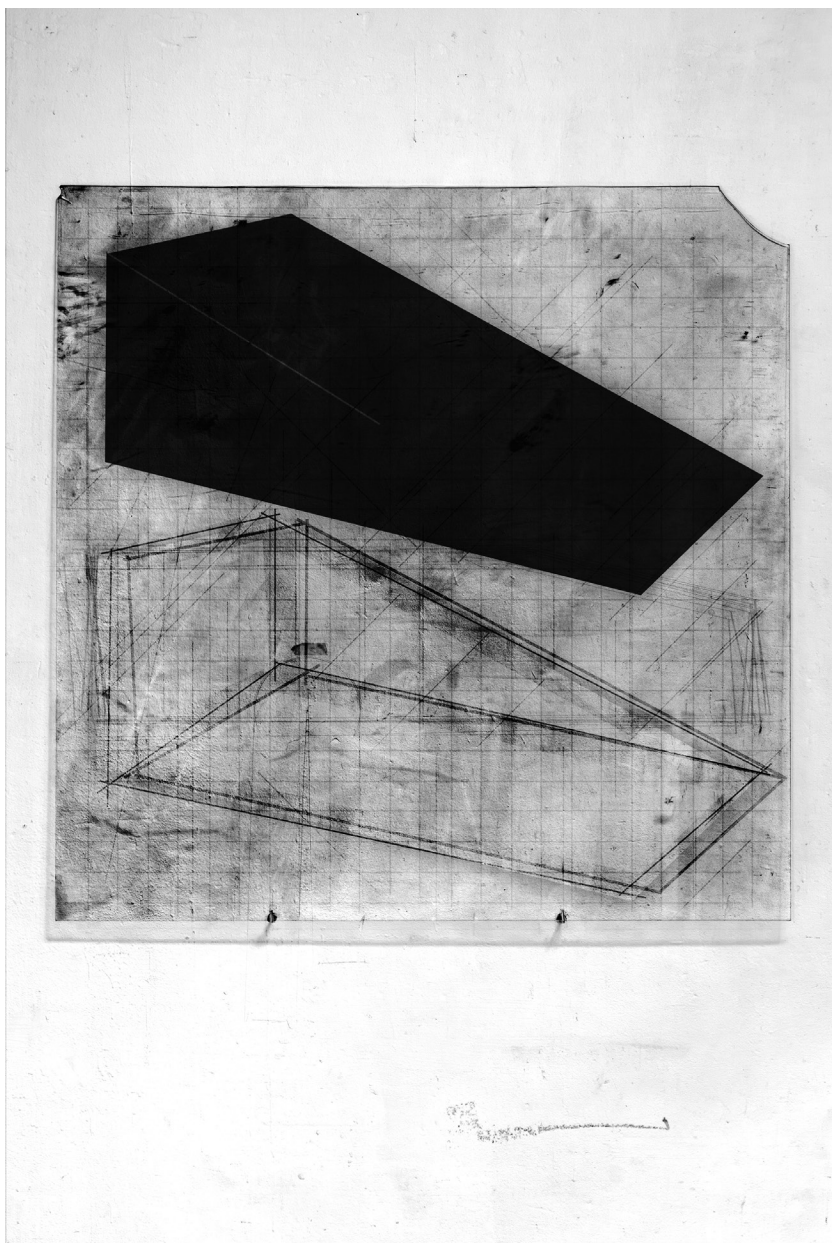
mothers of this handsome son, the “I-am
your-tour-guide-today,” who tells us,
when his father had the heart attack, the pastor
called and asked about his schoolwork,

there being no father left on earth to ask.
If you could hear him now, thou
brick-bearing, master-suckling mothers,
recount your stations in his filial pride,

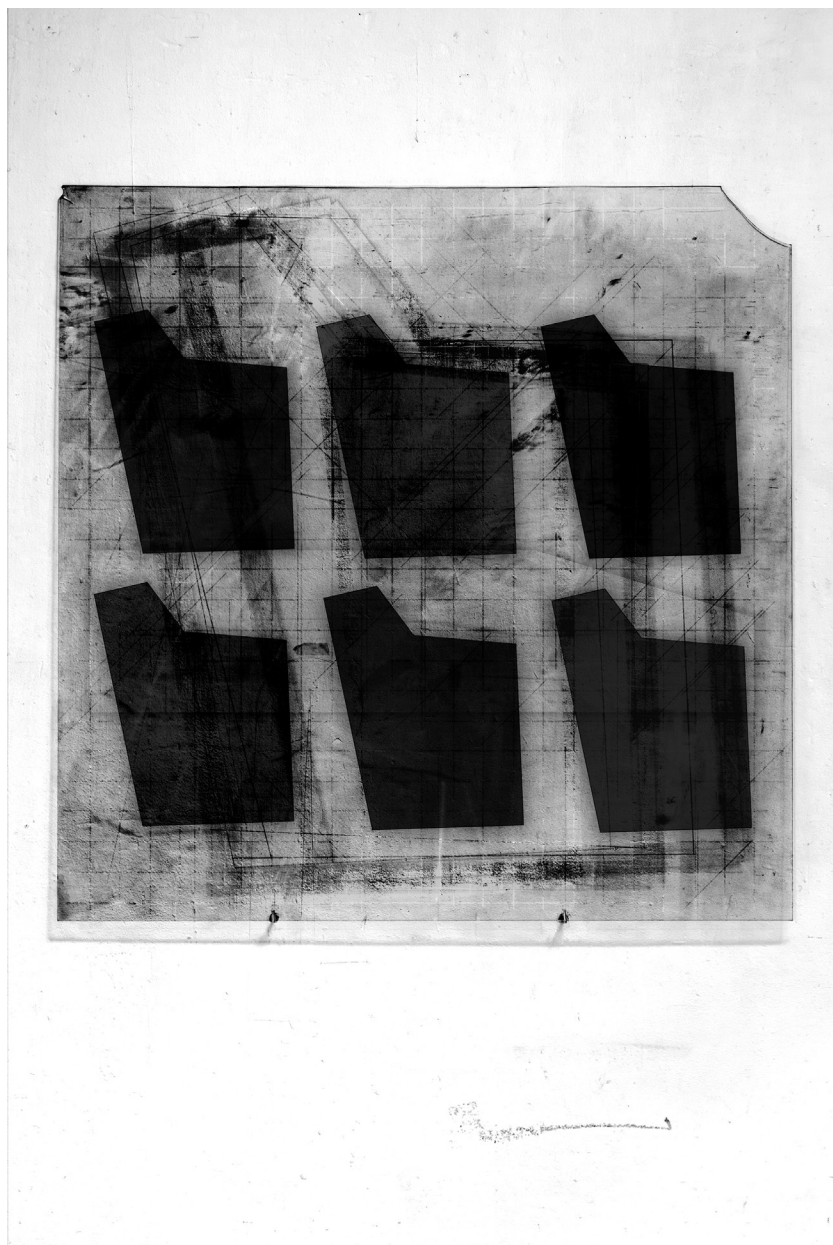
would you say your sacrifice was worth it?
Or would you tell us not to ask
eternal questions heaven alone can bear,
lacking which there is no sacrifice?

38, 7, 31, 4

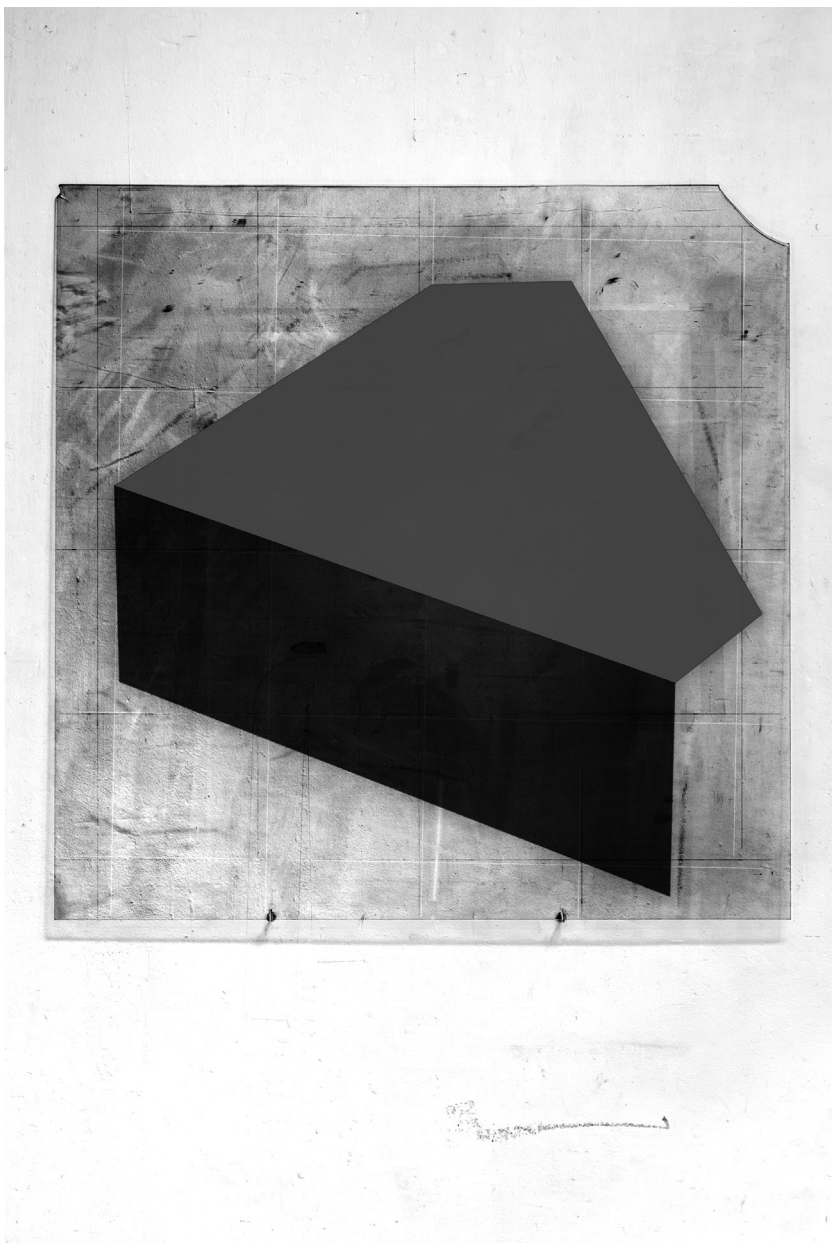
I was twelve years, nine months, and nineteen days old when I heard the news, saw the footage. Were I already thirteen I might have skipped the event the way hospitals skip a floor that bears the dreaded number. O Maimonides, God's mercy, Ya Ali, the Last Supper and the lunation. The dead were held in unsensed space, unnamable bloating away blackened, bouncing back and forth, from floor to ceiling, in zero gravity without elevator stop. In hotels it's the same. Though there the floor is the domain of fire. There was no hotel in the camp but there was a hospital. I didn't need to be there. The photographs, the brief video, my eyes dashing between screen and my parents standing in a silence that drove them out of the room as if they'd watched their bodies decompose. I didn't step over the corpses or love Blake's fly. I'd seen flies swarm the butcher's shop by then. You can't swat away what drowns the buzzing before slaughter. Twelve years, six months, and twenty-seven days later I was alone in my parents' bedroom in Clarksville, TN, when the dead reappeared. That same old woman in her headscarf and housedress was screaming. She looked older than heaven and hell and was wailing into the camera. "Where is everyone?" In the footage, she's suspended, her grief stuck on repeat, and I began my sobbing. I stood in line. The line was long. I was way in the back. Burial foundation six boulders deep then off to the core. How many floors to the molten base? Does belonging still go on down there or is there a red-light district to window-shop the poses of the massacred? O Mohammad, Ya Ali, twelve years, two months, and seven days later a door opened. I was somewhere and someone.



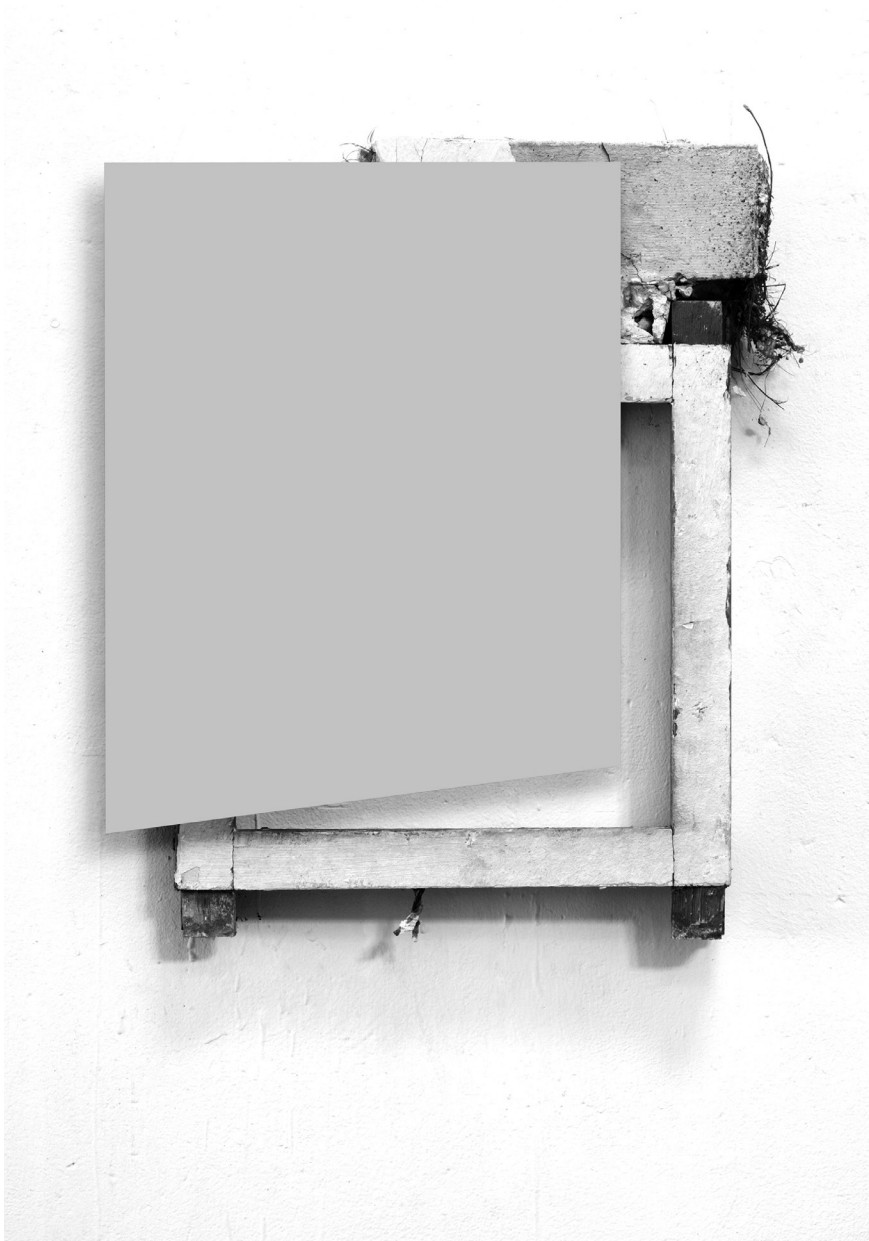
Hernan Ardila, *Untitled*, 2014, digital drawing on a photographic matrix, printed on cotton paper, 180 cm x 128 cm. Courtesy the John Marchant Gallery, London; A Gallery Named Sue, The Hague.



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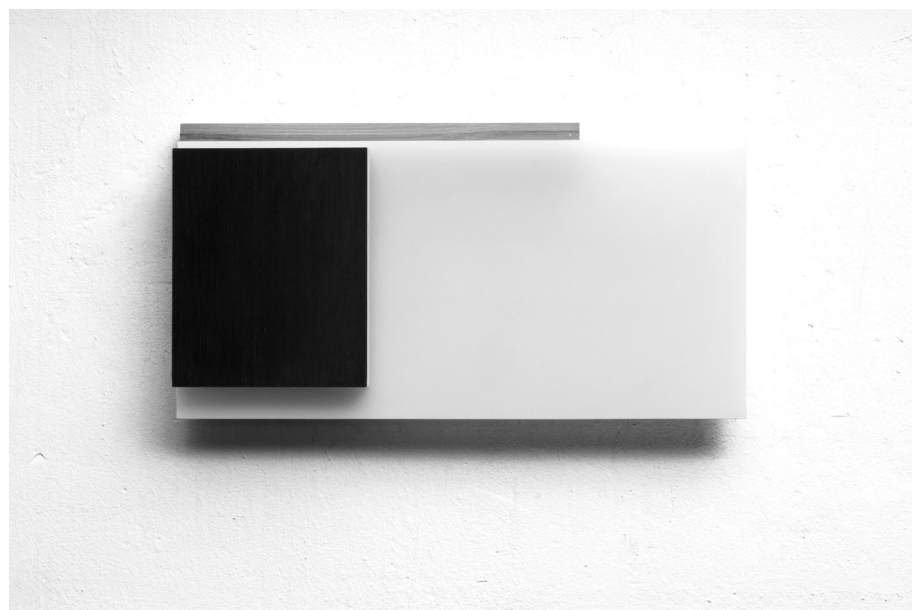
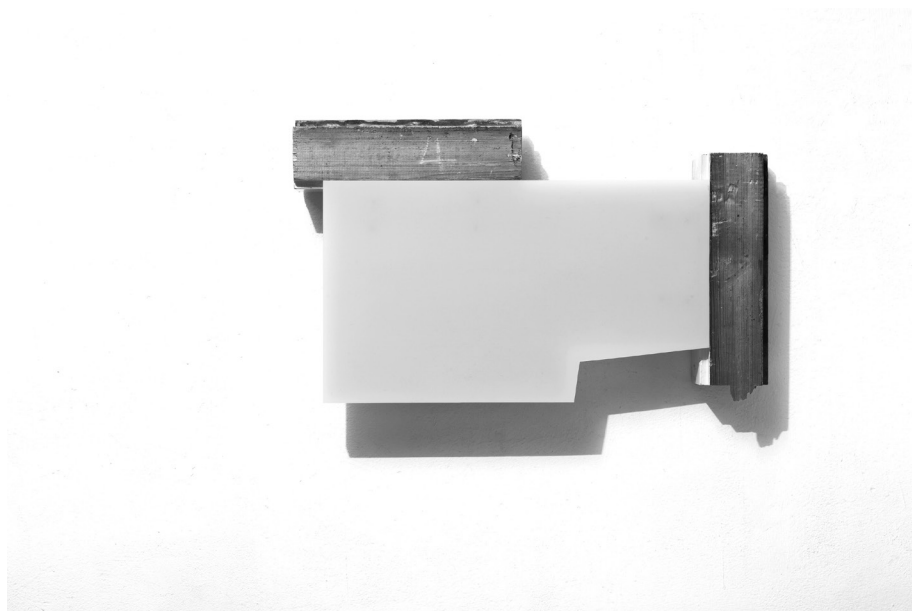
Hernan Ardila, *Untitled*, 2014, digital drawing on a photographic matrix, printed on cotton paper, 180 cm x 128 cm. Courtesy the John Marchant Gallery, London; A Gallery Named Sue, The Hague.



Hernan Ardila, *Untitled*, 2012, wood, polypropylene and alkyd,
59 cm x 49 cm x 9 cm. Courtesy the John Marchant Gallery,
London; A Gallery Named Sue, The Hague.



Hernan Ardila, *Untitled*, 2016, wood and foam, 84 cm x 107 cm x 28 cm. Courtesy the John Marchant Gallery, London; A Gallery Named Sue, The Hague.



TOP: **Hernan Ardila**, *Untitled*, 2013, wood and polypropylene, 62.5 cm x 38 cm x 8.5 cm.
 BOTTOM: **Hernan Ardila**, *Untitled*, 2013, wood and polypropylene and alkyd, 53 cm x 28 cm x 8 cm.
 Both courtesy the John Marchant Gallery, London; A Gallery Named Sue, The Hague.

DAVID GEWANTER

from *The Ego Anthology*

II. service *Ego*:

She sees him shuffle crabwise down the meat aisle—
is he that old? Am I?—years after the years
of analysis. He grips a paper bag
of papers, confused, slowly collapsing
inside the black office suit he wore when
torrents of intimacies had poured down
his gullet, the years of *When he hurts me*,
I apologize....Load on him the causes,
O Muse. The sausages dangle above him.
She takes his arm: *Doctor, remember me?*
are you all right? —Once he had told her,
You're no fireman. And he's no burning house.
Now he looks up, the lockbox, the old child
playing doctor: *Oh hello. You can't help me.*

DAVID GEWANTER

from *The Ego Anthology*

V. *Ego* dust,

as if a tidy Manx housewife would cut
her tattered curtains into tablecloths—
then years later, sew them up as aprons,
then napkins, then purses, doilies, spice bags,
pin cushion. It is not Zen, this slow vanishing,
not *the Will*, *pouring itself out*—Watch it
shrink inward: the holding cell where drunks dry out;
the orange, wincing on the windowsill,
the dry testicle in its gloom: your heavy
bag of habits, the frozen clothes swinging on
the laundry line, as if to sail somewhere—
pray for the wind to flap a bed-sheet over
your shirt; pray for what you understand.

BEN MILLER

The Secret of Jefferson Market Garden

WHEN MY BOSS at the local Youth Center, a divorced former football coach the girth of a couch, discovered how long I had been married, he cried, “What’s your secret!?”

It was a strong question. He was almost lambasting me. He sat on a swivel chair in a cramped file-cluttered throwback of an office. Above him hung an oil painting of a gaunt, disheveled Jesus Christ. To his right, on a shelf, rested a scuffed helmet from his linebacker days. I stood between desk piles and a lovely checkerboard of inlaid wood, crafted and donated by inmates at the nearby South Dakota penitentiary.

Roger, I felt, wanted me to transport him to an ache-less place where things made more sense. He had introduced me to the center by saying, “It’s all about building relationships.” It was a wish, I was finding out. Middle school students were herded out of vans and into the facility—a former elementary school with a leaky roof—and they remained busted, those little faces, short-circuiting connections abounded. Damn, Roger wanted a straight answer! A nugget over the tunnel to the raucous Arena of Amour. Roger deserved more though. I wondered if he knew that.

Anyway, I had no bracing slogan to offer. I had a deep wonderment about my marriage. It was the biggest thing Anna and I had made of and with our lives—the craziest thing—the most unlikely thing—and... *You think love is about winning?*

What telltale image, in the few seconds available, might I offer this middle-aged hunk to hold on to? What pristine pointer to the messy reality that nebulous negotiations, awkward adjustments, luck, patience, sympathy, imagination...were the modern game's name? The swerves lives consisted of—whether toward exhilarating success or disheartening failure—did not produce many straight answers in my experience. The living was always so much bigger than the learning.

The first thing I thought of telling Roger was that Anna and I should have been *done from the start*. The moment, say, she saw my horrendous half of a shared NYU studio apartment. Or the moment the cockroach scampered over the rim of her water glass during her first visit to the Iowa pit that spawned me. But I did not spit any of that crap out. History's eerie images came, went, and then, suddenly, I had only questions for myself—some logical, quite a few absurd—as I stared at the back of Roger's fuzzy neck and head. Concerned about concussion syndrome due to recent news reports, he was playing another "healthy brain" game on a dusty computer screen.

What positive attributes of our loving had waltzed us in the direction of longevity? Or was it wisest to assume everything that had happened—the awful (i.e., the Early Crisis in Vermont) as well as the wonderful—had helped steel us for the marathon route leading to the crystal moment glasses clink-clinked on our twenty-seventh anniversary, celebrated at the Blue Stem steakhouse next to the thrum of I-90? Had the marriage lasted because we expected different things than other couples? Was it because we were more intent than most on putting things together, or more terrified than most of ripping anything we have apart? What role did the agonizing choice to have no children play

in preserving our bond? Shedding toxic in-laws early on, my parents, their paranoia and violence? Anna being imbued as a child in the happy marriage cult of Elizabeth and Robert Browning via her mother's kitchen recitations, churning to re-create the passion she once heard in the voice of poet James Wright in a Minneapolis classroom? Our valuing the making of art not cash, how did that figure in? The five *One Story* magazine-sponsored fairytale Literary Debutante Balls we attended in Brooklyn? My still having in my 2017 dresser 1989 wedding day socks (no holes)? Reading Shakespeare's 154 sonnets for one year before bedtime? The long-standing habit of eating dinner together and talking over the day's dull and interesting details, and the converse long-standing habit of setting aside nights when we "did our own things" or worked on our writing as late as we could and ate separately? A shared affection for aged stinky cheeses? Wine, not cola, with food? The right dinner music—jazz's salty swing and improvisational emphasis? My taking over the cooking early in the marriage? Anna's skill in dealing with budgets, bank accounts, bill paying? Periodic stints in therapy to subdue personal demons? The seventeen (and counting) years we have been dutifully, periodically, turning the queen-sized mattress according to the directions that came with it when we bought it at ABC Carpet & Home? Decades of owning no car or TV? Visiting Paris three times? The many trips to Montauk, Long Island, to admire winter ocean grays, whites, violets? Pilgrimages to the quartzite cliffs of Blue Mound State Park in Minnesota—quartzite a stone harder than diamond? Living in a solid prewar apartment? Catching romantic comedies at Film Forum, Hepburn and Tracy—furniture-upending couple uproariousness? Us never writing about each other? (Never until this year. Anna informs me—not knowing I have started this essay—that she has just finished a "Ben" poem called "In the Swimming Pool.") Us both being eldest children? That cosmic wedding cake from Marquet Patisserie? Anna keeping her own last name?

A potent potion kept us married, but how might its exact ingredients be extracted from a roux of conjugal vows, feelings, whims, cues, staging, accidents, nutrition, rituals, philosophies, crusades that—thus far—had kept us married?

I merely knew where the answers were hidden. The answers were tucked in the sea of wedded days, the hours and the objects of those hours and the intricate landscapes our affection had filtered through: the regions, the rooms, the yards, the streets, the parks. Countless curls of topography spelled out a truth dense and wide, and to me it was a tribute to the relationship that its meaning defied easy summary.

Following the intense exchange with Roger, I often thought of the earnest tone of his sideline voice, the bellowing he-face nested in the cluttered, underfunded institution. He needed help like the kids needed it. Doing his job well was near-to-impossible, given staff turnover and a bizarre imbalance of resources. Lego blocks scattered over tables for clients to build imaginary futuristic structures with . . . but not one staff member qualified to advise teenage participants about college scholarships crucial to constructing a real future. Every religious organization in Sioux Falls, it seemed, sent poor kids pizza—but never any salad. The easiest week in the year for Roger was the week after school ended, when there was traditionally no programming and he could sit in his office blaring Journey on his speakers and crying at nine-year-old board-game opponents: “King me! *KING ME!*” He sounded stressed out then too, however. Roger was our leader and on salary, but not enough salary. Being the boss he couldn’t quit when burned out—like me. He could, each Thursday, visit the Man Salon at the Empire Mall where his battered skull finally got treated like the enormous fragile egg it was, shampoo, fingertip massage, clipping, and combing. He had a teenage daughter. He lived with a Haley, also divorced. If they married, he needed a better, wiser head. He behaved like a man scared of nothing, but he was afraid, I had heard, of getting married again. Very afraid.

The literary critic Frank Kermode famously ignored the gyre of marriage in his memoir *Not Entitled*. Joan Didion and Joyce Carol Oates wrote about husbands after those partners abruptly perished, the shock genre, lyric grief charging pages. There were books spawned by difficult divorces, the revenge genre, she said/he said. Caring for an ill spouse inspired a tender realm of literature, coping meditations. None of these worthwhile explorations addressed the alchemy of a marriage midstream, prior to a stoppage due to death or betrayal or mutual agreement, when both loving parties were still together for important reasons, stolidly working it out in morning haze. Working through night shadows. The commitment perhaps never prevailing definitively over threats, but more than enduring: growing. Flowing with certain currents, and against others, in each participant. There weren't enough books about ordinary days, their cleverness, their dreaminess of sleep and slog and litter, all the funny little packages happiness—and tragedy too—are most often delivered in.

Writing the above, I think of the photographs of the late Rodney Smith, who once placed, and shot, a man and a woman smooching atop a yellow cab wedged in a traffic jam. He once said of his work: "I put my life on the line for photography and it returned the effort with abundance. Its gift back to me was a me devoid of most of my neuroses. One who is clear, sharp and energetic." Substitute "marriage" for "photography" and there it is, a conceivable tone and form for this husband's story. Pages of pivotal pictures depicting, in edges, in circles, the simultaneous vastness and finiteness of married life. *Here's the first one, Roger: "Jefferson Market Garden."*

It is the small, tidy garden present between the slant of Greenwich Avenue and Sixth Avenue in Manhattan, protected by bat wings of tall wrought-iron fencing. Next to the green with the inset flower beds, rises the brick Jefferson Market branch of the New York Public Library, formerly a prison for wayward women and, earlier, the courthouse where

Harry Thaw was put on trial for murdering the famous architect Sanford White in a dispute over the affection of a lady named Evelyn Nesbit.

Cobble paths wind around the garden. There are benches at junctures. Attached to black bars next to the entrance gate is a bulletin board in a glass case, essentially an aquarium of messages, maintained by volunteers. One posting forever reminds citizens that the garden is open from Tuesday to Sunday from ten a.m. to dusk, *weather permitting*, through October. For years, seasonally appropriate hand-typed snippets of nature-oriented poems were also displayed. Basho on a square of paper not much larger than a postage stamp. Mary Oliver and Thoreau. I liked to stand there on the sidewalk, imagining the typist hunched over an antique machine in a dowdy nearby tower, pruning poems to the seeds of their most divine excerpts.

When the garden is open, two volunteers generally sit at a folding table in front of the out-flung gate. On the folding table sits a mayo jar for donations. They never ask for money, though. They wear floppy hats, many of them, grinning at ye who enter. They know exactly what is blooming: dahlias or hydrangeas or poppies or tulips or roses or lilies or daffodils. They can give you a brochure about upcoming musical events. They will never ask you to leave unless night falls or it rains hard.

The wood benches are wide-slatted. The backs come to a point in the middle like a musical notation. Benches face the trickling fish pond on the park's west end; I'll note, though, that it is such a small park that four directions hardly fit properly. On the east end of the garden, at the start of a cobbled loop around an island of mixed plantings, another bench resides under the arc of a rose trellis's hips and thorns.

On one of the first warm spring days in 2012, I perambulated thirty blocks from my workplace cube near Madison Square Garden to this bench at midday. I sat for a few minutes; the vroom of Sixth accompanied the drone of my thoughts. I can't recall what I thought, but for me sitting on a bench is accompanied by a responsibility to think so I

surely was thinking something. Maybe about how the garden soil once hosted the roots of W. H. Auden's favorite NYC tree, a multi-trunked monster dogwood—maybe about how nice it would be to stay an hour, listening to the Avenue polyphony and admiring hand-painted white letters across Greenwich: JOSEPH HANNA, FINE LEATHER GOODS, NEW YORK, MILAN, PARIS, LONDON. No more, no less than a pleasant sit, sun on skin, and something to tell Anna about later, when she returned to our Convent Avenue apartment from her stressful job as a college counselor at a private school in Brooklyn Heights.

That evening, however, before I could recite my day's highlight, she told of hers. After work, she boarded the A train to West Fourth Street, walked north a few blocks to Jefferson Market Garden. "What bench did you sit on?" I inquired.

She described the bench's location. It was the one I had chosen for pretending I was a tourist in Eden. Neither of us had been to the garden since fall. Neither of us, before going to work, had mentioned the possibility of visiting the garden. We had not talked on the phone during the day, or texted, or emailed. In the great hive of the city, coming from completely different directions, we had ended up choosing...

In silence—seated at a mission table, formerly a prop in a window display of the Cook's Companion store on Atlantic Avenue (a \$250 steal)—we savored the fact that when far apart from each other, out of all a magnificent city's alternatives, we had wanted the exact same thing, wanted it during one of the toughest patches in our marriage as, numbed, frightened, we stumbled to the end of punishing long-term day jobs and faced the prospect of leaving a sweet apartment we could no longer afford, departing from dear friends and Anna's parents to seek elsewhere answers as to how we could keep our writing going and bolster a bond rocked by economic trouble, rejection slips, and other travails. We smiled to think of each other sitting with the feeling of sitting in a winter garden gently rousing—finding succor in the

chirping of nest-building sparrows and the steady commuter avenue moan that would, in the end, deliver us back home to the ongoing doubts and ordeals, yes, but far, far away any travel sounded in the Jefferson Market Garden.

See, Roger, I may not be able to instruct you how to make your second marriage succeed, but I can show you what it is like when a marriage does manage to last.

It's living in the way of each other—in each other's pants!—for so long you learn to laugh more than cry, to bask in what commitment frees you to forget about and to covet what it asks you to covet: any occasions which remind you who you are, where you came from, and how far you have come and have yet to go, why loving is worth the effort. It's this weird phenomenon of a force of togetherness taking over, leading you on and on...to experience more sublime moments after you've made every magic you think can happen happen. It's being drawn to gardens more than games, and the pulse of attraction a plain bench sends out to one lover hours after the other lover sat there, half-asleep, serenely beached by waves of anniversaries.

GABRIEL BROWNSTEIN

No Time Like the Present

KATYA WAS A YOGA TEACHER and very pretty, with a round face and little black dreadlocks, a degree in cinema studies from Bard College, and a tattoo of an infinity sign on the back of her neck. Her father was a doctor from Boston, and her mother a painter from Port-au-Prince. She had been called Catherine when growing up in Old Lyme, Connecticut. Tomorrow was her lumpectomy. She took a pill and kissed her daughter Nomi good night.

Sebastian Fishberger, her husband, was forty-four years old. He retained the build of a high school varsity tennis player, though perhaps more stooped. He owned a company that sold web-based learning applications to colleges and universities. While his wife brushed her teeth, Sebastian lay on the couch, drinking his third whiskey of the night, and reading a book that had helped Katya with her anxieties, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, by Jonathan Garment, M.D. Sebastian sipped his whiskey. The ice melted in his glass. The first time Sebastian came to a half-familiar Sanskrit word, he thought he understood it. The second time, he was less sure. The third, he realized that his eyes were running over the same lines again and again. His eyelids got heavy. The ship of

meaning came unmoored from the words. He held the book in front of his face, but now he dreamed he was on a boat, reading. The sentences became a noise in the background of his dreaming, a sound like the lapping of the tide. His little skiff ran past a spiny reef, and toward open water. Under the surface, he saw the creamsicle fins of a big orange fish. He heard a tiny click—he imagined it was the click of Katya's reading lamp. His eyes opened. He thought of the front door—the door had come with the house, the ugly green front door—its knob was old and cheap and spotty in parts where the brass finish had worn off. The knob was sticky. The knob didn't work.

Earlier in the evening, he had been trying to take out the garbage, and had been unable to open the door on account of the broken door-knob. The trash had had a broken chicken bone in it, and the bone had punctured the bag, and the bag had started to drip brownish greenish juice all over the front hall. Katya had come to Sebastian's rescue, wearing a blue canvas apron. She had opened the door with a twist of her mindful wrist, a trick that Sebastian had been unable to duplicate. And now that she had taken her pill and gone to sleep, he worried. What if there were a fire? Would they be able to open the door and escape? If there were a fire, would they all be trapped?

Sebastian wore the clothes he had worn to work: a candy-striped oxford shirt and a pair of steel-gray jeans. He got the screwdriver from the cabinet above the fridge. The knob was loose. Where the knob met the door there was a circular piece—some kind of guard or washer shaped like a donut. It rattled. Sebastian tried to tighten the little screw at the knob's side, but the problem was inside the mechanism. There might also be a problem on the side of the door. Maybe the problem was with the catch plate. Maybe the catch plate stuck out a little, and that made it hard for the latch to retract. Sebastian turned and twisted the knob. He kicked the door. He tried again. The door opened.

Mist rose from the asphalt, past the parked cars and up to the streetlights and windows. Their cat, Hanuman, crept toward the front door, sniffing. Sebastian nudged the cat with his foot toward the living room and the coffee table. He knelt down in the front hall, to get a look at the catch plate. He couldn't fix it any tighter to the door's side. His wallet pinched, so he took it out of his right front pants pocket and laid it on the Ikea organizer, where the family kept its shoes. There, he forgot it.

He had fallen in love with his wife in the early 1990s, when she was in a band called Cat Fight Cat Fight. She had been playing bass at a house party in Annandale, a little girl with glowing dark skin and a big bright smile and a giant instrument and her afro popping wildly from the top of a multicolored scarf. For the lumpectomy, Katya was going to leave before six in the morning. That was her plan. She was going to take the subway to the hospital on 168th Street. Sebastian was going to pack Nomi's lunch and walk Nomi to daycare, and from there follow Katya's path into the city and uptown on the A train. When the procedure was over, and the doctors discharged her, they would take a taxi back to Brooklyn. Sebastian had wanted to drive Katya to the hospital and to drive her back home, but Katya had wanted him to be home in the morning for Nomi. Katya had been adamant. She didn't want to hire a sitter. She didn't want to explain the procedure to their little girl until it was done. She had banned the word "cancer" from the house. Also, she didn't want Sebastian to worry about parking near the hospital. He knew she was being crazy, but he figured that since Katya was the one who had the tumor, he might as well do what she said.

He pictured little pervert flesh cells reproducing in his wife's breast. They never said the word "tumor" aloud. She had excised it from conversation, by decree. But now it sat there, next to even their most ordinary remarks, like some kind of emoticon they couldn't scrub from their emails. She'd text, "Nomi's got dance at four tomorrow," or "Can you pick up some laundry detergent?" and he'd see it like a shadow on

the screen. Was it the dancing crab emoticon? No, it was the pile of shit emoticon, the one with the little flies. Past midnight, he disassembled and reassembled the doorknob. He extracted the long, oily, toothed spindle from the center of the door. There was a conference call at four tomorrow with Port Jefferson University, and if all went well and he was back from the hospital, he'd call in. Sebastian put the long bolts in his mouth and the short screws in a little white espresso cup. A figure in green appeared outside the gate. Sebastian rose, screwdriver in hand, as though he were ready to defend his house from an invader. But it was only his neighbor Foley in his bulky sweatshirt, and Foley's labradoodle, Ringo. Foley's glasses glinted in the dark. Ringo wagged his clublike tail. Sebastian threaded the spindle back through the gears. He tried to fix the catch plate more tightly to the side of the door. He tested the knob. Then he shut the door. He could not open it again.

He cursed. He turned the knob. He pulled it. He said, "Fuck shit." He rattled it. He had fucked it. He kicked the door. He had fucked it good. He had made it worse. They were trapped. Before six in the morning, Katya would have to go out the back door without coffee or breakfast, and from the little back yard she would have to climb six sets of fences, through the Goldenbergs' yard and past the chicken coop, all the way to the Lombardos' alleyway, just to get to the fucking hospital. Sebastian kept twisting and tugging on the doorknob, and finally got it open. The wind was picking up, the fog vanishing. The gray cat made a dash for freedom. Sebastian caught the animal in his arms.

Now that the door was open, he was afraid to close it again. It seemed he had only two choices: 1) to stand in the open door all night; or 2) to go to Home Depot and get a new doorknob.

Katya the yogi believed in the dharma. Sebastian did the stretches, he joined the chanting, he said the ohms, but he was more skeptical. In *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, Jonathan Garment, M.D., argued

that a mantra turned signal into noise. A phrase, like “present moment,” or “beautiful moment,” through repetition became nothing but a movement of the lips and tongue, or if repeated silently, just a firing in the blackness of the frontal lobes. Sebastian wasn’t sure how that notion calmed Katya. He also wasn’t sure that Garment was right. Surgery was scheduled for eight-thirty. They’d probably be home by four. Sebastian knew he shouldn’t care about the Port Jefferson University call.

At Home Depot, the clerks in orange aprons stood asleep at their stations. Music piped through wires into their ears. A familiar jingle played through the hangar space of the store: “A rainy day or a sunny day could be any day is a funny day.” Sale displays of gas grills and backyard furniture looked like the remains of civilizations in which no one had ever wanted to live. Sebastian took out his phone to check the time. There was a warning on his screen: less than ten percent of battery left. He wandered down an aisle of front doors, past deadbolts and combination locks. Sebastian selected neither the most nor the least expensive doorknob. It was called Tuff Stuff. Its knobs were round brassy balls, and they were packed in a hard clear plastic with a hole at the top so the package could hang from its rack. The brand advertised itself as a “vestibule lock” and the label said that the only tool necessary for installation was a screwdriver. Odds were, they’d be home by four, in time for the stupid call.

It was past one in the morning. Only two of the dozen checkout counters were staffed. The checkout girl had greasy hair and pimples on her forehead and a small-featured face with big eyes. He put the doorknob on the counter. He touched his pocket and felt his phone. That was when he realized that his wallet was gone.

“Just a moment,” he said.

She didn’t look at Sebastian.

“I had my fucking...” Sebastian said. “I’m sorry.”

Her big lips were painted red, her eyelids coated with a green-blue powder.

There she was on her stool, like a mushroom on rot. When had he taken his wallet out of his pants? Had he dropped it in the car? In his pockets he had only three dollar bills, a dime, a nickel, and four pennies. The doorknob cost \$18.39.

Sebastian said, "Excuse me, please."

Her plump lips neither closed nor opened. Sebastian returned to the aisle of doors and locks and chains. He hung the knob back on its hook. The identical knobs behind it rocked and swayed in a line. If he went back home for his wallet and then drove back here for the doorknob, it would be two in the morning before he even got to work, putting the new doorknob in the door. Or he could leave the store empty handed, drive back home, and get in bed next to Katya and the tumor in her breast. He would lie there and watch the ceiling, and he would worry about the house burning down, the doorknob not working, the three of them trapped. He'd smash a window. He'd lower Katya out, and she'd be standing by the planter where in springtime irises bloomed, and he would hand Nomi through the broken glass. Then he'd leap. Jonathan Garment, M.D., had a description of anxiety: "the thought that thinks less than it thinks." Katya had quoted that to him, and he'd been so annoyed.

"Well, read his book," she'd said.

He'd said, "I don't need to read the fucking book." He'd just been trying to make a simple point about anxiety: that sometimes anxiety prevented one from seeing things, but sometimes it helped one work things through. Then Katya had substituted the word "panic" for "anxiety," as if that were nothing, with her chocolate yogi eyes, as if "panic" were not implicitly insulting.

And then he had pointed out that she had her own craziness, too—like it was craziness to outlaw words like "tumor" or "cancer" or "death." When he said those words, she'd said, "Enough." She'd raised her hands, showing her pink palms.

Now he was wishing he hadn't said that. She'd left the room. She took her pill and went to bed. And on the couch he'd picked it up, that book by Jonathan Garment, M.D. Sebastian had never stolen anything in his life, but now he was going to steal the doorknob. He was going to do it for his family.

Dangerous-looking contractors rolled a dolly laden with wood and joint compound and sheetrock, and they looked around themselves suspiciously, as if Home Depot were the recreation yard of a penitentiary. The sad-faced cashier moved boxes into the cart of a bearded shopper, an orthodox Jew. Two guards in black shirts bantered by the exit. The shorter of the pair, a wizened, bespectacled man, raised a finger and lectured his younger partner. "Some like they fruit firm," he said. "Some like it tender." Sebastian felt it coming, Jew vs. Black, the eternal conflict of the Brooklyn tribes.

"What?" The shopper in the skullcap piloted his heavy cart toward the door. The tassels in his shirt swung in opposite directions from his gut. "You going to count every piece?"

"Yo yo." The younger guard was squatting, fingering the purchases and examining the long receipt. He had arms thin and long as an arachnid's. "You only pay for one of these."

Sebastian put his phone to his ear. He walked as though distracted, while the guards and the shopper argued. "We can go real time," he said, as he flashed the doorknob in the guards' direction, "Or we can go asynchronous." The doors slid open. He stepped past them into the parking structure, which smelled of urine and mildew. Under the low concrete pilings, dark liquid dripped from the back of a dented van.

"Young sir!" came a voice behind him.

Sebastian slid into his car. He dropped the phone and doorknob on the passenger's seat. The phone chimed, showed its corporate logo, and powered down to black. The guard in the rearview mirror had his mouth open and his hands high. Sebastian gunned the engine. He

dropped the emergency brake. His wheels squealing, he turned to avoid a parked truck, then he powered past a stop sign.

It took two honking drivers for him to realize that he had forgotten to turn on his headlights. The elevated highway loomed above. He'd had three whiskeys before Katya had gone to bed. His heart was thrilled and pounding. He crossed the Gowanus in the wrong direction. He made a left turn down a quiet street with shuttered gates and piles of trash.

"Present moment," he told himself. "Beautiful moment."

But where the fuck was his wallet? Had he left his wallet at home? He jabbed his fingers under his seat, fishing for the wallet. He made another left turn on Fourteenth Street, past a row of garbage trucks parked like giant beetles at the curb. They had a video of him, casing the aisle of doorknobs and locks, standing in line and fumbling through his pockets. They had a shot of his license plate speeding off into the night. He came to a stop sign on Second Avenue. The plate number got typed into a search engine. Somewhere in Mumbai, a mouse pushed a cursor across a computer screen, and up came Sebastian Fishberger's name, his address, his credit scores, his company homepage—they'd catch him. The compactor trucks were double-parked to his left and right. A taxi came whistling through the intersection, honking as it went.

"Present moment," Sebastian mouthed the words. "Present moment."

He was driving without his license. He'd never pass a Breathalyzer test. Best to go back and explain, to return the doorknob. The wind lofted plastic bags in spirals from the street. Sebastian imagined his wife asleep in bed. He imagined a double mastectomy. Fuck it, he thought. He stepped on the gas. The bicyclist came out of nowhere. Sebastian braked. He felt the rubber grip the road. The seat belt grabbed his chest. The car careened forward. The bicycle was there, right in front of him, would not move from his squealing fender. He felt the contact through the steering wheel. The metal made its awful sound. Sebastian winced,

leg rigid on the brake pedal. The body vanished. Sebastian heard a *thump* overhead. Then the body dropped out of heaven and through his rear view mirror.

Sebastian opened the car door. The pavement moved underfoot. He grabbed the emergency brake. He put the car in park. The bike was under his front left tire. The bicyclist was on his hands and knees, a big ugly white man with a shaved head, dressed in shorts and a Hawaiian shirt. He stood. He was bent double, breathing heavily, his pale scalp faintly greenish in the dark. In his hand he had the heavy chain of his bicycle lock.

“Thank God you’re okay,” Sebastian said.

The bicyclist faced him, blood on his mouth. He was ghostly, with narrow porcine eyes and tattoos on his hairless white forearms.

“I didn’t see you,” Sebastian explained. “You were coming from the wrong direction.”

The bicyclist swung his chain. Sebastian dodged. The rear window of the station wagon exploded.

“Hey!” Sebastian put his hands up.

The bicyclist drew the chain back, and swung again. Sebastian’s forearms took to the blow, but the end of the chain whipped back and one hard link pinged his forehead. Sebastian lost his balance. He was down on the asphalt. The bicyclist advanced, whip cocked for the final blow—and then suddenly, like he’d been sapped on the head, the bicyclist froze. His eyes rolled upwards. He stiffened. The wind picked up. The bicyclist, stiff as a cardboard cutout of himself, fell over backward, landing hard. His chain clattered. He lay still. Sebastian stood. There was blood on his hands.

Sebastian got back into his Subaru. His head hurt. He plowed right over the bicycle, running a red light. His open door beat against the sides of parked cars. He reached out, and slammed it shut. Streetlights exploded off the cracks in his windows. He said, “Oh shit oh shit oh shit

oh shit.” The blood was on his sleeves, on his fingers, and on the steering wheel. He said, “Fuck fuck fuck fuck.”

He had trouble parallel parking, first bumping the car in front of him, and then running his wheels up the curb. He pounded his fists on the steering wheel. There was a bump like an egg on his forehead. He turned off the ignition, then turned it on, thinking to go back and check on the man he’d just murdered. He smashed his rear bumper into the car behind him. He pulled forward, then back, then drove his front wheel onto the curb again. He screamed. He gripped his head where it hurt. When he walked out of the car and toward his house, it was all he could do to keep his balance. He had the doorknob in his left hand and his phone in his pocket. He tried to call 911, but of course his phone was dead. He screamed. He covered his mouth. “Get a grip,” he told himself. He worried his neighbors would hear him.

Inside the house, he took off his bloody shirt. He bundled it in a plastic bag and shoved it in the kitchen garbage. The cat mewed. The wound was ragged on his arm and tender and swollen and greenish blue. The stupid song from Home Depot kept chiming in his head, rainy day, sunny day, any day, funny day. “I didn’t,” he blurted. “I didn’t mean.” He punched the wall. He hurt his knuckles. Sebastian washed his injured arm in the kitchen sink and pressed the wound hard with a paper towel. “Please God,” he murmured. Then he slipped into his rubber Crocs and his hooded sweatshirt and after some difficulty with the front doorknob scampered down the street to the car again.

It was an awful parking job. He needed to make it okay. He needed to do it for Katya. He shut his eyes and thought of his wife in bed, and he listened to his own heartbeat.

The crack to the front window wasn’t as bad as he thought. The back window had been demolished. There were crystals of glass all over the child’s safety car seat. Maybe, he thought, he could tell Katya it was an accident. Or he could say that some crazy vandal had done that to their

car! She'd have no reason to doubt it. She kept baby wipes in the glove compartment. Sebastian cleaned off the steering wheel, and the blood-stained seat. He wiped down the front fender and the windshield. How long until they found the body?

Back home, he shoved his sweatshirt deep in the laundry, and also his bloodstained pants. He washed his arm again and saw the blood run down the drain, and he dried the wound with toilet paper and dropped the paper in the toilet bowl and flushed and then taped a piece of fresh gauze over his forearm. Quiet as he could, he went back to the bedroom. He thought, "Fuck fuck fuck," but did not scream it. Everything was going to be okay.

He put on a T-shirt and pajama pants. In the bathroom, he looked at himself in the mirror and ran water through his hair and touched the greenish lump where the chain had pinged his forehead. His wallet! Was it in the fucking car? On the way to Home Depot, had it fallen out of his pocket and under his seat? He imagined the wallet in the street beside the dead body, just sitting there for the cops. Sebastian patted down his dresser top. All his panic was now focused on the wallet. He fumbled through his sock drawer. The cops would find the body and there would be his driver's license and home address. He got down on his hands and knees and reached under the bed.

"Bastian?" Katya said.

"It's nothing."

"Fuck time is it?"

"Sleep."

He sat up and knocked his head on the bedside table, and Katya's reading lamp fell and so did her P. D. James novel. The nightlight in their daughter's room cast a glow across sleeping Nomi. On the coffee table, the stolen doorknob sat in its clear plastic packaging, next to his empty whiskey glass. *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* was on the couch, doing a split, its front cover a picture of clouds, its back full of

sky blue praise. We are all one, wrote Jonathan Garment, M.D. The oak breathes out, and we inhale it. We exhale and are absorbed by the tree. We share our genes with the earthworm. Sebastian pulled the cushions off the couch. He found pencils, quarters, playing cards, and hair elastics, but no wallet. He moved old newspapers off the kitchen table. On his desk were charts and binders and a printout of a PowerPoint presentation. There was the screwdriver on the Ikea organizer where the family kept its shoes, and there beside the screwdriver lay Sebastian's wallet. Idiot! He could have just covered the catch plate with a piece of duct tape. All he needed was a piece of tape! He could have thrown the bolt of the front door and covered the doorknob latch with a piece of tape, or put a piece of tape on the doorpost. He was on the witness stand. "I didn't mean..." Sebastian kicked the door. "My wife." He punched it.

"Daddy?" came a small voice at the top of the stairs.

Nomi's curls were matted to one side. Her skinny legs poked out of her nightdress, the one with the fading fairies and the marks from chocolate ice cream.

"What are you doing, Dads?"

Sebastian went up the stairs to her, and took her damp and cool little hand, and took her up to bed, and lay there beside her, listening to the city. His arm throbbed where it was injured. His head ached. "Present moment," he tried to tell himself. He'd argued with his wife so stupidly about Jonathan Garment. Katya took on regal calm when she was most pissed.

"It's just a way of saying, Sebastian." She kept her chin high as she spoke. "Just a way to let go."

"But what if we don't want to let go," he'd said. "What if we prefer clinging? I prefer clinging. Don't you?"

"I don't," she'd said. "No." Or maybe she'd said, "I don't know." But she'd lectured him on anxiety and then he'd called her crazy, and then he had said all those words that she had told him not to say. *Cancer*,

tumor, and *death*. He wished he hadn't said them, on this of all nights. And what had she said. Panic? He flinched, and in his mind he felt it: the contact of the bike against his front fender, the sound of the body scraping the top of his car.

"Daddy?" Nomi asked.

"We're fine," said Sebastian.

She shifted her hips. Her hair smelled of sweet shampoo.

Most nights when he put her to bed, Sebastian told stories about the Tooth Fairy and Hanukkah Harry. He'd forgotten to tell her one of those stories tonight, after all the bickering with Katya. Of course, they never let Nomi hear them bickering, and they never used the word "cancer" around her. Nomi didn't know exactly what was going on tomorrow, but the silence had its own effect. She felt the tension. Like a scent it got everywhere: in the sheets, in the walls, in her scrambled eggs.

In Sebastian's stories, the old couple lived together in a split-level house in Wyandanch, Long Island. The Tooth Fairy was named Chedeline, like Katya's mother, and Sebastian imitated the Tooth Fairy by using his mother-in-law's singsong voice. As the Tooth Fairy, Chedeline trotted the world, changing currencies and breaking large bills. Hanukkah Harry was paunchy and arrogant, like Sebastian's dad. He worked only eight days a year, but spent the rest of his time in his study, reading toy catalogs, which he referred to as "the literature of the field." Nomi wondered what the Tooth Fairy and Hanukkah Harry were doing for Thanksgiving. Sebastian said they weren't really doing anything, because this year Hanukkah fell in late November, and Harry was overwhelmed, busy, and tired.

"But what about Chedeline?" He could feel her anxiety in her fingers and legs. "She wants a party, doesn't she?"

"Oh." He kissed her beautiful forehead. "I think she's pretty tired, too. Go to sleep, Sweetie."

"Are you going to sleep?"

“Oh, yeah.”

He got into bed next to Katya. The clock read 2:49. He brought the sheet up to his chin, and he put his head on the pillow. He closed his eyes and imagined the man’s head under his wheel, the skull popping beneath the shaved scalp, the brains coming into the treads of his tires.

“I’m not,” Sebastian whispered.

“What?” said Katya.

“Shh.” He hadn’t known his voice would be audible. “Nothing. Relax, Babe.”

Katya settled back on her side of the bed. He turned over his pillow and put his face to the cooler side. Her bras after workouts left lines in the skin beneath her beautiful breasts. He imagined a scalpel tracing that curve, the layers of skin parting, the blood coming out.

“Oh, God,” he whispered.

He tried to pray. He thought of a football team linking hands, urging God to mess with their opponents’ last-minute field goal attempt. But God was no die-hard Sebastian Fishberger fan.

He imagined himself in a raincoat after serving his jail term, smoking a cigarette, tawdry love affairs in Alphabet City. His bald wife with her scarred chest vomited in the bathroom. He wanted her body to remain against time, sexy and warm and close. He reached out. Katya inched away. He felt her thigh through her thin pajamas, and he was possessed of it: the urge to take her, to snatch handfuls of Katya, to have her from behind—

“Sebastian!”

He apologized.

He lay on his back. He breathed and watched the ceiling swell. To calm his erection he thought of the least erotic vision he knew: Fox broadcaster Sean Hannity. He pictured Hannity’s frightened eyes, his massive hair, his liar’s smile. Sebastian put his hands on the cold plaster wall. A plane moved over Brooklyn. The cat moved heavily down the stairs.

She said, "What, honey?"

Had he spoken? He didn't think he'd said a thing. He said, "I'm sorry." He should call 911. If the man wasn't dead, the man needed help. Why hadn't he called 911?

He went downstairs. He picked up the phone. But to call now, and from the home phone, was to confess. He couldn't get arrested, not tonight. Who would take Nomi to school? On one end of their mantel was a small wooden sculpture of the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesha. On the other end sat a thin white ceramic Thai Buddha with arms aflame. Above the fireplace hung photographs of their grandparents, Katya's grandfather in black and white in military uniform, and pictures of little Nomi. The television in the hearth was a black flat screen. He put down the house phone. He picked up the doorknob. He struggled with its clear plastic packaging. He tried to open it up with a ballpoint pen. He stuck the pen in the hole from which the package had hung from the display rack. He tried to lever apart the two sides, but the pen popped out and stabbed him. "Shit!" He danced around the coffee table, cursing. He jumped. He stood at the sink and ran cold water on his arm. He'd drawn a big blue line on himself and gouged a hole on the hairless side of his forearm. On the hairy side was the bruise and the bloody gauze pad. Sebastian blotted the fresh blood with a handful of Kleenex. On his left arm was a crazy exclamation mark with a purple point. Then he got the poultry sheers from the knife block in the kitchen and used those to snip apart the packaging. Sebastian got down on his knees and took the screwdriver in hand. The lumpectomy would be successful. He'd be on that conference call. If the cops had been called to the accident, they'd be at his door any minute now. He'd left tracks, all those doors he'd scratched while driving.

The tip of his screwdriver trembled. Sebastian found the x at the head of the screw. His mind felt liquid. His hands were a tired old man's. He checked the instructions that came with the doorknob: *Rotates out-*

side rose make sleeve projecting be symmetrical around the door. Garment had a spiel about the workings of the human eye, how the wavelengths of light fluctuated and were never constant, and yet the mind invented colors, constant hues, like yellow and blue, and there was some argument as to whether a person could see a color for which he didn't have a name. The example was blue. The Greeks didn't have a word for blue, Garment said. That's why Homer called it "the wine-dark sea." But Sebastian had never seen a *blue* sea, not really. Maybe Greek wine, like the sea, was black or slate-colored, and didn't Poseidon sometimes have blue eyebrows in some traditions? Sebastian could remember the seat of the Greyhound bus in which he had read a book called *On Being Blue*, and he could remember the cover of the book, and the landscape flashing by the window, but he could not remember where he was traveling or a word that he had read. Sebastian tightened screws. He looked at the instructions one more time. *Push the boton before install back to inside knob.* Maybe he had only imagined it. Maybe there was no body in the street. Or maybe the bicyclist had awakened and taken his broken bike and gone away. *Projecting be symmetrical around door.* Sebastian closed and opened the front door. The stoop was icy on his feet. The wind blew the leaves on the branches of the sidewalk maple, and they trembled, and fell and scattered and collected into a bank alongside the wood that edged and framed the little tree. He closed the door. He tried to open it. The doorknob wouldn't turn.

There was a keyhole in the doorknob. He checked his pajama pockets.

"Fuck," muttered Sebastian. "Fuck shit!" He hadn't taken the key.

He'd stolen the wrong kind of lock. He didn't want a doorknob that locked! He'd have to go back to Home Depot tomorrow. He'd have to pay for this knob, and then he'd have to buy another one, and he'd have to get down on his knees in the front hall, after Katya's surgery, and instead of the conference call, he'd have to take out the screwdriver and

remove the fucking locking doorknob he had stolen. From the other side of the door, the cat meowed.

Through a gap at the side of the curtain to the closest window, Sebastian could see his book and his empty whiskey glass. He could see the clock. It was nearly five. He sat down barefoot on the cold stone steps. He put his head in his hands. He wasn't going to wake Katya, not now, no matter what. Let her sleep that half hour. He'd just stay out here, patiently. The cold blew through his pajama pants.

"Breathe," he told himself, and then he heard a police siren, coming closer.

Sebastian tried to keep his eyes closed, his legs crossed, his thumbs and forefingers in circles on his knees. The siren got louder. He opened his eyes. He could see the lights crossing Seventh Avenue. He would stand and present his wrists, and let them cuff him. He was on his feet and pounding the front door.

"Katya! Katya!" He could feel the collision in his hands. He could see the bald head of the bicyclist rising toward his windshield. "Katya!" He called. "Help!"

The siren flickered away, the sound snapped and stretched and then the cop car was gone, down the hill, two blocks away.

Sebastian could see the lights turning on in his neighbors' windows. An old woman in a wool cap sucked on a cigarette, kept her head down, and walked to work. From the avenue, he heard the squeaking brakes of a delivery truck. People were up and showering. Subways moved underground. In the distance, on the elevated BQE, traffic was thickening. Nurses changed shifts in hospitals, doctors in New Jersey were silencing their alarm clocks. In Manhattan, policemen poked nightsticks into homeless bundles on Fifth Avenue. Sebastian's father never slept. He was probably checking his blood pressure right now. And Chedeline in her bed in Connecticut was dreaming, maybe another nightmare. The drums were coming, the drums were coming. His wife was coming down the stairs.

Sebastian wanted to explain everything to Katya. He wanted to apologize for saying cancer, tumor, and death. He wanted to be forgiven—he could feel his anxiety rising, metastasizing, expanding. She opened the door. Katya was barefoot. She wore thin pajama pants, and a torn shirt for a top. He saw her face, tired and ashy and lined, heavy with the Ativan she'd taken to sleep, and heavy with early morning. He saw also the face he had first loved, Katya, his rock-and-roll girl. "Time to go to the hospital," she said.

LAURA MCCULLOUGH

Composition of Body :: Water Glass

The body is made
of elements, and we are mostly water,
but by elemental mass, we're really oxygen.
Oxygen is the most abundant molecule.

I am a molecule, bombarded by other molecules
colliding continuously and because we—
all of us as molecules in the vast ocean of reality—

have different velocities, we pelter, helter skelter,
which is random though less random than it sounds,
and has a name, Brownian Motion, the zig sagging

and ricocheting part of the rippling we sense across
the surfaces of all of our own water, and because we are
bodies of water submerged in bodies of water,

today, I woke near drowning and knew
if I opened my mouth, the song that would leave
would be both of science and sorrow, and what

would enter would be you. You all, the Other
and the *other* and the *other*, meaning, when
I finally opened my eyes, I would have a kind

of multi-bridged sight: multiple-hybridity,
the only surrender possible for me in my glass
of water trembling on the edge of a universe

we made together. In this way, I might float.

ERIC PANKEY

Small Works

For Lisa Weiss

The map's edge implies
A realm beyond it

Perhaps the unbearable
Proximity of the divine

::

What is that blank region
Called between *far* and *near*

We live in the conditional
Await transfer across the interim

::

The sun half aloft half submerged
Is like a child's drawing of the sun

Time slows and wobbles
Like a bullet through gelatin

::

The coordinates are superimposed
Over an arc of violet sky

From the present we hew
Toward a violet future

::

The day is a sheaf of drawings
The day is a notebook's privacies

Two vertical monoliths
Uphold a horizontal third

::

A seagrass meadow
Circles the patch reef

A greenish stain
Beneath the surface blues

::

The flame halo of re-entry
In not caused by friction

But by the compression of air
In front of the falling object

::

Through an anamoly of memory
The present tense is recalled

And I feel like I've been here before
Feel like I've been here before

::

A ghost grid floats on the surface
An abandoned net full of holes

In the offing a red hull bobs
A splintered wreck a derelict

::

At the heart of the square
A point is placed

Once conjoined
Twin rivers bypass each other

::

One can imagine the parallel lines
Continuing on forever

For now each hovers above the other
Held steady held apart

::

A body of water a bay
A nest of smaller islands

Where the earth curves
Away boats disappear

::

To draw the surface
Practice the lowercase cursive *l*

Let the linked loops
Pile up as a litany of waves

::

To stay cool we follow
The fort's shaded arcade of archways

Spiral stairs lead up
To an overview of the island

::

Each creek stream and river
Forgotten the rain itself forgotten

Beyond the shallows and shoals
An elegant austerity of seas

BRUCE SNIDER

Litany for My Father's Sperm

Within an hour most of the five million sperm from a man's ejaculate are dead.

O little hounds
of Delphi. O
dew of youth.
This one carried
ancient fear and sorrow.
It chewed its wormy lips.
This one was
God's absence.
One beat of the hard
old heart. It was
guesswork and the
passage out. It would
have loved peanuts.
It would have
cried itself to sleep.
This one slept
when it should have
woken. I clawed my way
into the world on its back.
This one nursed
at shadows, shaking

its phantom limbs,
Job alone in the desert,
Moses in his basket freed.
O endless river
of motion,
little Winnebagos
on creation's road,
you're all lightning
and volcano, all
whip-tailed fallout
from the Big Bang.
What do you know
of what it means
to rest? You're
what dies and goes on
dying, blue jays rolling
zeros in the nest.

BRUCE SNIDER

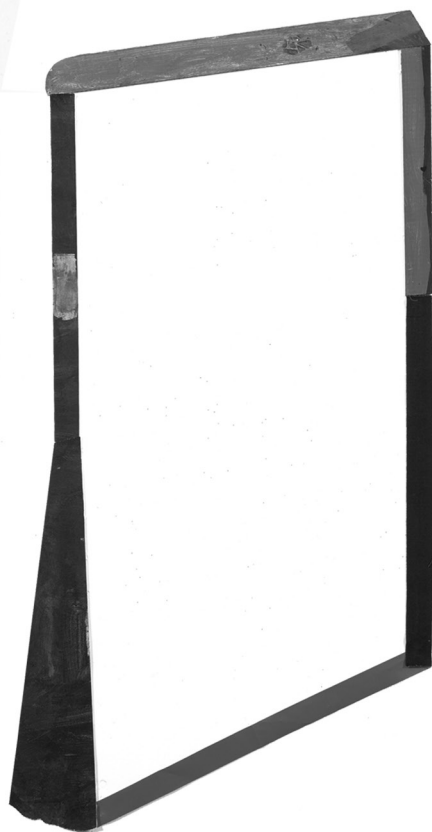
Elegy for the Girl I Was

For the first six weeks following conception, all human embryos develop as female.

Little girl of my unbecoming, your ghost moves
through me. You, a kink in my walk, tip-toe through
the halls of me, vanishing down the lane. Girl of
my thousand selves, let the black waters wash over
you, who knew neither boy nor man, who
knows the graveyard I have always been, sealed
crypt of me, your ending, where it all began. Little
Ghost, remember me—mother: *almost, almost*. O paper
onto which I'm written, script I won't learn. Fate
folds, unfolds your cold limbs. Into my warm
marrow, you reach—cell of my cells—and burn.



Vincent Hawkins, *Untitled*, 2014,
acrylic on board, 90 cm x 50 cm.



Vincent Hawkins, *Untitled Plastic*, 2014, acrylic on
canvas and cardboard packaging, 91 cm x 59 cm.



Vincent Hawkins, *Press*, 2016, gouache on paper, 40 cm x 37 cm.



TOP: **Vincent Hawkins,**
Orange Tip, 2015, gouache
on paper, 32 cm x 28 cm.

BOTTOM: **Vincent Hawkins,**
Early Listener, 2014, acrylic
on cardboard packaging,
66 cm x 32 cm.

OVERLEAF: Studio
Installation, 2016.







CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY

Science & Eschatology

I swear that whatever
it all has to do with stars,
halos, hosannas, or the blue
firmament of belief,
it doesn't matter much anymore
what page you turn to
given the trimmed fuses
of our aggregate dust,
the cosmic grit
and reduced fractions
of our dissipating form.

Some rough-necked seraphim
lost track of us in gravity, misplaced
the roadmap, home port, base line of light
blacking-out above the highest Himalayas,
and left us here below where it's all a scrum
of car parts and plastic bottles,
some stellar refraction,
and rain that never falls,
the last motionless notes of hope
evaporating into the rusting sun....

Our irresolute atoms float away,
 freeloading subatomic particles
 collide one part per billion,
 defying any use identifiable on earth
 as far back as you care to go
 to the first mitochondrial promise
 incipient in our blood as we crawled out
 looking up from beneath the sea.

Ask whatever you want about
 a resting place for the righteous—
 the first clue to futility is that
 you don't have one name
 of anyone living in that village
 this side of the crossroads of the dark
 where, for all you know, the trees wander
 the back streets after midnight
 with a scrabble of insurgent dogs.
 Not a breath of wind to support
 one leaf of speculation
 for more than a minute.
 And when you sit down and look,
 the top drawer is still empty
 of any scraps of significance
 or supporting evidence....

Your last metaphysical thought
 was let go along the beach
 picking up moon-eyed quartz
 and bruise-colored cowries
 surrendered by the tides

despite the ineluctable
 expectations of the sea...
 dolphins swim through
 the night half-asleep,
 and your head, it barely bobs
 above the diminishing
 spindrift of the years.

The night air blows in off
 the cosmic reefs—candlelight,
 incense, they change nothing.
 You take what you're given:
 the reciprocation
 of the trees, the blue strata
 of evening going to ash,
 a residual emptiness
 we keep looking out at....

If there is something
 on the other side, chances are
 it's a parallel world
 all balled up in string—
 eleven dimensions
 beyond understanding, something
 no one will ever see.
 And if, as current thinking
 has it, it's endless, the contagion of stars
 will just continue to pile up
 across the dark—nothing there
 but their long-term deaths
 to fill in the equation of belief.

EILEEN POLLACK

Righteous Gentile

WHEN I TOLD MY MOTHER I was dating a Polish Catholic, the abyss that opened in our conversation was so deep and dark I could see three generations of our family tumble in. Hadn't my grandparents fled Poland to escape the brutish peasants who got drunk and murdered Jews? Didn't all Poles rat out their Jewish neighbors, or nod approvingly as the Nazis led them to waiting vans?

My boyfriend fit none of my mother's stereotypes. The director of an economic development institute at the university where we both worked, Marian was far better read than most writers I knew. When the High Holidays rolled around, he donned his *kippah* and accompanied me to services, then suggested we walk to the river and toss in our sin-laden crumbs for *tasblich*. The local Hadassah awarded him the designation "Righteous Gentile" for organizing the yearly Holocaust symposium and editing a magazine in which he took his fellow Poles to task for their anti-Semitism. In one of our first email exchanges, I admitted I couldn't help but be turned on by the idea of kissing a Righteous Gentile.

And yet, I shared my mother's fears. Marian had been raised by parents who viewed the Jews as conniving financiers and Communists. His

parents had been imprisoned in Nazi jails, yet his father sat in the basement listening to an anti-Semitic Polish radio station and was anything but pleased to see his son dating a Jewish divorcee. When Marian took me to a Polish fair in suburban Detroit, the sight of the towering steel crucifix, the sour smell of kielbasas and Okocim beer, and the oompah-pah of the accordion to which the fairgoers were dancing a polka induced a panic.

Even so, I was determined to prove my mother wrong. As Marian and I spent more time together, I saw a side of Polish culture few Jews encounter. Whenever a Polish writer or musician visited Ann Arbor, the auditorium filled up with the local intelligentsia. I learned to pronounce Polish names, and even to spell them. (Once, when Marian and I showed up at a resort in northern Michigan, he fumed at the way he was registered at the desk, until I confessed that I had been the one to misspell his last name.) On Wigilia, I stood with head bowed while Marian's mother recited the Lord's Prayer in Polish. Then I took one of the Styrofoam-light *Oplatki* crackers embossed with the Holy Family and shared pieces with Marian's brother and father.

Finally, he asked me to travel with him to Poland. He had been born in a Displaced Persons camp in Munich, Germany, after the war and brought to America by his parents in 1951, when he was three. But he traveled to Poland often. During the Communist years, he smuggled assistance to Solidarity. (We joked that he single-handedly brought down the Iron Curtain.) Now, he spent several weeks a year visiting his relatives, keeping up his fluency in the language, and immersing himself in Polish culture. I had no desire to visit Poland. But I knew if I wanted to remain his partner, I would need to accompany him on future trips. What I was less sure of was whether I could directly confront the reality that the man I loved was a Catholic Pole.

The journey started well. Marian's friends picked us up at the airport and drove us past the dismal Soviet-era apartment blocks that surround

Warsaw to a house so modern and luxurious my friends in Ann Arbor, or even New York, would have coveted it. Walking the cobbled streets, I felt that pressure behind my eyes that nothing but a quaint, graceful European city seems able to evoke—an effect intensified by the knowledge that eighty percent of the buildings I saw were replicas of the originals, Warsaw having been dynamited by the retreating Germans.

I was surprised how many Polish words I understood, the equivalent of their Yiddish counterparts. Ditto the tastes and smells of the heavy, fatty, fried, dill-and-garlic-seasoned foods, which, with the exception of the kielbasa, could have been found in the dining room of my grandparents' Catskills hotel. In fact, my inability to stop shoveling in all that familiar and enticing Polish food almost spelled my doom. I previously had undergone three abdominal surgeries, and my intestines were knotted by scar tissue. Often, when I travel, my digestive system shuts down and I become what my father would have called *ongeshtopt*, which in Yiddish means “all dammed up.”

The condition is made worse by stress. Marian had already visited Auschwitz six times—his family had lost many relatives at Auschwitz, while as far as I know, my family lost none—and we agreed it wouldn't do our relationship any good to turn our trip into the death-camp march most American Jews follow. But how could I not see the Warsaw Ghetto—or rather, the residential neighborhood where the ghetto once stood? The Poles weren't the ones to create that ghetto. But they didn't come to the aid of their starving, disease-ridden fellow citizens, not even when the Jews staged a suicidal uprising against their common enemy.

As if my intestines weren't knotted enough, I kept noticing the Jewish stars embedded in the town's graffiti. When I asked Marian to translate a slogan etched on a bus, he admitted that a citizen was venting his frustration with the prime minister, Donald Tusk, by labeling Tusk's economic policies “Jewish chicanery,” a telling gripe considering that Tusk is not a

Jew. On our drive to Krakow, we saw spray-painted slurs accusing the players on rival soccer teams of being dirty Yids—an odd complaint given that virtually no Jews remain in Poland. It was as if enemies of the Detroit Tigers had defaced the team's posters by spray-painting an *N* over the *T* and adding a second *g*, even though no black people played for the team, or remained anywhere in the United States.

In Krakow, Marian and I checked into the quaint apartment he had rented. Guilty about having bypassed Auschwitz, I requested we spend the few hours before dinner touring the Jewish quarter. The Kazimierz was even eerier than the Warsaw Ghetto; here, the shops, apartment buildings, and synagogues still stand, though creepily devoid of Jews. In recent years, Judaism has become trendy. Poles who once would have cursed you for intimating they had a drop of Jewish blood now go to great lengths to claim their Jewish ancestry. The busloads of American Jews who visit Auschwitz stop in Krakow, so a bustling business in Jewish kitsch has grown up in the Kazimierz. Tourists can dine at Jewish-style restaurants owned by non-Jewish Poles. They can attend Jewish cultural festivals, study Yiddish, and listen to Klezmer music played by non-Jewish musicians. They even can buy hand-carved wooden dolls in the shape of *davening* rabbis and pious old *balebustas*.

I told myself we Americans had done much the same thing to Native Americans—tried to wipe them out, then turned them into objects of fascination. And yet, the kitschy Jew-dolls pissed me off. For one thing, I had seen exactly such a doll in Marian's bedroom back home. Bought on a previous trip, it had been carved by a craftsman with higher artistic standards than most of his fellow hucksters. Also, Marian knew a graduate student who was writing her dissertation on these figurines, which have a long history in Polish folk art. (Apparently, a big-nosed rabbi holding a sack of money might bring the owner his own good fortune.)

And yet, here in a Jewish Quarter devoid of Jews, the sight of these dolls, combined with the memory of having seen one on Marian's shelf

back home, made me feel like a doll myself, something to be fetishized and collected. How could Marian not have noticed the graffiti on Poland's walls? How could his father still believe the Jews caused Poland's downfall? And, the question I couldn't stop asking: if we had lived in this country three quarters of a century earlier, would Marian have saved me from the Nazis? Would I have saved him? Would I have risked my life to protect a Pole, even if he had been my lover? It wasn't as if I expected the Nazis to rise again. But I needed to know the person I loved wouldn't have blindly gone along with the crowd. Easy enough to earn the designation "Righteous Gentile" in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I needed to be sure Marian would have been one of the very few Poles who disobeyed the Nazis to save the Jews.

I refused to eat at the fake Jewish restaurants, and I was afraid another bite of Polish food would kill me, so Marian treated me to an Italian bistro. We strolled back to our apartment. Exhausted from our long day, Marian conked out. I tried to sleep, but the cramps I had been ignoring all week grew so excruciating I hurried to the bathroom, only to pass out on the floor. Near dawn, Marian came in and found me barely able to breathe. He ran to the street to call an ambulance, then came running back and led me from our apartment down the narrow alley past three locked gates to wait. Crippled by pain and convulsed by the most intense nausea I ever experienced, I slumped to the cobblestones and lay curled on my side until the ambulance came.

Deducing I was an American, the driver promised he would take me to "best hospital in Krakow." I was grateful for this consideration, but I couldn't help but be dismayed when the facilities turned out to be as primitive as something out of *Doctor Zhivago*. The emergency room was so crowded that even though I was screaming in pain, the admissions clerk told Marian I would need to wait. "Scream louder," Marian whispered, and, finally, the orderlies rolled me into a vast room filled with cots occupied by heavysset older men, many with their privates hanging

out. The doctors spoke very little English. If not for Marian, I wouldn't have been able to make myself understood. I begged for drugs, but I was informed no medications could be administered until the cause of my pain had been determined. A nurse wheeled me through a maze of primeval corridors to a cavernous exam room, where an alarmingly somber gynecologist jammed her ultrasound probe up my vagina and studied the images it produced on a computer that resembled my ancient Apple IIe. A boy who looked young enough to be in elementary school translated her instructions.

"Has anyone ever say you have very advance cancer of uterus?" the boy inquired. When he saw my expression, he added cheerfully: "Not to worry! Very, very serious cancer, but we surgery you tomorrow and you maybe live many month!" I tried to convince the gynecologist she was seeing a benign fibroid my OB in Ann Arbor had been ignoring for years, but she pooh-poohed my diagnosis. "She know is difficult to believe," her sidekick said, "but very sad is true."

When I promised I would have my uterus examined the moment I got back to the United States, the surgeon said she couldn't allow me to leave the hospital. She would "surgery me tomorrow," she repeated. Then she pointed me in the direction of the ER and instructed me to walk back to wait.

Bent ninety degrees and shivering, I wandered the desolate corridors until I found my way back to the emergency room, where I slipped into the crowded waiting room and begged Marian to swear he wouldn't allow the doctors to operate on me for cancer.

"Cancer?" he said. "You have cancer?"

"No, no," I said, "I *don't* have cancer. They only *think* I have cancer. Swear to me you won't let them operate!" I could see he wasn't sure. How many of us would believe a layperson, even a layperson we love, rather than believe her doctors? Only when I had extracted his promise that he would, under no circumstances, allow the doctors here to "surgery me" for cancer did I head back to the hellish ER.

Hours later, Marian convinced the doctors to move me to a ward for patients with gastrointestinal disorders rather than the ward for patients dying of uterine cancer. My room housed five other women, each of us assigned to a primitive metal cot against a wall. Whoever had occupied my cot before had tacked above it two images of the Black Madonna, an icon that graced the nearby monastery at Czestochowa. An object of veneration for Poles, the six-hundred-year-old painting reportedly had saved the country from invading Swedes. Another legend had it that she rescued the church from a catastrophic fire, which is how she and Jesus had ended up with black skin. Marian asked if I wanted him to take down the cards. But with my five Catholic roommates watching, I told him no. I didn't really think they would turn me over to the Gestapo. But I decided not to tempt fate by removing the images of a woman everyone believed to be the mother of God and the most powerful healer in the universe. Besides, she and her son were the only two Jews in the room but me.

At last, the nurses hooked me to a morphine drip. The drugs allowed me to sleep. But in the middle of the night, the laxatives in my IV started to work. The nurse on call unhooked me from my tubes, but she indicated it was up to me to make my way to the bathroom. Barefoot, half blind without my glasses, I wobbled down the infinitely long corridor, only to reach a communal bathroom so filthy I could barely withstand the stench. Despite my lack of slippers, I made my way across a floor puddled with urine and feces and sank to the toilet, where I remained for hours, convulsed with diarrhea. When I discovered the bathroom had no toilet paper, I sat weeping until dawn, when a kindly older woman came in and took pity on me by sharing hers. As I later found out, the hospital couldn't afford luxuries such as toilet paper, soap, or paper towels. Patients were expected to bring their own.

You can imagine how overjoyed I was to see Marian, who ran out to purchase my supplies. He helped me wash my face and brush my teeth. Then, as I lay recovering from this ordeal, he chatted to my roommates in Polish, explaining who I was and how I had come to be in such a

sorry state. Goodness! they said. Wasn't I lucky to have been admitted to one of Poland's finest hospitals! Most of them had made their appointments months in advance and were looking forward to a vacation from all the cooking and cleaning for which they normally were responsible. Several of the women patted their heads and motioned in my direction, and Marian said they envied my curly hair.

"You mean my Jew hair?" I whispered.

Yes, well, he said, these women had never seen a Jew. But they wished they could get their boringly straight Polish hair to look like mine.

The weather grew unseasonably hot, and the nurses opened the windows. Not only did the flies buzz in, anyone could have climbed in from the street. Without curtains, the cots were exposed to view; when a doctor conducted an exam, the rest of us could hear and see whatever there was to hear and see. After visiting hours, when everyone's boyfriends, husbands, sisters, mothers, and children left, my roommates passed the time comparing maladies in Polish, watching Polish soap operas, and reading Polish magazines. The reservation on our apartment had run out, and Marian needed to hurry around Krakow to find another place to stay; reluctant to ask him to run more errands, I made do with the glossy English-language edition of a fan magazine about Michael Jackson one of the women had found for me to read.

After three or four days, I managed to choke down a few bites of bread and drink a few sips of water. The doctors interpreted this as a sign I was strong enough for the surgery to remove my uterus, while I tried to use my newfound ability to eat and drink as evidence that I was healthy enough to check out of Hospital Dostoevsky. After heated negotiations, Marian persuaded the doctors I could leave, but only if I agreed to undergo an endoscopy. Sadly, the hospital could afford to provide the services of an anesthesiologist only on Thursdays, and today was Monday.

I have a terrible gag reflex. The thought of a doctor jamming a length of metal tubing down my throat all the way to my intestines made me

shake. But I was even more frightened of staying in a hospital where toilet paper and soap were considered luxuries and everyone seemed determined to “surgery me” for a cancer I didn’t have. I don’t mean to imply the Polish doctors and nurses were sadistic or incompetent. I was getting far better care than most Poles. And I had suffered equally appalling misdiagnoses at the hands of American doctors. Yet lying helpless in a city that once had been home to 60,000 Jews, of whom only 2,000 survived the war, I couldn’t help but grow more paranoid.

Marian supported me through the corridors to the wing where I would undergo my endoscopy. We took our place at the end of a very long line of patients, many of whom were elderly or frail, or both. At last, it was my turn to enter the tiny room where the doctor and his assistant waited. I tried to relax, but as they lowered me to the table and inserted the thick metal snake in my mouth and began unwinding it down my throat, I panicked. The doctor and his assistant pinned me down and kept jamming in the tube. I flailed my arms, attempting to throw them off, but Marian joined in and held me.

That’s when I lost all self-control. He was no better than the rest! If his fellow countrymen wanted to torture me, he would take their side and hold me down! I tried to struggle harder. Finally, Marian saw the terror in my eyes and ordered the doctor to stop. When he didn’t, Marian pulled the two men off me, lifted me in his arms, and carried me from the room. It was his fault I had come to Poland. But it wasn’t his fault I had gotten sick, or that the best hospital in Krakow was so poorly equipped. For a while, he had taken his countrymen’s orders. But in the end, he had thrown them aside and saved me.

As we passed the line of feeble old people waiting their turn, I could see how frightened they were. If the healthy young American needed to be carried from the room in the arms of her strong Polish-American husband, how would they, so much older and frailer, be able to endure what was in store for them?

I doubt the endoscope descended low enough to allow the doctors to make out anything in my intestines. But they told me I could check out—so long as I paid my bill. By American standards, the amount I owed was laughably small. (If I had been a Pole, I wouldn't have owed anything.) And my insurance back home would reimburse me. (A week later, my gastroenterologist confirmed that I had been suffering from an intestinal blockage, while my gynecologist looked at the grainy ultrasound and said there could have been an old shoe in my uterus and the doctors wouldn't have been able to determine what it was.) But the hospital demanded we pay in cash, and so, on a sweltering afternoon, Marian ran from one ATM to the next to extract enough zlotys to pay my ransom.

At last, the time came to pack my few belongings. I surprised myself by taking down one of the cards of the Black Madonna. When Marian asked why, I couldn't say. I didn't want a reminder of my ordeal. But the Madonna had endured ordeals of her own, and seeing her above my bed had brought me comfort. In the old days, I might even have credited her for my miraculous cure from what the doctors had assured me was a fatal case of uterine cancer. But mostly I took the card because it would offer me a false identity in a world in which it is still sometimes dangerous to be a Jew.

Marian carried my bag and held my arm as we preceded step by tiny shuffling step down a long street to a corner where we could find a taxi. He helped me up the stairs to our new apartment, then sat beside my bed while I took a nap. When I awoke, I was ravenous. The doctors had warned that trying to consume anything fatty or spicy or fried would land me right back in the hospital. Boiled chicken, they advised, along with the broth in which the chicken had been boiled. I laughed. Chicken soup! Exactly what my much-loved and long-deceased Polish grandmother would have prescribed. But where in Krakow would we find boiled chicken? As we hobbled past the cafés lining the main square, we saw nothing but couples dining on French, Italian, Indian, and Chinese

food. At the more traditional Polish restaurants, the menus listed the usual sausages, fried cabbage, potato pancakes, and pierogies.

In an alley off the main square, I stopped, so exhausted I needed to slump against the wall. I was about to tell Marian that he should go on without me when he noticed a plaque on the wall. There, in the basement of the building against which I leaned, a division of the Polish underground called the Zegota had schemed to provide Polish Jews with false documents and hiding places. Because of the Zegota, some 4,000 Polish Jews had survived the war.

“Look,” Marian said. “There’s a restaurant around the back. This building used to be good to the Jews. Do you want to go in and try it?”

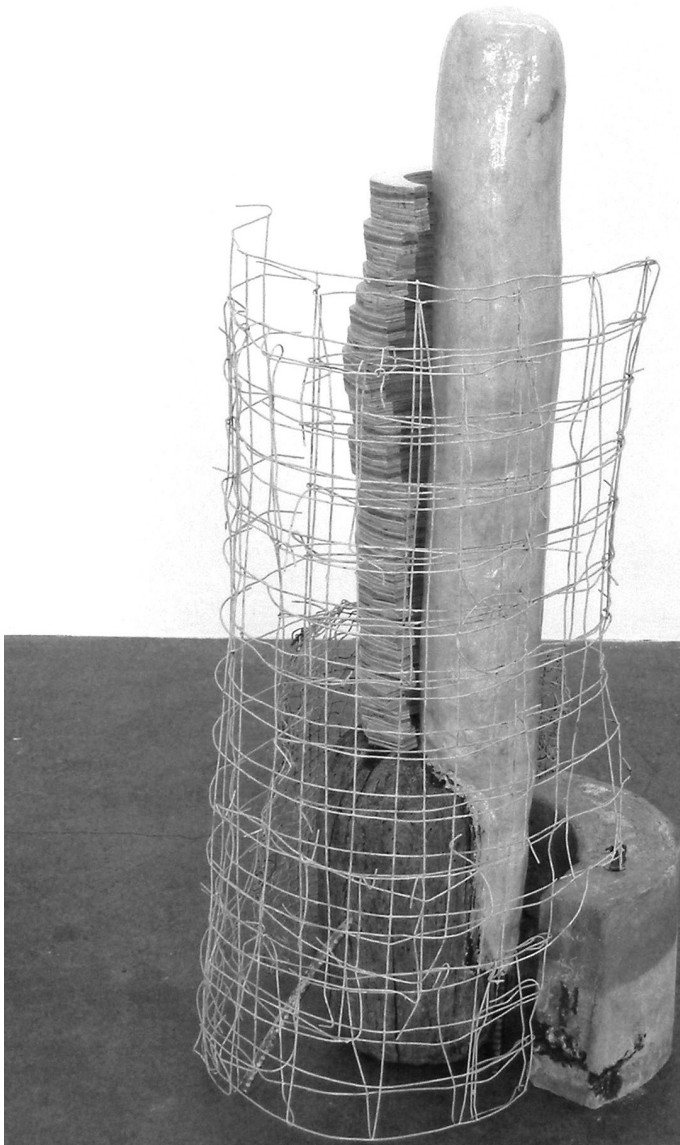
The shabby café looked as if it hadn’t changed since the 1930s. The waitresses were cleaning up from the evening meal. But Marian said a few words in Polish, and the hostess nodded and held up a finger. They did indeed have boiled chicken on the menu. But there was only a single serving left. Did we want the cook to save it?

“*Tak!*” Marian told her. Yes! Thank you! “*Dziękuję!*”

The waitress ushered us to a seat, then brought out a cup of chicken soup so comforting it brought tears to my eyes. When the soup was gone, she returned with a domed silver plate such as the ones we used to use in the dining room at my family’s Catskills hotel. When I lifted the lid, I saw exactly what I would have seen when I ate there as a child—the same breast of boiled chicken, the same boiled potato, the same waxy white beans. It was the blandest, whitest, most delicious meal I had ever eaten.

“So,” Marian said, “was I right? Is this building good for the Jews?”

“Yes,” I said. “This building is good for the Jews.” I took another bite. “And so are you.”



David McDonald, *Self Portrait (Visible Self)*, 2011, cement, wood, hydrocal, metal, enamel paint, 35 in. x 18 in. x 12 in. Private collection, Los Angeles.



David McDonald, *Self Portrait (Protected Self)*, 2011, cement, wood, hydrocal, rebar, cardboard, enamel paint, 36 in. x 14 in. x 15 in. Private collection, Seattle.



David McDonald, *Casting Amongst the Sands #20*, 2015, hydrocal, pigment, sand, varnish, 10 in. x 5 in. x 4 in. Courtesy David B. Smith Gallery, Denver.



David McDonald, *Casting Amongst the Sands #22*, 2015, hydrocal, pigment, sand, varnish, 6 1/2 in. x 6 in. x 5 in. Courtesy the artist.



David McDonald, *Casting Amongst the Sands #51*, 2015, hydrocal, pigment, wire, sand, varnish, 7 in. x 4 in. x 4 in. Courtesy the David B. Smith Gallery, Denver.



David McDonald, *Falls*, 2015, hydrocal, pigment, enamel, sand, metal, 21 in. x 12 in. x 12 in.
Private Collection, Courtesy Peter Blake Gallery, Laguna Beach.

STUART GELZER

Immigrants

FIVE DAYS BEFORE Marie and I move away from New York, the packing disorder has already reached the point where it takes me a few seconds to figure out how to get to the ringing phone.

“Stiuart, this is Zaza M__shvili. Do you remember me?”

No face comes to mind, but his name and his accent, starting with the extra vowel in my name, tell me enough: a Georgian. I swallow hard and sit down on a short stack of moving boxes. “Who?”

“Zaza, singer from Rustavi Ensemble.”

Now I remember him: tough-looking but with a nice smile, a squared-off young man I met a few times when I sat in on the Rustavi Ensemble’s rehearsals in Tbilisi. I remember that this Zaza had a sweet clear tenor voice, but I never had a real conversation with him, and I’m surprised now to learn that he can produce even a little bit of English.

“Zaza!” I exclaim with what I hope sounds like enthusiasm, while I wonder silently how he came by my number. “Where are you?” But I already know: the connection is dreadfully good.

He’s in Brighton Beach. He arrived at JFK last night, and he’s looking for a job and an apartment. Right now he’s staying at a very expensive

place, and he needs to move out before he uses up all his money. I put together this story mostly from the scattered islands of English in a ten-minute sea of half-comprehensible Georgian.

"Wow. I wish I could help you, but we're moving in a few days ourselves, and the house is already mostly packed." It's now Thursday; we leave for Virginia on Tuesday.

"What? Wait one minute." Taken beyond his English vocabulary, Zaza puts the receiver down for a while so he can use both hands to thumb through his dictionary. "Oh. Very bad for me."

But very good for me. I say, "Well, even if I can't help you, I may be able to think of someone who can, so give me your number there." And I fervently wish him lots of the very best luck before I hang up.

That's midafternoon. In spite of what I told Zaza, I don't really know anyone who can help him, and for a few hours after his call I don't give him or his problems any further attention. But as time goes on and evening approaches, I find myself thinking repeatedly about the countless Georgians, in big cities and tiny mountain villages, who have taken me into their homes and given me everything when they had almost nothing to begin with. It's uncomfortable to recall how many times I've enjoyed the benefits of a culture that carries out the sacred mission of hospitality with terrifying potlatch thoroughness.

I also think about my own father, an immigrant to this country at the age of seventeen, stepping off a ship in New York with not a single word of English and with exactly enough money to buy a one-way train ticket to a cousin's farm in Indiana. In short, I get sentimental.

Over dinner Marie and I agree that I should call Zaza and offer him camping space for a couple of days. "Just for a couple of days," we tell each other, "until he finds his feet."

The number Zaza gave me reaches a pay phone in some kind of boardinghouse: I have to speak pidgin Georgian to half a dozen people,

including a couple of other Zazas, before I get him. “Zaza, have you found a place to stay yet?”

“Thank you, Stiuart, thank you.”

“What? Zaza, listen, why don’t you come here for a couple of days?”

“I understand. You are good man, and your wife is good woman.”

A wiser man than I am would have noticed at this point that Zaza thanked me before I made the offer, suggesting that he’s already a step ahead of me, but I dismiss it as mere quaint confusion.

I start to give him subway directions to Park Slope, but he says he has too many bags to take on the subway. “Stiuart, have you car?” I say I’ll call a taxi service, and we have a pleasant little argument in which each of us insists on paying for the cab.

I give the dispatcher elaborate instructions, but I don’t need to; when the car pulls up to my building, Zaza and the driver are jabbering away in Russian (it’s a Brighton Beach car service). We embrace warmly. I try to pay the driver but Zaza has already done it. We drag his massive duffel bags up to the third floor. Under the living room light he looks like what he is, a thirty-year-old Georgian airlifted to America: millimeter-long hair, bad teeth, olive-drab polyester clothes, pack of Marlboros clenched in his fist, mischievous unpredictable sparkling glance that never stops taking things in and assessing the world. He also looks like he hasn’t bathed or slept in a number of long, hot days. He kisses Marie’s hand. He declines all refreshment except a glass of cold water. He looks around at the packing chaos, nods as if he is only now ready—reluctantly—to believe my story, and practices his new English word: “Moooving.” And thus begin the Zaza Days.

What with packing, we’ve been getting short sleep for almost a week, and our eyes are now dropping shut, so Zaza only keeps us awake three hours past our bedtime. He slipped through U.S. immigration at JFK on a forged three-month visitor’s visa, accompanied by a fake letter

from a sponsor inviting him here and taking responsibility for him. The sponsor is a real person in suburban Connecticut, though unacquainted with Zaza and probably with Georgia—and certainly unaware that his name, address, and forged signature have somehow found their way onto a legally binding letter in Tbilisi. A second forged letter, this one from an employer in Georgia attesting to Zaza's nonexistent job and mentioning his nonexistent wife and small children, is designed to persuade skeptical immigration officials that Zaza has ties in Georgia strong enough to bring him home when his visa expires. The whole dossier cost Zaza two hundred dollars—a major investment.

He spent his first night in America at the place I phoned, a Brighton Beach flophouse for illegal immigrants: sixteen men and women, all Georgians, in two rooms, for ten dollars apiece a night. Zaza reaches into the breast pocket of his shirt and pulls out all the money he has—his entire wealth. He counts it in front of us: two hundred and eighty-seven dollars. "If I stay in Brighton Beach, soon no money." He drifts into Georgian to curse the landlord (a Russian immigrant himself) for getting rich off the last desperate pennies of illegals with no recourse against him.

Zaza's plan is to find a job, then an apartment, and eventually an American wife. What kind of job, without work papers? "Any job, I do any job. Clean floor, work petrol station, any job." For the rest of his life? "Ah, for life! No, Stiuart, I am singer, good singer. I am in Tbilisi Conservatory, Rustavi Ensemble. Good singer. When I know English good, I go to Tchicago, sing with James Brown. I sing bliues."

I shake my head and point to my pursed lips. "Blues."

"Bliues."

"Blooos."

"Bliooos."

That goes on for a while, so Marie has time to get up and put sheets on the sofa. As we stagger off to our own bed, Zaza offers one last

thought: he has a job lined up for tomorrow, a Georgian connection. Do we know how to go in metro to Flushing? And he must without fail be there by eight a.m.

It's almost three as I set the alarm for six. Forbidden to smoke in the apartment, Zaza takes his Marlboros down to the sidewalk after promising solemnly not to leave the street door open behind him. Then Marie and I lie on our bed and listen while Zaza takes a shower that lasts from three until four-thirty. Soon thereafter we're all up again. In spite of his protests I walk him the five blocks to the subway—easier than explaining the way. I've never been out on my own street at this hour and it's a revelation: clean, oddly streamlined with all the metal shutters still down, wonderfully devoid of traffic.

In spite of the short night, I'm filled with a happy glow: this Zaza is turning out okay, he has a sense of humor, he clearly has whatever oomph it takes to have found work of any kind on his second full day in America, and he says he has numerous leads for another place to stay. I think again of my father, stepping ashore to a new life in the New World, and almost get a lump in my throat as I picture the small but vital part I myself am now playing in the never-ending American saga of *How We Came to Be Who We Are*.

I'm so caught up that, as we walk, for the first time I examine Zaza a little protectively. He isn't exactly dressed for a day of manual labor. He's wearing plastic flip-flops that might have started out as bedroom slippers. His entire fortune, his two hundred and eighty-seven dollars, is stuffed loose down the front of his pants—actually my pants, since he doesn't own anything except polyester dress pants and has borrowed a pair of denim work shorts from me. He has on yesterday's olive polyester dress shirt, now entirely unbuttoned. His curly red-blond belly-button hair is already damp from the heat of the day.

He must see something in my expression. "It's normal to close shirt in America?"

“Yeah, it’s normal.”

He buttons exactly one button.

“Also, is it necessary for you to carry your entire wad of money with you on the subway? It’s the G line, for God’s sake! And if you carry it like that, how can it fail to fall out of your pants leg during the day?”

He grabs my gesticulating hand near the wrist—a grasp he means affectionately but that instead reminds me how careful Americans are not to touch each other. “Stiuart, don’t worry, please. I come from Tbilisi, where are many bad mens. I’m not farmer.”

He releases me and we walk on. He pulls his mashed pack of Marlboros out of his shirt pocket, whisks one into his mouth, then suddenly stops cold. “Is okay to smoke in street?”

As part of the process of leaving New York, we’re shopping for a car for the first time in our lives. Long before Zaza showed up we arranged to spend our last Friday afternoon and Saturday morning with Marie’s sister and her husband in suburban New Jersey, visiting used car lots. So we give Zaza the spare house keys before he goes off to his mystery job. We also put labels in pidgin Georgian in my childish Georgian handwriting on the random leftovers in the fridge: *Bean soup—eat me*, and so forth.

All afternoon we wander past rows of used cars in sun-baked lots along Route 28. We don’t find anything good, and long before the end we’re exhausted, but at bedtime I can’t sleep. Finally, I sit up and say to Marie, “Are we completely nuts? We gave our house keys to a virtual stranger, a man I hadn’t spoken to for more than five minutes in my life before he showed up yesterday.”

Marie says, “Sometimes you just have to trust people.”

“I know that, and I feel guilty thinking this way, but this guy has false papers and he’s proud of it.”

“That’s different. That’s cheating the government, not your friends. He grew up under Communism, so to him the government—any government—is the enemy and deserves to be cheated.”

"I understand that too, but everything we own is already conveniently packed in boxes. As soon as we were gone he brought his Georgian pals back to our house with a truck, and together in about half an hour they took it all. We're going to go home tomorrow and find our house absolutely empty. The cat will be huddled in some corner, wondering where everything went."

"Call him up. I bet he's sitting watching American television."

"He may be watching our television, but is he watching it in our house?"

I call our number. Somehow the ring sounds more echo-y than usual. The answering machine picks up, so at least he hasn't stolen that. I hang up.

"He only had two hundred and eighty-seven dollars. Computers, stereo, clothes, jewelry, all packed and ready to go—it's our own fault for tempting him."

"Come to bed. What else can you do? If he robbed us we'll find out soon enough tomorrow."

Meanwhile, here's what actually happens: Zaza finds his way to Flushing without losing his wad of cash. He and a crew of half a dozen other men under the direction of his Georgian contact spend the whole day toting several hundred boxes of electronic equipment ("twenty, thirty very big TV, many compact disc machine") from a storage locker to otherwise empty bedrooms in a fancy Long Island mansion ("big plant, fish swimming, many nice furniture, so many big picture"). The owner is not Georgian or Russian, but speaks English poorly. He pays them in cash and tips them nicely. His girlfriend doesn't wear very much and ignores them the entire day as they traipse through.

Zaza gets back to Park Slope in the evening, again without losing his money. He even finds our building, but the keys "do not work." He sits on the curb until four a.m., when neighbors down the street

coming home late—people unknown to me—take pity on him and let him sleep on their couch. Now, our block is almost entirely Dominican, many of them originally from the same small town, and, along with worse English than Zaza's, many of the older generation retain the old-fashioned neighborly ways of a Caribbean backwater, but still: I believe this story when I hear it only because it's too strange to have been made up. Maybe it's the flip-flop bedroom slippers that made Zaza look harmless. In any case, he sleeps late on the nameless Samaritans' couch, and shows up at our house again after we ourselves come home. (Our keys work fine.)

On our way back from New Jersey to Brooklyn Saturday afternoon, I angle over to Astor Place for one last New York haircut before my exile to the Virginia wilderness. My regular barber is a young Jewish immigrant from Tajikistan, a man with strongly accented but confidently slangy English picked up on the job. Shouting over the hip-hop music, I tell him about Zaza, but just the general picture: I can't bring myself to admit that we walked away and gave him our keys. With each haircut in the past I've heard about the latest link in the endless chain of relatives winching themselves out of Tajikistan to America and now all mooching off this one beleaguered barber, so I ask for his advice while the scissors whisk around my ears.

"This Georgian, he Jewish?"

"No."

"If he Jewish, you send him to synagogue, they take care."

"Definitely not Jewish."

"What he do in Georgia?"

"He's a singer, conservatory trained. He was a member of the best folk music ensemble in Georgia."

"Singer? No good, dude. Better he went barber school." He clips for a while in silence, thinking. "These people—Tajik, Georgian, Russian, any

kind—all come here, they think money on street, just get broom and pick it up. Okay, my advice. Today, right now, you buy this guy bus ticket to Chicago, Denver, somewhere it's too far he come back.”

I laugh.

“No joke, man. You think you don't want spend that kind money? Trust me, it cost you more if you don't. These people all the same.”

Seeing that I don't believe him, he gives up on me and spends the rest of my haircut in heated conversation with the barber at the neighboring chair, entirely in Tajik-accented Russian.

Zaza's mysterious adoption by the neighborhood Samaritans (a kind of badge of trustworthiness), as well as the continued presence in our house of all our belongings, gives him new credibility in my eyes. So I believe him when he says on Saturday night that he's on the verge of arranging another place to stay and just has to make a few phone calls. In the shifting, ever-growing chaos of our packing, he carves out two islands for himself: One is his living quarters on the sofa, surrounded by his gaped-open, overflowing luggage and a layer of wadded-up clothes, papers, and stuff on the floor around him—stuff that keeps sneaking underfoot as we heft more boxes out to add to the towers of boxes that already line the walls and are now advancing steadily into the middle of the room, where they loom over the sofa. The other space is his working quarters by the phone on the bare, ready-for-the-movers desk in my already box-filled office.

Around the phone Zaza lays out his future: a few dozen palm-size scraps of torn notebook paper scrawled with names, phone numbers, and addresses transliterated into Georgian script: a professor in Champaign-Urbana, a gas station manager in Allentown, an illegal who just got here a month ago—friends of friends, cousins of cousins, mostly not people Zaza knows first hand. My own crumpled bilingual business card is among them; I gave it to the director of the Rustavi Ensemble

when I was in Tbilisi a year ago, just to show him that my computer can do Georgian fonts.

All of Saturday evening Zaza shouts into the phone in Georgian. I can follow only a little of what I hear, but every conversation seems to begin with joyous cries of greeting and news about the mutual acquaintance and to end, twenty minutes later, with an angry, shouting argument. All of his contacts seem to have taken immigrant self-defense lessons from my barber. Eventually Zaza hangs up and goes down to the street for a calming smoke before trying the next number.

He's still at it when Marie and I go to bed. "You know," I say, "he's got the famous immigrant pluck. He doesn't give up. I could wish he weren't underfoot like he is, but I've got to say I admire his determination."

But by late Sunday morning in some indefinable way the tide of approval has turned and begun to run out. Maybe it starts when Zaza comes to me with one of his scraps of paper and says, "One number I have, is old, they say no good. I must call Georgia to get new number. But I have twenty-minutes telephone card. No problem, yes?" So he calls Georgia and shouts down the phone for half an hour. Then he calls his brother in Germany for another half hour, still on the "twenty-minutes" telephone card. I begin to think about the cost of a bus ticket to Denver. (Our phone bill for the Zaza Days eventually reaches a hundred and fifty dollars.)

Or maybe the change in my attitude comes after that, when Zaza reports that his new plan is to go to Canada as a refugee (much confusion until we find "refugee" in my Georgian-English dictionary). His brother is a political refugee in Germany. He was kicked out of the Georgian police force for taking bribes, so he persuaded the German authorities that he had been victimized for blowing the whistle on torture and other "anti-democratic" practices by the Georgian police. He now lives on a German government stipend and supplements that by shoplifting

clothes and selling them to other “refugees.” Zaza tells me this story in a tone of fraternal admiration quite free of irony.

The refugee plan doesn’t get beyond one call to a legal, non-refugee Georgian acquaintance of mine in Toronto. He explains that, though Canada is certainly more open to refugees than the U.S., the Canadians, sensibly enough, want their Georgian refugees to come from Georgia, not the U.S. Zaza would have to go home and start over, which would be a waste of that excellent two-hundred-dollar visa. Convinced that he *could* have been a refugee, if only he had had more timely advice, Zaza shuffles his scraps of paper a little sullenly and makes some more calls.

Sunday afternoon, weary of packing, Marie and I take a break and, from the other end of the apartment, sit listening to Zaza shout on the phone. When he hangs up I go into the office and perch on a pile of boxes next to the desk. We smile at each other. “Zaza, you know that the day after tomorrow, we’re gone. Finished.”

“I know, Stiuart, you tell me. Don’t worry, I find place today. No problem.” He begins going through his scraps of paper one by one, sorting them into categories as he reads them off to me. There are numbers that never answered, numbers with a machine where he left a message and is just waiting for them to call back, numbers where he spoke to someone but it wasn’t the right person or the right moment and he should call again later, numbers that were wrong numbers and that he will correct by calling their friends at this different stack of numbers, if only those people in turn would answer. Somehow this tidy sorting system doesn’t seem to account for most of the calls I’ve been overhearing, admittedly with my rudimentary Georgian.

“What about the ‘no’ category, the people that you actually reached who said, plain and simple, ‘Take a hike?’” I notice that when I’m annoyed with Zaza and half-consciously trying to annoy him back I use slangy expressions he won’t understand. It rarely works, though: he doesn’t know enough English even to know when he’s being messed with.

In this case he follows the gist if not the words. He looks shocked and amused. "Not possible, Stiuart. Nobody tell me 'no.' This is Georgian mens, Georgian peoples. I am Georgian man. They must help me. It is necessary. Don't worry, it is normal." He picks an address off the desk at random and holds it up without even looking at it. "This one is very good man. I think he call in one hour, maybe."

I go back out to the living room. Marie says, "He's going to be here till we leave, isn't he? I mean, till the moment we go out the door for the last time."

I nod. "Or until we pack the phone."

"Maybe we should call NYNEX and ask them to cut off our service early."

I laugh. "But I can't even bring myself to blame him. The guy's running on sheer survival instinct. He's like a cornered rat: he'll do anything—fight to the death—and those telephone numbers are his only way out of the trap. He'll die with the receiver in his claws."

At that moment I remember something that I really shouldn't have forgotten and that only my do-gooding sentimentality could have allowed me to suppress. A few years ago a Georgian folk ensemble was stranded at the end of its U.S. tour when a civil war broke out in Georgia. Another Georgian music enthusiast put up a couple of the singers in his DC apartment. Two months later, not only were they still there, their new American girlfriends had all but moved in too. I try now to remember how that adventure ended, but I can't. Maybe it never did.

Marie doesn't look happy as I recount this story now. "Still, at the very worst," I say, "even granting that we won't get rid of him till the bitter end, it can't be like what happened to Ben. After all, we're moving Tuesday—thank God. I mean, what's he going to do, follow us to Virginia?"

He's like some infuriating but still charming baby (though a sweaty and badly shaved one), the kind of baby who can crank up just enough adorableness at the crucial moment to escape being shaken to death.

We planned very carefully to use up our food just before moving, but we planned for two instead of three and the food runs out a day early. So for Sunday dinner we all go out to a mom-and-pop Salvadoran place down the street.

Zaza is a jewel. He greets everybody in the place in his pleasantly fractured English. He flirts with the owners' six-year-old daughter in incomprehensible Georgian, and when she brings us our water glasses he pinches her on the cheek. No American would dare touch a stranger's child like that, but the Salvadorans don't know that and they beam with pride.

Over dinner we have a long and very entertaining discussion about the proper answer to "hello." Following a Georgian analogy, Zaza is convinced that the correct response must be some other word, like "hi" — that merely to repeat "hello" is to start the conversation over again like an idiot. For that short while, I am able to turn Zaza back into the plucky, deserving immigrant I want him to be: my father, stepping ashore in the Depression-crushed New World and looking about him with the child-like innocence and optimism that are this country's greatest assets but that we have to keep importing.

As if reading my thoughts, Zaza points to a poster of the Statue of Liberty on the wall beside our table. "Freedom Statue."

"The Statue of Liberty. Do you want to see it? We could walk over to Brooklyn Heights and see it from the Promenade. You could see Manhattan too, from there, and the Empire State Building."

Zaza curls his lip in scorn. "I'm not tourist."

Dinner out is supposed to recharge us for packing, but when we get back all I can manage is to sit on the windowsill and stare at everything that remains to do. Zaza joins me there, absently sorting through one of his dog-eared stacks of phone numbers.

"Stiuart, Weerjeenya is big town?"

"Virginia is a state."

"Like California?"

"Exactly. And the town we're going to is not a big town. In fact it's a very small town."

"What kind jobs they have there?"

"I don't know."

"What kind job you will do there?"

"I don't have a job there yet and you cannot come with us to Virginia, absolutely not, impossible, no, do you understand me?"

He looks hurt. "Stiuart, no problem. Why I want go to Weerjeenya? I only ask you as your friend, we just . . ." He doesn't know how to say "we're just making conversation," so he fans the air between us with both hands. "I tell you already, I go to Tchicago with James Brown."

Suddenly filled with energy, I bolt from my seat and dash to the bedroom, where Marie is packing. "Do—not—tell him the name of where we're going."

"You mean Fr — ?"

"Don't even say it to me. He might overhear you."

We both stop to listen. From the living room we can hear Zaza's beautiful clear voice as he sings, just to himself and probably unconsciously, a sweet and melancholy Georgian lullaby.

Monday is the last day before the movers arrive, and all the things we've put off packing to keep life bearable now have to be packed. In classic New York apartment style, our sofa won't fit through the tight S-curve created by the front door and the front hall; we had it dismantled and reassembled inside when we moved in, so now we have an upholsterer come and do the same thing in reverse. Zaza watches in silence as his nest is pulled apart, pushed through the door, put back together, and left standing on end outside on the landing for the movers. I think that at this moment, left with literally no bed for the night, Zaza finally begins

to take our departure seriously. The telephone calls get longer and more frantic, but the cigarette breaks on the street (for which he now has to squeeze past the sofa) also get longer and more existential.

At midmorning he comes to me holding a twenty-dollar bill. "I think my telephone card finish. I want pay you for some calls I make."

Figuring rightly that the phone card expired long ago (assuming it was ever active), and that I'm already so deep in the hole that the twenty is purely symbolic, I think for a moment about the symbolism of accepting money from a man who has less than three hundred dollars in the world. "Forget about it. I can't take your money."

"Stiuart, please, is important to me." I still don't lift a hand to take it, so he puts the twenty down on the kitchen counter. Then he goes to take a shower. I stuff the bill as far as I can into one of his open bags—but too near his clean clothes, because when he's dressed again he shakes his finger at me with a little smile and puts the twenty back on the kitchen counter. We pass the bill back and forth a few more times over the course of the day, and each time as I find some new hiding place for it in his things I think, where is the person who could accept this money without taking on more shame than it's worth? And that shame actually gives Zaza a strange kind of power. As long as he keeps finding people who aren't too hardened, who are still capable of shame, he could live forever on his last three hundred dollars.

The dining room is by now completely cut off by boxes, so for lunch we eat peanut butter on crackers while standing in the kitchen. Zaza's perpetual little smile is gone, the chipper gung-ho strut is gone, the banter about English grammar and pronunciation is gone. "In Georgia now is very bad. In Rustavi Ensemble I have salary thirty dollars one month, but never pay, so zero dollars one month, zero dollars every month. A man cannot to live. Stiuart, in America, a blioos singer, bloos singer, how much salary one month?"

"I have no idea. I'm sure some make a lot and some make nothing. It's hard to be a musician anywhere. To tell you the truth, I don't personally know any blues singers. All the singers I know sing Georgian music."

He jumps on that. "How much salary one month to sing Georgian music in America?"

I laugh. "That's easy. A big fat zero."

He gives me a slightly disbelieving, then slightly patronizing look. "Stiuart, if no money, why you sing Georgian music?"

"Well, why do *you* sing Georgian music? You've trained all your life to sing Georgian folk music. You could have trained to be a . . ." I try to think of an occupation that would actually pay a living wage in the collapsed economy of Georgia today and can't. Engineers sell cigarettes on the street, academics sell their parents' libraries. I try again. "You could have been a . . ." The right answers—militiaman, smuggler, gangster—don't seem like what I'm after. I wave the thought away. "Anyway, I sing Georgian music for love."

He nods and looks distant. "For love. Very nice." And he talks about something else.

Zaza begins to follow me around the apartment as I pack, pestering me in a tone of rising panic with an unending list of questions, great and small: How much education is normal in America? How can both of these numbers be in Chicago if they have different area codes? What do I think is the most likely kind of place to find an American wife? Are the next tenants moving in right away, or will our apartment be empty for a while? I am by now so intent on last-minute packing that I stop bothering even to pretend to be listening to him, much less considering my answers.

No doubt he would not get on my nerves quite so quickly and so fatally if we ourselves were not right now at the crisis point of a major

life-changing move. But when I finally snap, it isn't into craziness but into great clarity. I find Marie and tell her calmly, "This guy has got to go, and he's got to go now. It's getting worse by the minute. I just can't hold his hand anymore."

"Okay. You tell him."

I corner him. "Zaza, I know you've been trying as hard as you can, but you have to find somewhere else to go, right now. It's finished. You can't be here anymore. There's no place for you and no time for you. I'm sorry."

He seems completely unsurprised and doesn't argue. He gets on the phone for five minutes and comes back to report. Marie and I are by this time just sitting limply on boxes in the living room, defeated not by moving but by Zaza. "My friend in Queens, Georgian man who gave me job Friday, he say I go to him."

"Excellent." I wonder fleetingly whether we could have had this exact conversation three days ago, and whether the Georgian in Queens intended from the beginning to let the American suckers take up the slack until they cracked.

"But my friend say he cannot come now. He come with car later, about eleven clock in night."

Long pause. It's now three p.m. Marie and I look at each other. I think about the great clarity I just found, and what preceded it, and what might follow it if I can't sustain it for eight more hours. Marie looks ready to say something, but I speak first. "No. You cannot stay here till eleven o'clock. You have to leave now."

"I understand. It's no problem, Stiuart. I take my bags, I sit on street."

"You're going to sit on the curb with your duffel bags from now till eleven o'clock?"

"It's no problem."

I bury my face in my hands, picturing us glancing out the windows as we pack, seeing Zaza (or at least the top of his buzz-cut head) three floors down, sitting with his back against a parking meter, his shapeless

luggage piled around him, his feet in the perpetually wet gutter, Zaza chatting with a little circle of curious neighborhood children and the occasional curious drunk and the occasional curious policeman, Zaza waving to us as we sneak out to go get some dinner, Zaza sitting there placidly hour after hour heaping coals on our heads. I can't raise my face to look at him.

I hear Marie say, "You can't sit on the street, Zaza—it's out of the question. But we know how seriously hospitality is taken in Georgia. That's why we feel ashamed that we haven't been able to host you properly these last few days. So, in order that we don't lose face as your American hosts, we insist on paying your cab fare to Queens."

It's all lies, but it's lies brilliantly dressed in the rhetoric of honor, and Zaza understands it completely. He nods and accepts without even a token speech of protest. He finishes packing his things while I call the car service, then he takes the phone straight out of my hand to make just a few more calls. I stuff his twenty-dollar bill back into his luggage one more time.

The taxi honks outside, and Zaza is still on the phone. "The car's here." He ignores me. "Time to go. Your taxi is here." He nods and waves me away. "You have to hang up now." The taxi honks again. "Hang up!" He turns his back. I zip his bags shut and begin to carry them downstairs, squeezing past the sofa on the landing. When I get to the bottom of the stairs I can still hear him shouting in Georgian to somebody far away who just might be able to help him.

He catches up with me on the sidewalk and relieves me of the bags. The car service driver pops the trunk and gets out to help. He looks Ethiopian or Somali. I give him thirty dollars. "This includes tip. My friend has no money and he doesn't speak English. I don't even know if this is a real address. I don't know who to believe anymore. Anyway, if you can't find it you'll just have to ask somebody. Whatever you do, do not bring him back here."

The driver sizes me up, then Zaza, in his bad haircut and his pitiful best clothes, cramming bag after bag into the trunk, and a look of immense understanding comes into his eye. He seems to want to say, "You think you're the only guy in New York with an immigrant problem? You should see my relatives—it never ends. And you think you're safe now, sending him to Queens? Next time, do what I do: put him on the bus to Denver, Chicago, someplace so far he can't come back." But all he really says is, "Okay, boss, no problem."

Zaza and I exchange a big Georgian-style hug and a kiss. Then he gets in and the car drives off. I stand there and watch until the taxi is ten blocks away and out of sight. I want to be sure he's really gone.

A few months later, in our new home in small-town Virginia, I answer the phone.

"Stiuart! It's Zaza M___shvili. Remember me?" Even in those few words he already sounds more American.

"Zaza!" I haven't given him more than a passing thought in the intervening months, and he seems like part of an old, barely recognizable life, but I notice that the moment I hear his voice my hands break out in a sweat. I jump straight to the critical question: "Where are you?"

"I am at Utica, upstate New York." I feel better already. "I have job. I sweep floor in night at very big superstore. But soon maybe I sing Russian pop at Greek nightclub here. Then, who knows, maybe Tchicago."

"Great! How did you wind up in Utica, of all places?"

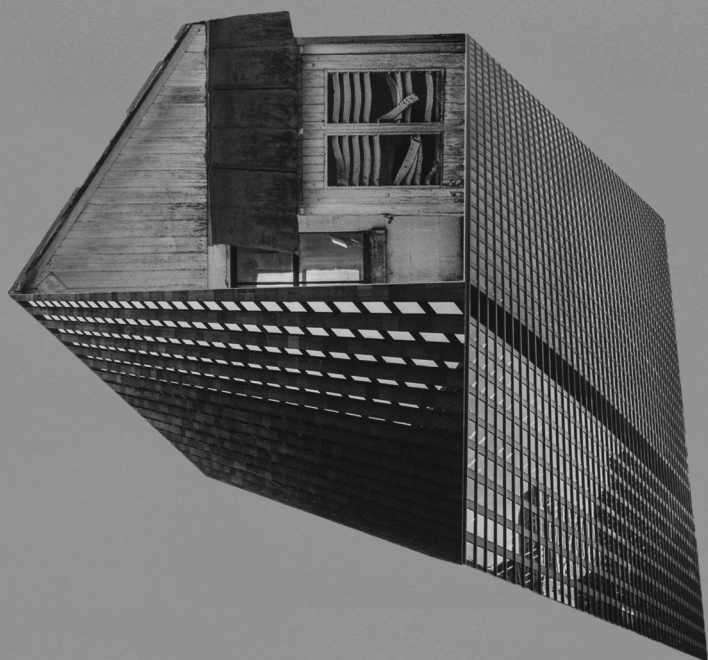
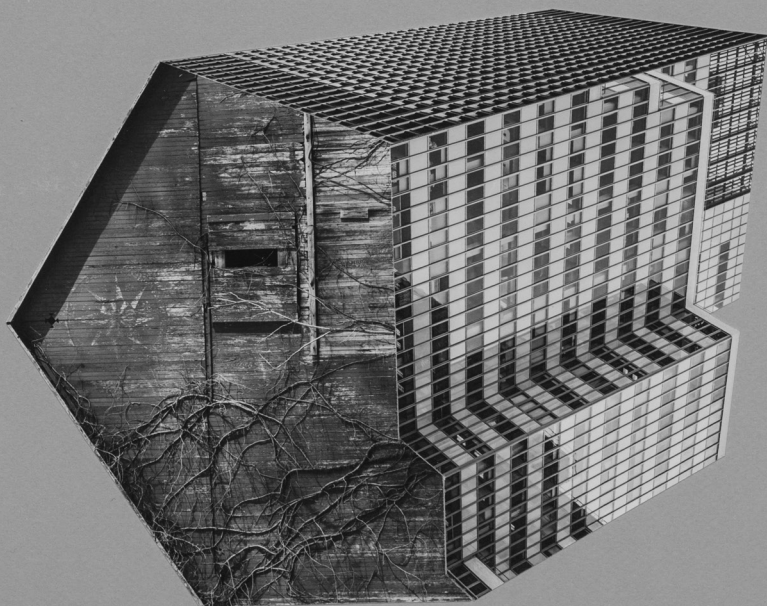
"Stiuart, I call to thank you and Marie for helping me. No Georgian man help me, American man help me. I remember this."

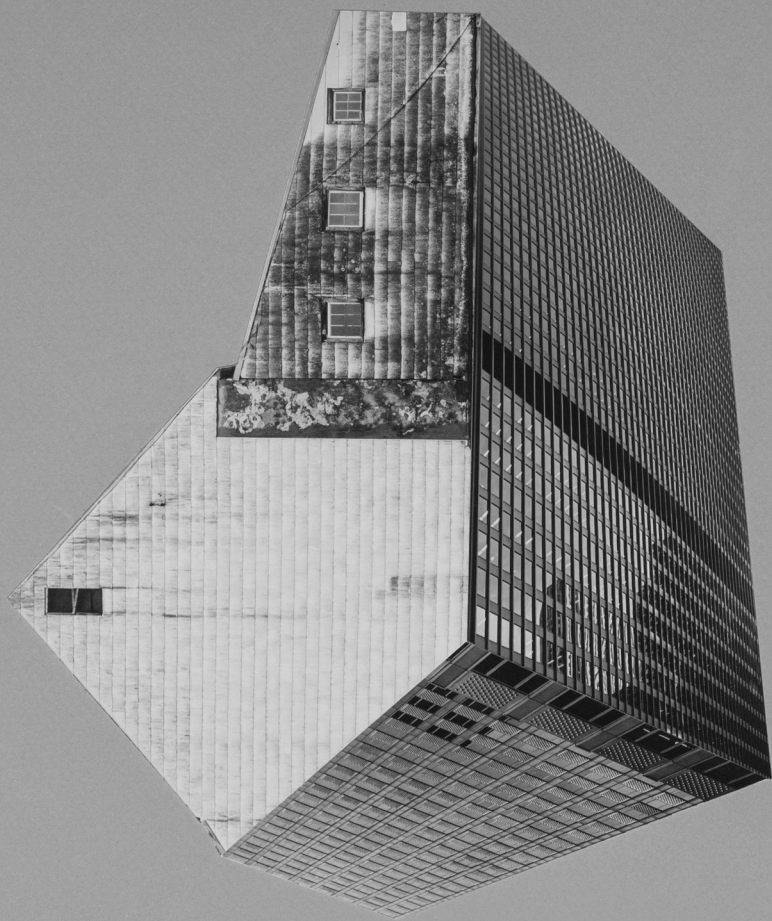
"Please, don't mention it," I respond automatically. "Anyone else would have done exactly the same thing in our place."

"But Stiuart — " Then his phone card runs out, and he is disconnected. He didn't give me his number, and he never calls back.

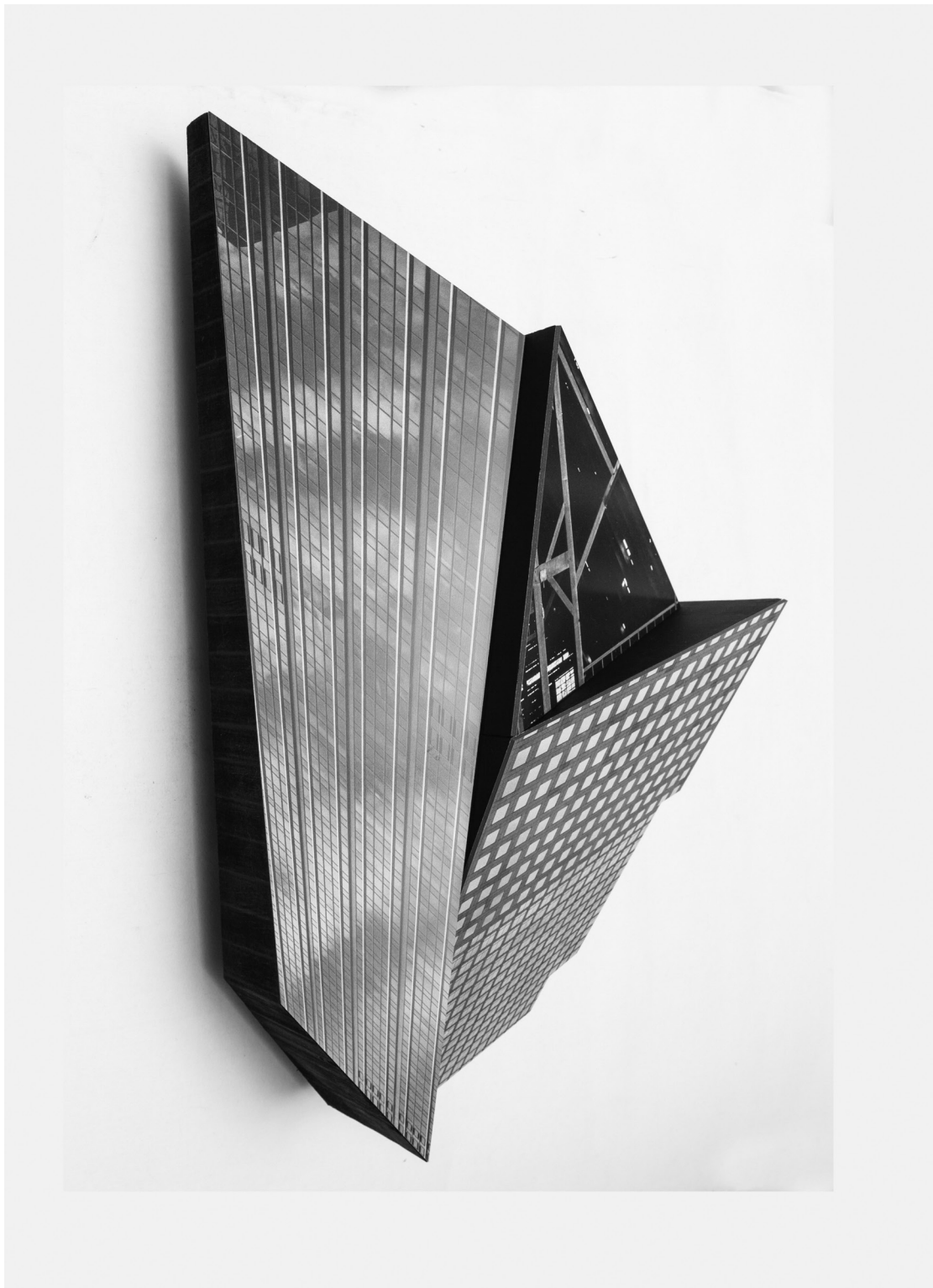


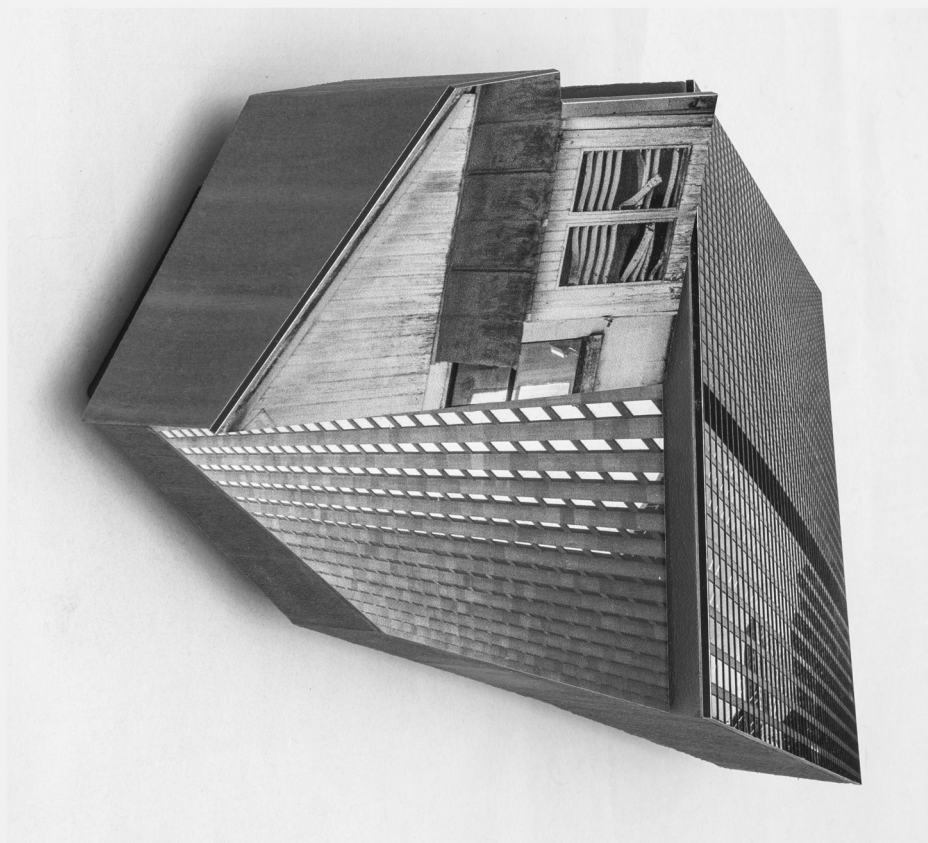
Krista Svalbonas, *Migrator 1*, 2015, *UV print on dibond on medium-density fiberboard*, 16 in. x 18 in. x 3 in. *Courtesy Matteawan Gallery.*





LEFT TOP: **Krista Svalbonas**, *Migrants 56*, 2016, pigment print and collage on board, 14 in. x 14 in.
LEFT BOTTOM: **Krista Svalbonas**, *Migrants 59*, 2016, pigment print and collage on board, 14 in. x 14 in.
RIGHT: **Krista Svalbonas**, *Migrants 57*, 2016, pigment print and collage on board, 14 in. x 14 in.
Courtesy Matteawan Gallery.





LEFT: **Krista Svalbonas**, *Migrator 6*, 2016, UV print on dibond on medium-density fibreboard, 22 in. x 14 in.
RIGHT: **Krista Svalbonas**, *Migrator 8*, 2016, UV print on dibond on medium-density fibreboard,
9 in. x 9 in. x 4.5 in. Courtesy Matteawan Gallery.

TERRANCE HAYES

*American Sonnet for My Past
and Future Assassin*

For her 81st birthday I found in a used New Jersey
Toy & Book Store, a six inch Amiri Baraka action
Figure including for wear an elaborately colored dashiki
With afro pick, a Leninist outfit with black beret,
And a sport coat with elbow patches & wool kangol.
He comes with an ink pen & his grandfather's pistol.
If you dip him in your bathwater, he will leak
The names of his abandoned children. Pull a string
He sings "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note"
Sweeter than the sweetest alto to ever sing
In the Boys Choir of Harlem. The store clerk tried
Selling me the actual twenty volume note Leroi Jones
Wrote the night before Baraka put a bullet in him.
I would've bought it. But I had no room in my suitcase.

TERRANCE HAYES

*American Sonnet for My Past
and Future Assassin*

The old woman looks at the rows of clothes
She will never wear again. Beneath the clothes
Are high & low high heels, office & casual flats,
Sandals, & sneakers covered in dust while above
The rows of clothes is a shelf of tropic, exotic,
Cryptic, elegiac, futuristic Sunday hats amassed
Over many decades shopping wherever a woman
Buys such hats. The feathers stand like flags
In an over populated bird country where almost
Every export is made, covered or stuffed with feathers,
Where birds, to survive, disguise themselves as hats.
The old woman with a mess of feathers in her care
Is as lovely as she was long ago when she was known
To wear, every night, a different feather behind her ear.

TERRANCE HAYES

*American Sonnet for My Past
and Future Assassin*

Who cannot distinguish a blackbird from a raven
Or crow behind the bars, window blinds & curtains,
Body guards, physical trainers, domestic servants,
And dog walkers. Who cannot distinguish an entrance
From a gate. Who cannot distinguish swagger from snake.
Whose approach is a misstep. Who prefers his elevator
To his spiral staircase. You can't describe your own face
Without looking in a mirror. Baller. Bawler. Toothpaste,
Make up, hair-raising malarkey. In the commercial age
Decisions are based on the suggestions immaculate
Strangers have been paid to make. I can live without
Your know-how, howling & babbling. You don't know how
To describe your own face. In the mirror you coo
Gibberish where the shape of your mouth escapes you.

TERRANCE HAYES

*American Sonnet for My Past
and Future Assassin*

The umpteenth thump on the rump of a badunkadunk
Stumps us. The lunk, the chump, the hunk of plunder.
The umpteenth horny, honky stump speech pumps
A funky rumble over air. The umpteenth slump
In our humming democracy, a bumble bureaucracy
With teeny tiny wings too small for its rumpled
Dumpling of a body. Humpty-Dumpy. Frumpy
Suit. The umpteenth honk of hollow thunder.
The umpteenth Believe me. The umpteenth grumpy,
Jumpy retort. Chump change, casino game, tuxedo,
Teeth bleach, stump speech. Junk science. Junk bond.
Junk country, stump speech. The umpteenth boast
Stumps our toe. The umpteenth falsehood stumps
Our elbows & eyeballs, our nose & No's, woes & whoas.

SHERRY SIMPSON

Lucky You

THE HUNDRED-DOLLAR BILLS tucked inside your wallet are so new, so stiff, that you could fold the three of them into elegant origami cranes, one for each day you'll be alone at the Silver Legacy Resort Casino. Celebrating your anniversary in Reno was your husband's idea, mostly, and before he left you here to relax for a few more days, you asked him to take your debit card. That's how well you know yourself. Not that you're a real gambler, one of those used-up-by-life people hunched over a poker hand, squinting through cigarette smoke as the dealer wings cards across the table, *shick, shick*. You're not excitable and giddy like the drunken college kids whooping and hollering around the craps table. Certainly you're nothing like the bored women sluicing money into \$50 slot machines surrounded by red velvet ropes. Still, you visit Reno or Las Vegas once or twice a year, often enough that the *boop clang riiinnngg beep* of a casino has become a toccata in the key of cash, a sound that strips the synapses raw and pinballs through the brain. You don't feel that rush in your head, though. You feel it in your chest, where anxiety and hope cinch together every time you risk a few quarters, a few dollars, a few hundred dollars—the amount doesn't seem to matter much.

On the first morning you vow to buy meals only with whatever winnings accumulate beyond your original bet. Fifteen minutes of intent but careful playing at video poker, and you've made \$8, possibly the highest hourly wage you've ever earned. How triumphant you feel spending \$1.95 for a tub of raspberry yogurt from the little convenience store that caters to people who'd rather not waste money on restaurant food. You might as well have slain a deer with your bare hands and eaten its liver raw right there on the casino floor. Not even noon, and already you're ahead a few dollars. Your husband will be so surprised when you come home with the original \$300 and then some.

Ten hours later, your favorite slot machine, Hot Shot! spins a thrilling combination of cherries and bells and fire and announces that you have won \$277, which you could really use because the day's budget of \$100 evaporated hours ago and already you've broken the second bill. A fire alarm clangs away and video flames flicker and sizzle, all of which would seem more exciting if Hot Shot! didn't fuss over your tremendous good fortune in exactly the same manner when the payoff is \$2. But the amount of winnings isn't nearly as important as the need to ease this clenched, familiar feeling of losing.

A lady sitting one machine over gazes at the numbers totting up your riches cent by cent. "Lucky you," she says, and you smile modestly, savoring her envy as you sip from a weak—but free!—gin and tonic. As always, you hit the "spin" button a few more times in case you're on a streak, and damned if the bells and flames and cherries don't deliver another \$54. Hot Shot! is hot, you're hot, and your lucky streak is hot, screw probability. Once the machine cools, you punch the cash-out button, and a \$250 voucher emerges serenaded by the tinny clatter of fake coins, a sound not nearly as satisfying as the avalanche of greasy quarters that slots once regurgitated in that prehistoric era when people like your grandmother lugged around plastic buckets filled

with nickels. The moment you abandon Hot Shot!, the neighbor lady scooches into your seat.

When you flop into bed at two a.m., barely a hundred dollars of your winnings remain. You blame the waitress who took forever to deliver a free Corona, a beer that actually cost \$84 if you include all the money you lost idly pulling the lever of a slot machine while you waited. Eighty-five dollars, counting the buck you handed her in the belief that failing to tip even the tardiest of waitresses is profoundly unlucky. Whether this is true, you have no idea. It's just one more theorem worth testing in your ongoing inquiry into the nature of the universe, one more proposition you'll interrogate the hell out of before this weekend is over.

For example: is it luck or is it chance when an infinite number of possibilities funnel into that glorious millisecond when the slot reels tick perfectly into place? Statistically, the outcome of any one spin does not depend on the previous spin's results—you know this—and a random number generator ought not to care whether you're a Pisces or a Sagittarius, whether you yank a lever or push a button, whether you choose a gaudy new video slot decorated with dancing leprechauns or a clanking workhorse stranded in a lonely corner of a dingy casino, a machine that surely hasn't paid out in ages, a machine that clearly has so much more to give. Of course the house usually wins, duh, you're not *that* stupid, but it doesn't *always* win, which you know because you've studied those grainy, blown-up photographs of slightly stunned past winners posing with giant foam board replicas of checks, and if Jimmy S. from Elko, Nevada, could win \$11,297 despite that unconvincing comb-over, then there's no reason you can't either.

And why not believe in luck, when chance offers only randomness, which implies chaos, which smacks of meaninglessness? To ward off an existential crisis, you have tried to outmaneuver chance in Jacks or Better video poker by memorizing charts that calculate which cards to keep and which to discard if you hope to achieve the theoretical return

of 99.54 percent with a perfectly played hand. You have practiced these strategies for hours on risk-free Internet poker sites with a studiousness you never mustered for your GRE exams. Even so, statistics don't stop you from drawing on an inside straight now and then. And it's not statistics that make you catch your breath when you're holding an ace, a queen, a king, and a ten, all in the suit of hearts, and you draw the final card already imagining the riches that will cascade through your life should that miraculous jack of hearts appear, which it doesn't and probably never will because chance is a stone-cold bitch.

But luck—luck is supernatural, persuadable, seducible. Luck notices how you comport yourself through life. Luck is like Santa and Jesus rolled into one. Luck knows if you've been naughty or nice, when you tip waitresses, what you deserve out of life.

"Did you win?" friends ask after these trips.

"I always win," you say, which is true. "The trick is trying to lose less."

How someone could just hand money over to casinos and corporations and billionaires and probably gangsters is beyond them. Gambling is like riding Space Mountain at Disneyland, you explain. You're not buying a physical object; you're buying a recreational experience minus the vomiting. Usually.

Sometimes you insist that gambling is an anthropological exploration of the fascinating behavior of humans. And you do notice when people try to summon luck by kissing a cross or arranging an audience of troll dolls or ritually stroking the glass above a reel of spinning symbols. You've shaken your head at ads for more outlandish charms—Gambler's Gold Lucky Seven Hand Wash, for example, or the penis bone of a raccoon. You know that you can no more harness luck with such tactics than you can siphon electricity into a jar. Luck is a state, a flux, a kind of ectoplasm that, under the right spiritual or mental conditions, oozes from your pores and recalibrates your future.

So, no coon dongs for you. You're a fan of Jungian synchronicity, the "meaningful coincidence." That's why you believe that the more brides you spot on the way to the casino chapel the more likely that you'll win big, a notion permanently cemented by a four-bride sighting coupled with a jackpot of \$362.47 soon after. Encountering Elvis impersonators is also auspicious, especially if Elvis is driving a pink Cadillac convertible with the top down, which you once saw in Las Vegas on a particularly profitable evening. But crossing paths with brides or Elvises doesn't create luck, exactly. Winning simply means that luck is paying attention to the attention that you're paying.

On the second day in Reno, you pause at an ATM in Harrah's Casino and wonder if you remember the PIN for the credit card stashed in a hidden compartment of your wallet, the card that you assured your husband you'd use only for emergencies. This feels kind of like an emergency. And look! Nobody needs a PIN anymore. The casino is happy to dispense up to \$500 in cash with nothing more than a driver's license and a ZIP code, both of which you possess. Teensy, almost unreadable print on the ATM describes usurious interest rates and outrageous bank fees, not that you bothered deciphering the details. The line at the cashier's window is long but not nearly long enough to change your mind before it's your turn to push a credit card and ID through the slot in exchange for three freshly minted hundred-dollar bills exactly like those you've already donated to some faceless billionaire/corporation/mobster.

At a cheerfully seedy casino called the Golden Nugget, you inadvertently play a slot machine that dispenses winnings in coins. You feed nickels into the coin slot three at a time, thinking, *Well, at least losing takes longer this way*. Scooping nickels into the plastic bucket blackens your fingers with the slick residue of all the gamblers who fondled them before you. Real money insists on the grimy truth. Either luck exists, or it doesn't. Either you have it, or you don't.

One thing you know for sure is that luck does not depend on how much money you have or don't have. Otherwise, why would Guadalupe Rodríguez, the mother of fabulously wealthy Hollywood star Jennifer Lopez, win \$2,421,291.76 at an Atlantic City casino? In no way is this fair, but it's difficult to untangle the moral threads because Mrs. Rodríguez claimed that she'd use the windfall to open a \$100,000 college fund for her two grandchildren. On the one hand, good for her. On the other, only \$100,000? And, really, haven't the Lopez offspring already rolled lucky sevens simply by being born to Jennifer Lopez?

This kind of thinking raises uncomfortable questions about the role of Providence in your own life. Was it chance or luck that you were born into a white, mildly educated, middle-class family in these United States of America during the late-ish twentieth century? Chance or luck that you weren't home the morning that the electrical wiring shorted out and burned through the kitchen floor until it flamed into a conflagration that killed your cats and charred the house into ruins? Maybe if you'd been there you would have smelled smoke in time to save everything. Or maybe you would have died like the cats, hiding beneath the bed. How about when the massive grille of a semi truck missed your face by inches when the driver failed to see your tin can of a car as he pulled onto the road? One moment less dawdling in the bathroom, one fewer car ahead of yours at the stoplight—well, you can play this game all day.

So far, deliberate efforts to tilt the balance between chance and luck in your favor have failed, most notably the time you attempted telekinesis on a slot machine. After a half hour of beaming concentrated brain waves at the machine's innards in an attempt to force three cherries to align, you gave up and moved to a nearby bank of slots. Moments later, the man who claimed your seat won so much money that the red light on top spun wildly and a Klaxon blared through the casino and into the universe. Was that chance, or luck, or simply delayed telekinesis? You

couldn't bear to go over and see exactly how much money he'd won; the naked envy on the face of every person in the crowd surrounding him was enough to sear your heart into a lump of smoking meat. Even now you find it painful to abandon a machine that's hoovering up your money because any minute now, the universe might pick you to win. Somehow it never occurs to you that the universe might be picking you to lose.

The casino's mad lullaby rockets around your skull as you lie in bed the second night wondering how to transfer \$800 from the savings account to the credit card without your husband noticing. Standing in line at the cashier's window the next morning you promise yourself that you'll promise your husband that you will never, ever stay alone at a casino hotel again. You hope you mean it, you really do.

As you drift through the casino clutching the cash that will finally fix everything, you try to sense which machine will restore all that you deserve, and then some. You've always been bemused by the talismans and totems decorating individual slot machines—symbols that represent luck and money (the number seven, the color green), animals noble or whimsical (lions, wolves, lemmings), cultural references flattened into cartoons (Egyptian pyramids, Chinese emperors, American game shows). But now you dither between meerkats or dolphins, flags or flames, Pompeii or Rome. Hope perks up with every scatter win or wild card, sags with every impotent spin. You need to win—that is, you need to stop losing—but you haven't the willpower or character to simply retreat to your room until it's time to leave for the airport. Watching re-runs of *Law and Order* won't help you retrieve all that money.

Perhaps, you reason, as yet another faithless machine confiscates money and hope, gambling is a useful way of practicing Buddhist nonattachment. Money is an illusion, when you think about it, a fluid metaphor that can mean anything you want it to mean. You want money, of course

you do, but more than that, you want to win. What were you going to do with all that cash anyway, send it to Darfur? Save it for retirement? Give it to the cleaning woman who stops wiping ashtrays long enough to ask if those red flashing numbers mean pennies or dollars?

And now you wonder what it would be like to gamble as if it didn't matter, as if the teeter-totter of wins and losses didn't represent some kind of cosmic referendum, as if there were no need to worry that this disturbing episode is not just a story from your life, but *the* story of your life. Perhaps all this time you've mistaken destiny for luck. Surely there's a way to turn this loss into, if not a win exactly, then less of a rout. Maybe you could write the whole trip off your taxes as research for an article about the seductive gameplay of the new generation of slot machines, or the exploitive cynicism of credit card companies, or the desperation of middle-aged women who destroy their marriages during an inexplicable but all-too-common gambling fugue.

When you check out of the hotel, a single \$20 bill occupies your wallet. Wait a sec—you'll need to tip the shuttle driver, so you'd better break it. Five minutes later, you salvage the remaining \$9.75 from a poker machine, one last humiliation to tuck away for the long flight home.

When your husband picks you up at the airport, he doesn't ask how much money you won or lost. You look out the window at the familiar landscape, trying to think of the right words, but what emerges is the worst thing a married person can say to a spouse.

"I need to tell you something," you begin, "but you have to promise you won't get mad."

His face tightens. "How much?" he asks.

A long silence follows your answer, a silence in which you can still hear the Hot Shot! machine trilling its fiendish, unresolved melody. You're almost home before you say that after all these years, you finally understand something about addiction. When you were standing in

line at the cashier's window borrowing money (again), you suddenly recognized the terrible emotional transaction under way: you felt awful about what you were doing, but the only way to stop feeling so bad was to continue doing the one thing that could help you forget how bad you feel. Now, you say, you realize how hard it must have been to quit drinking.

He doesn't answer, not because you mentioned the drinking—all of that is long past—but because he knows this grand epiphany doesn't mean shit. You're not promising to give up gambling. You're not claiming you'll change. You think you were unlucky, not stupid.

"I shouldn't have stayed there alone," you admit, eager to show that you've learned your lesson. "Just please tell me that you're not mad."

Unfortunately, he's not a liar, but he does say, "I guess it's not the end of the world."

Your thank you is fervent, contrite, genuine. You barely stop yourself from adding, "I'm so lucky to have you." And the electronic tootling that sounds like winning and the hollow clink that means you're losing recede from your skull, leaving behind the deep hush of a universe that never, ever stops counting.

SCOTT NADELSON

A Hole in Everything

PICTURE TWO TEENAGE girls on a quiet suburban street. One is on foot, the other on a ten-speed bike, zigzagging from curb to curb and occasionally making loops to keep from getting too far ahead. The one walking, the older by several months, wears dark eyeliner to match her dark hair. Her jeans are ripped at both knees, and between the thumb and forefinger of her left hand is a tattoo she gave herself with a sewing needle and ink from a ballpoint pen. It's a bluish-black blotch no bigger than a squashed tick, but whenever anyone asks what it means, she flips her bangs out of her eyes and says, with exasperation, "It's the fuckin' universe, man." Her name is Samantha Weisbart, but everyone calls her Sammie.

On the bike, her best friend, Nicole Raines, steers with one hand and chews the fingernails of the other, spitting slivers into the road. She's the prettier of the two, a few weeks shy of sixteen, with wavy chestnut hair, long legs muscled and sleek from running cross-country, fair skin free of blemishes except for a large bruise on her upper arm, still dark in the middle, yellowing around the edges. Around her neck is a thin gold chain with a *Chai* at her throat, and on her wrist a watch with

a chartreuse band and purple numbers. She glances at the watch more often than she wants to. It's a Monday morning, late April of 1989, and in a few minutes she should be heading to second-period trigonometry. Instead she's approaching a cul-de-sac in a new development with massive houses but no trees, a mile and a half from home.

Sammie pulls a pen from her back pocket, with a folded scrap of paper tucked into its clip. She opens it, checks it over, and stuffs it away. "This one," she says, out of breath, and gestures to a brick-fronted colonial with a circular driveway and three-car garage.

"You really need to learn to ride," Nicole says. "And quit smoking."

Sammie doesn't respond, just heads up the stone path to the front door. Nicole makes one last loop before laying the bike at the edge of the newly clipped lawn. Before she can get up the nerve to say they should forget it, turn around and go back, spend the day sipping from the half-pint of peach schnapps she's swiped from her father's liquor cabinet and sunbathing in the backyard, Sammie's already reached the door, her finger on the bell.

But even then she knows you can go back only so far. Things that are happening are happening. No matter how often she wishes it were otherwise, she's mostly accepted that time moves in only one direction. She catches up to Sammie and waits.

The door opens to reveal a woman in her late forties, in a tennis outfit and slippers, her frosted hair held back with a headband. The sight of Sammie—sweating in her denim jacket, a line of safety pins down each sleeve, and underneath, a black T-shirt with red flames over the words *HELL AWAITS*—sends her back a step, but her alarmed look softens when she takes in Nicole. "Can I—" she starts, but Sammie cuts her off. "We're here to talk about James," she says. "It's an important matter."

The woman blinks several times, glancing from Sammie to Nicole and back. "James? Is he—"

"He's fine," Sammie says. "At least nothing's happened to him, if that's what you mean. It's what he's done. That's what we're here about."

Sammie turns to Nicole as she says this, and Nicole, on cue, crosses her arms and looks down at her feet.

"My husband isn't home," the woman says.

"Who said anything about him?"

"I was just leaving," the woman says, and Nicole belches out a sob. When she glances up, her eyes sting, and a single tear has leaked onto the bridge of her nose. It tickles as it slides down, and she has to resist the impulse to wipe it away.

"How about we come in," Sammie says. "It's better if we can discuss this," she adds, lowering her voice and peeking over her shoulder at the imposing façades of neighboring houses, "in private."

The woman—JP's mother, Mrs. Farber—steps aside, and Sammie strides across the entryway, boot heels loud on gleaming hardwood boards. Nicole hesitates again, until Mrs. Farber reaches out a manicured hand, spread lightly with freckles though none are visible on her face, and touches her shoulder. She's wearing a tank top, and the brush of Mrs. Farber's nails with their soft pink polish makes her shiver. She wishes she were wearing more clothes, but she and Sammie agreed: best to leave the bruise on display. "Please," Mrs. Farber says. "Make yourself at home."

Sammie has already done so. She's sprawled on a sectional couch in the high-ceilinged great room, surveying the skylights above, the baby grand piano in the far corner, the walls adorned with watercolors in carved wooden frames. Her wild hair and sharp face—jutting nose and chin, thin lips sucked between teeth, pimples on her forehead torn open and scabbed over—stand out like a gash against the expanse of white leather. Nicole takes a seat across from her, in a stiff armchair, perching at the edge of the cushion, tucking hands between knees.

"I didn't realize James was loaded," Sammie says.

"Can I get you girls something to drink?" Mrs. Farber asks.

"You'd never guess to look at him."

"I'm fine, thank you," Nicole says, and offers up a miserable smile.

"You got any ginger ale?" Sammie asks. "Or 7-Up? For my friend. It settles her guts." As if the words have called up a new discomfort, Nicole leans forward and holds her belly. "I'll take a Coke."

When Mrs. Farber disappears into the kitchen, Sammie spreads her arms along the back of the couch and winks. But Nicole maintains her hunched posture, her pained, somber expression. This takes concentration, poise. She's been acting since the fourth grade—she recently played Rizzo in Union Knoll's production of *Grease*—and knows the importance of staying in character. She focuses on the clink of ice cubes against glass, the pop of soda cans followed by a hiss of carbonation. To keep her eyes red, she imagines her grandmother dying, and then her little brother, and then her cat, Lacey. With the last comes a burning in the back of her throat.

"Hey," Sammie whispers, clicking a heel on the floor. "Stay cool, okay?"

But it's too late: she sees Lacey sprawled in the road, her black and white flank matted with blood, back paws stretched out and stiff. By the time Mrs. Farber returns, she's bawling into her hands.

Staying cool is something Sammie asks often of others, though she can never quite manage it herself. Her normal temperature is a simmering anger which easily boils over into rage. It doesn't take much to set her off: an insult from a girl in the cafeteria, an incredulous question from a geometry teacher, an impatient look from a driver when she's crossing the street. Once, when a woman in a station wagon made a sharp right in front of her just before she stepped off the sidewalk, Sammie chased her half a block, and when it was clear she wouldn't catch up, grabbed her crotch and shouted, "Suck my dick!" She seemed as startled by the

words as Nicole was, and after a second they both cracked up until they couldn't breathe.

Nicole is used to her outbursts, and even more, the furious intensity that follows, the swift revenge. The next day, a girl who'd insulted her would open a shaken soda bottle and have it spray all over her clothes; the geometry teacher who doubted she'd done her homework herself would pull a two-inch nail out of his back tire. The most recent victim was her older sister, who borrowed Sammie's favorite denim jacket without asking. Sammie waited a week, until their mother made her spicy barbecued chicken, slathered in ketchup and Tabasco. She knew her sister would eat two legs and a wing and then chug a glass of water. Only this time she switched out the water glass for one filled with white vinegar. Her sister had half of it down before realizing what it was, her face on fire, eyes bugging. By then, Sammie was on her way out the door, running gleefully to Nicole's house.

Nothing Sammie does surprises Nicole anymore. Or rather, she's so used to being surprised by Sammie that she takes as commonplace just about anything she does. They've been friends for as long as either of them can remember. At least that's what they tell people who ask, because implied in the question is skepticism, judgement—*why do you hang out with her?* So they give the answer that leaves no room for doubt. Their bond stretches beyond memory, beyond time. It's mythological, set in the stars. Those friends who suggest otherwise risk exile. Nicole's last boyfriend, for example, who said he thought Sammie was a bad influence, that she was undermining Nicole's potential. "Potential for what?" Sammie asked when Nicole told her she'd dumped him. "Dating a douchebag? He must have been talking to your fuckin' mom."

The truth is, Nicole does remember the first time she spotted Sammie, at six years old, a frizzy-haired kid in a swimsuit too small for her, its straps cutting into sunburned shoulders. This was at the little beach at the south end of Lenape Lake, where she spent her first few weeks

in town, swimming in the muddy shallows, before her parents decided she'd be better off in camp. They'd just moved from Montclair, fulfilling her mother's dream of living somewhere she could look at water over her morning coffee. Her mother would have preferred the ocean, or a mountain stream, but Lenape, fringed with birches and bobbing docks, a scattering of little islands draped with morning fog, calmed her fragile nerves. Plus it was close to Nicole's father's office in Florham Park.

For Nicole, though, the lake was never as peaceful as her mother's vision of it, with the speedboats that gouged its surface, the pack of older boys who'd come tearing down the beach and splash scummy water in her eyes. One afternoon several of them crept through the weedy stretch where the beach petered out, carrying a plastic bucket with the handle broken off. "Hey kid," one called to her. "Wanna see a fish?" He was blond and buck-toothed, with a strawberry birthmark on his chest. The water in the bucket was dark and dense with algae, and she couldn't see anything inside, no sign of moving fins or tail. "Bet you can't catch it," the boy said, and the others crowded close. She didn't want to put her hand in there, but she knew she didn't have a choice; already the boy had grabbed her wrist and was forcing it down.

But before he could push it all the way in, there was the frizzy-haired girl shoving her way to the front. "I can do it," she said, then flexed skinny fingers and plunged them into the murky water. They weren't under more than two seconds before she shrieked. The boys took off up the beach. The bucket dropped away to reveal a snapping turtle the size of a salad plate dangling from the girl's thumb. After the first shriek she went silent, giving Nicole a narrow-eyed look of accusation. Blood trickled down the heel of her hand. The turtle's head was hardly wider than the thumb, its beak clamped, bauble-eye still and staring. Nicole could have looked at it for hours. But then the girl thought to dip her hand into the lake. When it came up, the thumb was purple above the knuckle, a gash below. She shrieked again, as if it were an obligation,

and then sucked the thumb. After a minute she said, "I need a stick." The one they found was long and flexible, whiplike, and when the buck-toothed boy wasn't looking, Sammie lashed him three times across the back.

Nicole doesn't remember if she went to Sammie's place that day or one soon after. She's been there so many times now, has spent so many hours sitting at the kitchen counter, drinking fruit punch and then coffee, and recently, with Sammie's mother's silent consent, wine coolers; or with her back against the bedframe in Sammie's room, watching as Sammie does something unreasonable with her hair—shaving a bare streak above one ear, bleaching her bangs which turns them orange—that she can no longer distinguish one moment from another. The house is three blocks from hers, where the newer and bigger lakeshore homes give way to bungalows built early in the century, when Lenape was a vacation spot for Manhattanites escaping the city's summer heat. When she first saw it, it was just shy of shabby, with three of four sides recently painted, the fourth beginning to chip, the sag of the front porch carefully hidden by shrubs. Those shrubs have since overtaken the steps, the porch abandoned altogether; the only entrance now is around back. All four sides need new paint, and the rain gutter leans away from the roof in several spots, disconnected from two of four downspouts.

The house's dilapidation has always seemed exotic to Nicole, as has the food Sammie and her family eat—meat loaf with pickle relish, broccoli with a slice of American cheese melted on top, pancakes with creamy peanut butter instead of syrup. Even more exotic, though, is a house free of men: just Sammie, her older sister, and their mother, a tiny frenetic woman who's always getting into fender benders, though somehow they're never her fault. Sammie's father was long gone by the time Nicole came into the picture. Now he lives somewhere outside Chicago and has a new family, and though he often forgets to return Sammie's

calls, and some years misses her birthday, she visits him for a week every August.

This is what surprises Nicole most: despite all her tough talk and bluster, her acts of vengeance, she'll eventually forgive anyone who's done her wrong. Unlike Nicole, who didn't suffer a moment's doubt after dropping the boyfriend who questioned their friendship—instead, drunk at a party that night, she went to bed with JP Farber—Sammie agonizes over her decisions, feels sorry for those she's paid back, decides to give them another chance. She'll say she's finished, kaput, not another word, but she never gives up on anyone.

Not Nicole. When she's done, she's done.

But of course Mrs. Farber doesn't know this, and when she returns with the sodas, she gives a little gasp to see Nicole's wet face, which she's trying to dry with her forearms, the hair on them—darker than on her head, and too thick, she's always thought—slicked down over tanned skin. And maybe Mrs. Farber catches sight of the bruise then, too, just below the left shoulder, wrapping around her biceps, the shape, if she looks closely, of slightly parted fingers. But she doesn't look long, because then she's setting the drinks on the coffee table, muttering about tissues, and hurrying off to the bathroom. Only then does Nicole glance up at Sammie, who's frowning at her, arms twined over chest. She wants to tell her she knows she's gone over the top, she'll keep it under control from now on, but she doesn't dare speak up or even mouth the words for fear of breaking the spell that still has her feeling heartbroken though she has no reason to be—certainly not because of some boy she slept with once and never expects to see again.

Mrs. Farber returns with a box of Kleenex, and though by then Nicole has finished crying, she thanks her meekly and dabs at the corners of her eyes. She didn't wear makeup this morning on purpose, and she knows the skin around the bridge of her nose will be bluish, tender. Af-

ter she cries, she always looks younger than she is, and sleepy, a little kid who's just gotten out of bed. She stifles a yawn with a tissue. Mrs. Farber hands her a glass, and she takes a small sip. Ginger ale. Not her favorite. She would have preferred 7-Up. Or Coke. Sammie has her glass tilted up, and it's already half empty. By the time Mrs. Farber settles onto the opposite end of the couch, all that's left are brown-tinted ice cubes.

"I really don't have much time," Mrs. Farber says, addressing Nicole. "I'm supposed to be at the Lenape courts by ten."

"This won't take long," Sammie says. "At least it shouldn't have to."

"You should come back when my husband's home."

"What's he got to do with anything?"

"JP's not here, you know. He's at school for another month."

"Oh, we know," Sammie says. "Trust me. If he were here, we'd be talking to him, not you."

Even then Mrs. Farber doesn't turn away from Nicole. She has her legs crossed, slipper dangling from the toes of her right foot, bare heel exposed. The tennis skirt hardly covers her crotch, and her legs are pale and covered in goosebumps. Her expression has changed from concerned to wary, lips pinched, fingers enmeshed against her belly, thumbs pressed together to make a point beneath her breastbone. Nicole isn't surprised to discover she's a good-looking woman and fit, with only the slightest loosening of flesh under her chin. But she doesn't see as much of JP in her as she expected—maybe a hint of him in the dark brown eyes, the prominent lower lip. He must get his wide jaw from his father, and his height, and the low raspy voice that makes everything he says sound like a secret. And the thick shaggy hair that sweeps across his forehead and covers his ears—that, she thinks, is all his own.

When he was a senior at Union Knoll, and she was still a freshman who knew him only to say hi, Sammie used to joke that his initials stood for Jumbo Pecker. She'd jab Nicole in the ribs after he gave his little wave—a two-finger salute, head cocked to the side—and then pre-

tend to swoon in his arms, moaning, “Oh, Jumbo. Take me. Take me now.” The few times he spoke to Nicole she found herself leaning forward to catch his words, close enough to feel his breath on her ear.

He has since graduated and is now finishing his first year at Lehigh. But he was home the week before last, visiting friends, and when Nicole saw him at the party she went straight up to him—or as straight as she could manage after downing three shots of Seagram’s 7 in a tub of Coke—and put a hand on his chest to keep her balance. They found their way to a bedroom half an hour later, and only afterward did he tell her he has a girlfriend. Her name is Leigh. “Leigh from fuckin’ Lehigh?” Sammie said when she heard. “You got to be kidding me.”

“It’s no big deal,” Nicole answered, though her voice faltered, and a sob—less authentic, she thinks now, than the one she performed for Mrs. Farber—broke through her words like a hiccup. It wasn’t a big deal, she swore. Why should it be? They’d both been drunk, they’d taken off their clothes and rolled around on the bed of the host’s little brother, and afterward he’d stroked her hair and called her sweet and said he couldn’t see her again, because he really loved Leigh and he couldn’t believe he’d done this, god, why did he drink so much? And why did Nicole have to be so damn cute and easy? And then he’d cried a little before leaving her alone in the room, still naked, spots of blood on the little brother’s sheets, her arm throbbing with the imprint of his fingers. No big deal at all, she thought as Sammie gathered her into a hug, though she couldn’t keep herself from letting go then, howling and shaking until she was empty of tears.

“I’ll cut off his fuckin’ pecker,” Sammie said.

“It’s not jumbo. Just average.” She had little to compare it to—only that of the ex-boyfriend she’d dumped, which had never made it past her hand. “Maybe smaller.”

“It’ll be a hole by the time I’m done with him. He’ll wish he was born with a cunt.”

Now, rattling the ice in her empty glass, Sammie says, "James turned nineteen this year, am I right? His birthday's in, what, January?"

"February fourth," Mrs. Farber answers, tonelessly, as if hypnotized. She's looking straight ahead now, at a crystal bowl on the fireplace mantel, which catches a beam from the skylight and sends a dozen tiny rainbows onto the floor.

"And my friend here. Do you know how old she is?"

"I don't," Mrs. Farber says.

"Take a guess."

Mrs. Farber shakes her head. "I—"

"That's right," Sammie says. "She's fifteen."

"Until next month," Nicole says, taking another sip of the ginger ale, whose flavor reminds her of Seagram's 7. The smell of it turns her stomach, and she hunches forward again, elbows on knees. "I turn sixteen on the ninth."

"The point is," Sammie says, shooting Nicole a scowl. "The point is, she's fifteen now. She was fifteen a week and a half ago, when our James—"

"I see," Mrs. Farber says, louder than she needs to. Her hands have risen to her chin, and Nicole wonders if she's going to stick fingers in her ears to keep from having to hear any more.

But Sammie doesn't appreciate being cut off. She's up from the couch, pacing now in front of the fireplace, hair tucked behind her ears so that it makes little wings on either side of her head. "We're not talking about involving the... authorities, or whatever. Not unless we have to."

"I understand," Mrs. Farber says. Her voice is softer now, and its submissiveness makes Sammie stop moving. She runs a finger along the edge of the bowl, holds it up as if checking for dust. "So you've come to me because—"

"We figured you'd want to see Jumbo—I mean what's his name, your son—take responsibility for his actions."

"Of course I do."

"Well, my friend here," she says, and wanders over to Nicole's chair, putting a hand on her shoulder. The hand is surprisingly cold, and only now does Nicole realize how warm she is; in fact she's sweating despite the tank top and shorts, despite the glass with iced ginger ale propped on her thigh. And the smell of that ginger ale continues to waft up to her nose even though she's holding it away from her face. In her mouth she tastes Seagram's 7, and JP's smoky breath, and the mint she sucked on the way home from the party, and the combination makes her woozy. The nausea she's supposed to fake is real now, and she closes her eyes to settle herself. "She's in a fix, as you might guess. We got her an appointment at the clinic in Chatwin—"

"That's enough," Mrs. Farber says. "I don't want to hear any more." When Nicole opens her eyes, she expects to see the woman's face buried in her hands, but instead her head is tilted back against white leather, her eyes dry and set on the soaring ceiling. "Come back when my husband's home, and take it up with him."

"As I was saying," Sammie goes on, flashing a grin down at Nicole. Her hand is still on her shoulder, the little tattoo just above the bruise. "You can probably imagine my friend here can't ask her parents for the money."

"You don't have to do this," Mrs. Farber mutters, exhaling hard. "You don't have to go along with everything she says."

"Who, me?" Sammie asks.

The tattoo doesn't look like the universe now, if it ever did—it's a black hole, sucking Nicole in. The heat is making her feel faint, and she closes her eyes again, but it's too late. She pushes Sammie's hand away and tries to put the ginger ale back on the coffee table but knocks the glass on its side. Ice cubes skitter across the marble and onto the carpet beneath. And then she's running for the bathroom, only she doesn't know which way to turn. There's the entrance to the kitchen, the stairs,

a room with an enormous TV. She spots a partially opened door, and beyond it the corner of a sink, but that, also, is too late. The ginger ale she swallowed, along with the cereal she ate for breakfast, is splashing onto the waxed boards of the hardwood floor.

“What don’t you understand about staying cool?”

“I was trying to make it realistic,” Nicole says. “Practicing for Broadway.” They’re in the bathroom, with the door closed. She wipes the spray of vomit from her shoes with toilet paper and flushes it. Outside the door comes the sound of a sponge mop being squeezed into a bucket and then Mrs. Farber’s slippers swishing away. There are a pair of candles on the toilet tank, along with a box of matches. She lights one, and the smell of orange blossoms fills her nose, bringing back the nausea. “Rather smell my own shit,” she says, and blows it out.

“I thought you said you weren’t really—”

“I’m not.” She lowers the toilet lid and sits. “I’m sure.”

“Then you’re a better actress than everyone says.”

She’s not pregnant, she knows. The drops of blood at the party weren’t from anything tearing: her period started in earnest later that evening. Other than the bruise, JP left no lasting mark. He was with her such a short time the whole episode now seems less than real. What she remembers most is the pain when he pushed inside, a terrible lovely pain she didn’t want to end. Staying in it would have meant keeping at bay the ache that followed, the slow throb lingering for a few hours and finally going numb. But then JP bucked and squeezed her arm, letting out a grunt louder than any words he’d ever spoken to her. His eyes were closed, and she might have been anyone beneath him, or not a person at all, just a hole into which he lost himself for one ecstatic moment. She could see the disgruntled look that followed when he found himself expelled from it, back into the dim, dreary world, lying on top of a girl he hardly knew, far too young for him.

She wishes now the bruise could be permanent, like Sammie's tattoo. She reaches out, grabs Sammie's hand, circles the blotch with a fingertip. "I want one," she says.

"Right. Another reason for your mom to hate my guts."

"I'm serious."

"If you can keep it together, we'll have some cash in a minute. There's a parlor in Chatwin, over by Victory Park."

"I want it now," Nicole says, and flicks one of the safety pins on Sammie's jacket.

"What, here?"

"Get it over with."

"Fuck's gotten into you?" Sammie asks, but the question is less resistance than formality. Already she's unclasping the pin and bending it straight. "Better do it quick," she says, and locks the door. She takes the pen from her pocket, pulls it apart, taps some ink into a soap dish. Nicole lights a match and holds it under the tip of the pin.

She doesn't want a tattoo so much as a final step to seal their bond, one more thing to make it last. Because also implied in people's questioning of their friendship is the suggestion that it won't survive beyond the next two years, if it even makes it that far. Nicole will go off to college, and Sammie will live at home and take classes at County—or maybe she'll drop out like her sister did and get a job bottling pills at Warner-Lambert. Staying close will take more than just their will. Or at least more than just *her* will, which doesn't seem strong enough on its own. She hopes the tattoo will shore it up. Sammie rolls the pin in the ink and passes it to her, a dark blue jewel trembling at its end. She takes it in her right hand and stares at the meaty spot between finger and thumb on the left.

"What do I do?"

"It's not the Sixteen Chapel or whatever."

"Just stick it in?"

"Like Jumbo did."

"Fuck you."

"Only not as deep."

She jabs the pin down but her muscles tighten before it strikes, and it only spots her skin. She tries again, biting her lip to keep from crying out, and this time it goes in, though not far enough to draw blood. "You do it."

"Pussy," Sammie says, but she takes the pin without hesitation and rolls it in the ink again, as if she's known all along it would come to this. She braces Nicole's hand against her leg, just above the rip at her knee. The frayed threads of her jeans tickle Nicole's knuckles. Sammie's fingers are the most graceful part of her, longer than Nicole's, the nails shapely and enviable even painted sloppily with purple polish. Cleaned up they'd be more elegant than Mrs. Farber's. And now those fingers are snapping down, though Nicole isn't at all ready. She flinches, and the pin goes in at an angle. "Hold the fuck still," Sammie says, and snaps again, the pin this time going deeper than Nicole thinks it should. She expects a spurt of blood to follow, but there's only a tiny red dot, slowly bubbling up. She wants to see how large it will grow, but before it finishes spreading, the point descends and then descends again, a barrage of little stabs.

She grits her teeth, but the pain shoots down her arm to her elbow, and she can't keep herself from groaning. And then there's a knock on the door, followed by Mrs. Farber's tentative voice. "Everything okay in there?" Neither of them answer. The pin keeps coming down, pressing into her, forming the universe, or a black hole, but she can't see it because her eyes are squeezed shut. "Girls?" Mrs. Farber calls, louder now. "Will you please let me in?"

"Give us a second," Sammie barks, but that's the wrong approach: the door handle rattles, and Mrs. Farber knocks again, harder.

"Please open the door."

The pricks stop, and Sammie releases her hand. She wants to say, *Keep going. Cover the whole thing*. She'd have it cover every inch of her body, if she could. Instead she opens her eyes. She still can't see the tattoo. Blood covers it, and much of her thumb as well. It's leaked into her palm, and some is dripping onto the floor. Sammie cleans off the pin, bends it back into shape, sticks it through the fabric of her sleeve, and closes the clasp. Nicole just sits, watching the blood pool and drip, until Sammie tears off another wad of toilet paper and dabs at her hand. "Anything else I can do for you?" she asks. "Wipe your ass while I'm at it?"

A throbbing has taken the place of the sting, and though it hurts less, it encompasses more of her, moving from the tips of her fingers beyond her elbows, and it nearly sets her crying again. Mrs. Farber hammers the door and shouts, "Let me in right now."

"Scrub it," Sammie says. "Lots of soap, so you don't get fuckin' gangrene."

Mrs. Farber has washed her face, and without makeup her skin is wan, her eyes tired. Freckles to match those on her hands, hidden before, now darken her cheeks and forehead. She's changed out of the tennis outfit into crisp slacks and lavender blouse, though she still wears the slippers. Her hair is loose to her shoulders. She and Sammie are the same height, both an inch shorter than Nicole, who isn't finished growing yet. She's hoping to add another half inch to her stride this summer, which should help her make varsity when cross-country starts again next fall. Sammie and Mrs. Farber stare at each other, and this time Mrs. Farber doesn't look away. "So," Sammie says, trying again for that bullying tone somewhere between TV lawyer and mob enforcer, but there's something uneasy about her voice now, not quite sure of itself. "Are we ready to settle up?"

Mrs. Farber's hands are on her hips, elbows touching either door jamb. There's no way for Nicole to slip out. "I'd like to speak to your friend," Mrs. Farber says. "In private."

"Anything you got to say to her, you can say to me. Unless, you know, you want to get the authorities involved?"

At this, Mrs. Farber doesn't even blink. She steps aside and makes a motion with her hand. "Go right ahead."

"You think I'm fuckin' around? I'll call the cops right now."

"The phone's in the kitchen."

"Well, it's on you then," Sammie says, flashing Nicole a puzzled look. She's not used to other people being unpredictable, their moods, like hers, changing from one minute to the next. She certainly doesn't expect it from Mrs. Farber, no more than she expects it from Nicole. "Why don't I call Jumbo while I'm at it, let him know his mom's selling him out for a few hundred—"

"Just give us a minute," Nicole says.

Again the look of confusion, but one that's also relieved. "You sure you're...up to it?"

"I'm done puking."

She's done acting, too. The nervous energy that made her chew up her nails on the bike ride here is gone now, replaced by a heaviness that travels with the ache in her hand through all her limbs and into her head. When her parents spot the tattoo, they'll flip, she knows: her mother shouting about ink poisoning, her father threatening to transfer her to the Solomon Schechter high school in West Orange. And as she does whenever they smell cigarettes on her breath, whenever she comes home drunk from a party, whenever she misses her curfew or skips school or gets caught shoplifting, she'll hint that it was all Sammie's doing. And once again they'll tell her she can't see Sammie anymore, she's banned from the Weisbart house, and Sammie is banned from hers—a pledge they'll keep for a week at most. Because they need Sammie as much as Nicole does. Without her around, who can they blame for their daughter's recklessness, her belligerence, her disregard of every rule they try to set?

"One minute," Sammie says. "After that, I'm making the call."

Nicole is the one to close the door behind her. It's she who leans against the sink, and Mrs. Farber who sits on the toilet. The woman's perfume is as strong as the scent from the candle, slightly acidic, but Nicole's stomach stays calm now, no hint of rumbling. In the mirror she can see a little zit in the crease between nose and cheek, one of the few she's ever had. She leans forward to squeeze it, but then catches sight of the toilet paper, a dime-sized spot of blood tacking it to her skin, and tucks the hand behind her back. "I'm sorry about your floor," she says. "I'm feeling better now."

"I had a friend like her when I was your age," Mrs. Farber says.

"I'm sorry you missed your tennis match, too."

"I did everything she told me to do, no matter how stupid."

"You don't know anything about us," Nicole says.

"It was easier, never having to make decisions for myself."

"I need the money for the clinic," she says. "I can't ask my parents for it."

"I guess it's no different now," Mrs. Farber says. "My husband chose this house. He even picked out all the furniture."

The truth is, this was all Nicole's idea. If she'd left it up to Sammie, they would have taken a bus to Bethlehem, kicked JP in the nuts, and then tried to figure out how to lure him away from Leigh. It was Nicole who wanted to do something more drastic, make him realize he'd messed with the wrong girl. All she had to do was lay out the plan, and Sammie took over, looking up the address and phone number, calling several mornings in a row to make sure Mrs. Farber would be home. It's been an unspoken rule between them since the beginning: if Nicole wants something, all she has to do is ask. "We've been friends forever," she says now, flexing her sore hand behind her back. "She'll do anything for me."

But Mrs. Farber, staring up at the beveled glass window above the toilet, might not have heard. "I'm sorry he hurt you," she says. "I did my best with him, but I've never understood boys."

"He should have told me he had a girlfriend."

"She's not as pretty as you."

"Minute's up," Sammie calls.

"He can definitely do better," Mrs. Farber says.

"Ready for me to make that call now?" Sammie shouts, her boots clacking away from the door. "See what the law says about a nineteen-year-old screwing a fifteen-year-old?"

Mrs. Farber is standing now, pressing something into Nicole's wrapped palm. "Morning sickness doesn't start until six weeks in," she says, and reaches past to open the door. Nicole takes a quick peek at the roll of bills—a fifty on the outside—before looking for a place to put it. But she has no pockets in her running shorts or tank top, so closes it into her fist.

"Enough is enough," Sammie says, looking small in the cavernous room, light dumping from the skylight onto her wild curls, her face all innocence and worry. "Time to pay up."

Nicole grabs her arm and pulls her out of the house.

"What are you gonna do with it?" Sammie asks.

"I don't know," Nicole says. "Buy some clothes, I guess. Or get you a bike."

"Watch where you're going."

They're both on her bike now, Nicole standing to pedal, Sammie perched warily on the seat behind her. Nicole's hand throbs on the handle. She peels away the toilet paper and lets it flutter to the ground. The skin underneath has stopped bleeding, but it's red and puffy, plastered with white fibers. The tattoo itself is smaller than Sammie's, not much bigger than a mole. She imagines people asking about it—not now, but later, when she's in college, away from Lenape, away from New Jersey—and imagines herself saying, *It's just a hole*. And then she'll add, waving it like a weapon, *Don't get too close. Might fall in*.

"And you?" she asks. "Spend your half on weed and music no one wants to listen to?"

"Hell, yes," Sammie says.

They've come to the end of the development, where the road dips downhill. On her wrist, the watch reads twenty to ten. Not even an hour has passed since they went inside. Second period will end in a few minutes, and if they hurry she can make it to school in time for chemistry class. She pedals once and lets them coast.

"You should just keep it all. Buy an extra ounce."

She turns onto Lenape Road, which is steeper and winding. In front of them the older neighborhoods fan out around the lake, a wedge of water glittering through the trees.

Sammie grabs her around the waist. "Slow down, will you?"

"I'm serious," Nicole says. "You can keep it. I don't want any of it."

She doesn't need the money. She has what she wants most: something to remember Sammie if she's no longer in her life, as everyone—everyone except Sammie—suspects she won't be one day.

"Slow the fuck down," Sammie says, and reaches forward to clench the brake. Nicole slaps her hand away.

"You reek," she says. "I told you it was too hot for that jacket."

Sammie fans a hand under her armpit. "Slow down, or I'll shove it under your nose."

"Quit. You're making me gag."

"One hundred percent prime grade woman."

"Left out in the sun too long."

The road curves sharply to the left, but Nicole doesn't touch the brake. The wind feels cool in her face, the tilt of the bike exhilarating as she turns. Except there in front of them is a big white van, nosing out of a driveway. On its side is a picture of a bent pipe with a plumber's snake sliding through. Sammie cries out, but Nicole stays silent. She catches a glimpse of the driver—baseball cap, sunglasses—and waits to see if he'll

notice them, waits for the inevitable. Why fight against what she can't change? Though she does squeeze the brake now, as hard as she can, her imagination blooms with the impact, all questions about the future answered, made irrelevant, with one definitive blow.

But the van misses them by inches. She's past it by the time she stops all the way. And then Sammie's off the bike, running after it, shouting, "I'll kill you and your wife and your whole fuckin' family!" When it keeps going, she picks up a rock and hurls it, and when that misses, she makes a V over her mouth with two fingers, sticks her tongue through, wags it up and down.

The van rounds the curve, up the hill and out of sight.

JODY GLADDING

all suspect clothing
a single
the poor leather
hide jacket
for warmth
a can
trash

must be burned

epidemic

passed

from one

to

another

what

they

gather

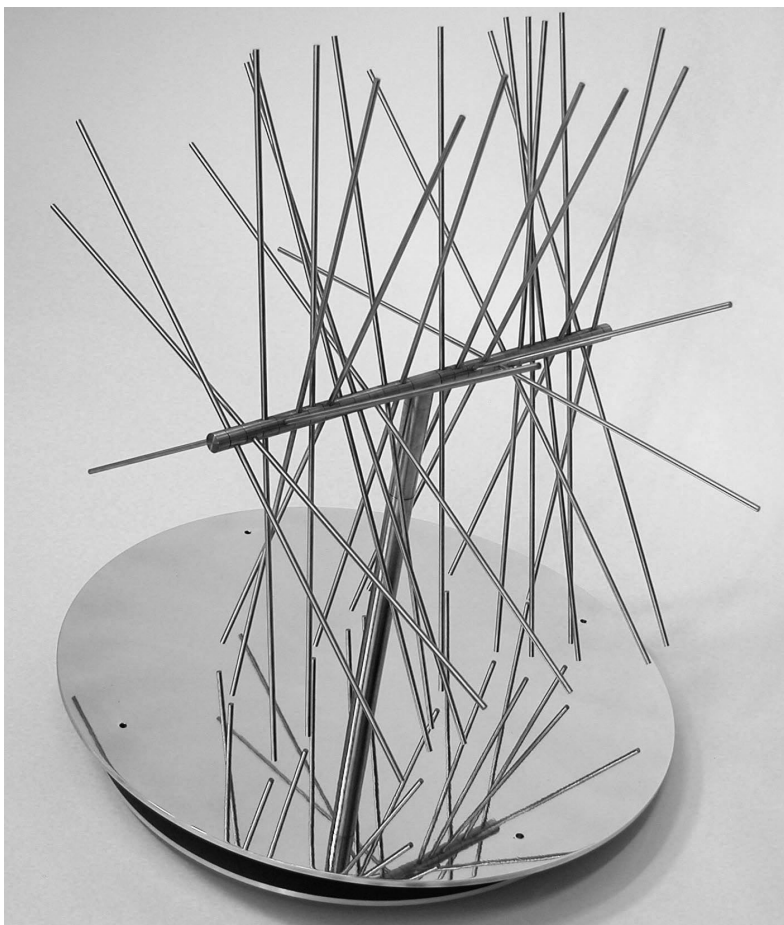
around

lit

fire



Anne Lilly, *Eleven Miles Above Virgin*, 2011,
stainless steel, 19 in. x 19 in. x 19 in.

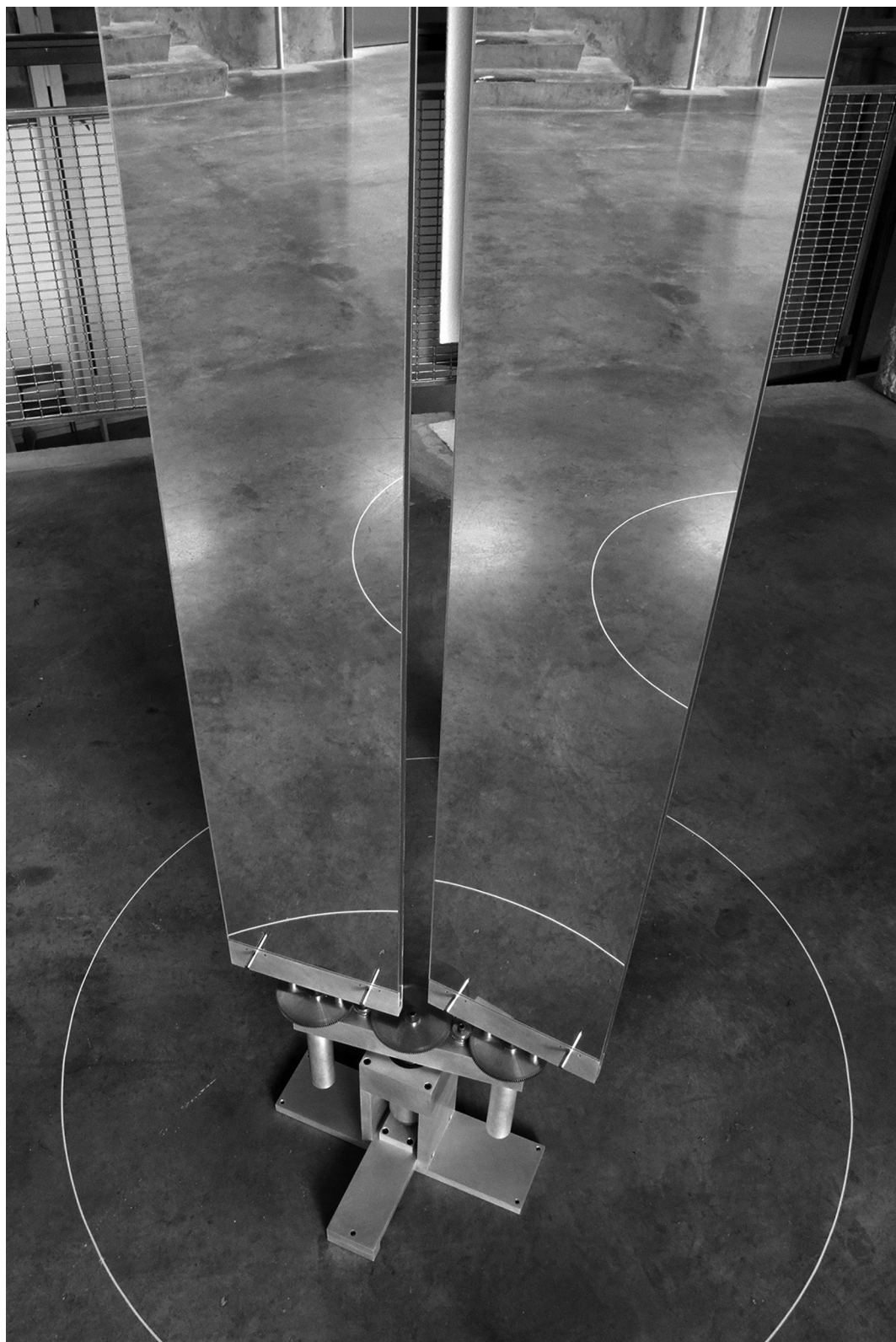


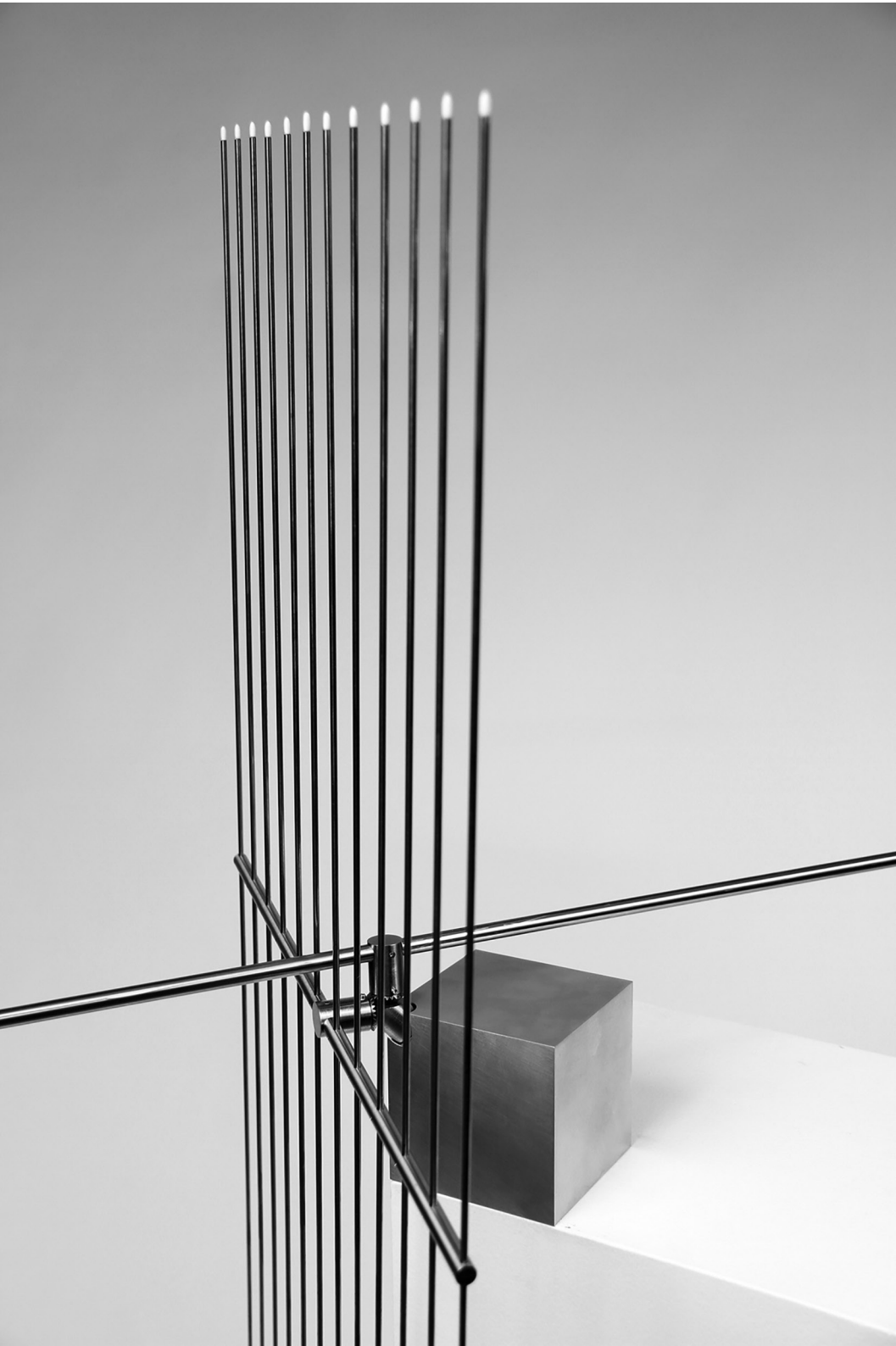
Anne Lilly, *Anemone*, 2008, stainless steel,
aluminum, 22 in. x 22 in. x 22 in.



Anne Lilly, *Chiasmus*, 2012, stainless steel, 25 in. x 25 in. x 25 in.

OPPOSITE: **Anne Lilly**, *To Wreathe*, 2016, mirror, plywood, aluminum, stainless steel, motor, engineering components, 72 in. x 20 in. x 36 in.







Anne Lilly, Van Ruisdael's View of Haarlem (detail), 2013,
stainless steel, aluminum, 40 in. x 40 in. x 40 in.

OPPOSITE: **Anne Lilly**, Van Ruisdael's View of Haarlem,
2013, stainless steel, aluminum, 40 in. x 40 in. x 40 in.

RICHARD CARSON

Assisted Living

ON A WARM MONDAY morning in early October 2014, I moved my father into the Pilgrim Village Assisted Living Center. A few weeks before, I had asked him if he had heard of Pilgrim Village. My father had smiled.

“Sure,” he said.

He told me that it was a nursing home made from a converted pocketbook factory on the Boston-Quincy line, near the neighborhood where he grew up. He had sold newspapers a few blocks from there, and he said that he remembered when they used to bring the cows in from Braintree to be tanned.

“It’s really not a nursing home, Pa,” I said. “You can have a life still. You’ll have your own place, there are lots of activities, they have trips, there are lots of nice people.”

My father had been a truant officer in Boston for twenty-seven years until his first stroke forced him into retirement. For all the years he had been a truant officer, my father prided himself on being able to tell when kids were lying: they give you information that you don’t ask for.

"You know," he said. "On damp days, when you drive by there, you can still smell the cow shit."

Overall he had seemed agreeable, but on the day I moved him in, my father shook as we drove the two miles to Pilgrim Village, as if the shadows of the trees we passed were scraping his skin. We pulled into the parking lot, and he stared at the long brick building with its iron fences and imitation old-fashioned street lamps.

"Let's just take it slow," I said. I got him out of the car, and we walked toward the brick entrance with its lawn of wood chips. There was a bench on either side, and on one bench sat a woman in a bright pink dress. The other bench was empty. The woman's cheeks were brown and sunken. Her hair rose above her head like a gray petrified bush. She kept staring at the bench opposite her and shouting at it.

"Abner?" she cried. "Abner!" I squeezed my father's elbow.

"It'll be fine, Pa."

My father stopped and gave me that look that could stop heaven and earth.

"How the hell would you know?" he said.

Inside, I walked him down a corridor lined with blond wooden handgrips. Finally, we got to his apartment, a wide L with an insert for a bathroom. I unlocked the door and my father pushed it open with his walker.

He pointed toward a recliner that the Center provided. I settled him into it and asked if he would be okay while I went and got his clothes. He stared at his loafers. I waited. "They won't come in by themselves," my father finally said.

I brought in his clothes and hung them up. My father sat and watched me. The facility had provided a television and I snapped it on. The screen brightened with bluish film.

"Looks like they haven't connected the cable yet," I said. "I'll call them."

My father rubbed the faint pink line on his forehead left from the fall he had taken a month before. I had had faculty meetings all day. Around two-thirty, he had stopped answering the phone. I left the meetings early, and when I got to his house I found him on the floor, his walker on top of him, bleeding over the eye and shaking.

“She’s everywhere,” he had said. “She’s everywhere.”

Now I went back out to the car and brought in the remaining cartons. I set up the picture of my mother feeding him cake on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, the only picture of her he’d kept after she died. I said I had to get to school, but he didn’t respond. His eyes were closed. I asked him if he needed anything else. He kept them closed when he shook his head.

I knew that my father believed I couldn’t take care of him. The home health care worker he had fired on suspicion of taking drugs, the neighbor’s visits he’d stopped because he said she was stealing, the absence that had led to his fall, everything that had gone wrong all had to do with decisions of mine. And now there was Pilgrim Village. I called to tell the home health care worker that he was going, lest somebody think of sending a replacement.

“Just make sure you show up as much as you can,” she said. “It will impact his care. We want this to work, don’t we.”

I thanked her. When I hung up, I repeated her words. If Pilgrim Village worked, after all these years, my father might trust me.

So, now, I had to say it again.

“Pa, it really will be okay.”

With his eyes still closed, my father waved good bye.

On the day my father went to Pilgrim, I had been teaching history and social studies at John Jay High School for a little over a month. After I got out of college, I taught those subjects in a small private school in Maine until declining enrollments changed that. I came back to Boston,

enrolled in education courses at UMass, and when it came time to complete my teaching hours, I applied to John Jay, a public school near my parents' house. My mother was still alive then, my father had had his second stroke, and I thought I could help.

When I was a kid and I would complain that we never went on vacation to Cape Cod or New Hampshire, my father would tell me that our money went to the Latin Academy they sent me to so I wouldn't have to go to John Jay. He had cases there every day, he told me, and every time he went there, the police were there too.

I expected to see bullet holes in the walls when I got to John Jay, but instead the place was freshly painted. Teachers and students were generally friendly, but something of my father's opinions had filtered into my consciousness. In my first week, I put twelve students on detention. The kids settled down, but they kept staring at me, as if to see what I would do next.

After I left my father that morning, I rushed to school and into the office where the principal's administrative assistant, a young woman named Melina, looked up from her computer screen and smiled.

I had been in a relationship in Maine with a woman who taught math until she, too, was let go. We wrote until I received a letter saying she had found a job with a pharmaceuticals company where she had met a marketing director who, she said, she had really connected with. He had purpose and vision. She said that she hoped that I would find someone too.

Melina was a little younger than me, and when I was in her presence, I found myself wanting to say nice things. I often started by complimenting her on her earrings. That morning she wore black disks trimmed with silver filigree. At the center of each was a tiny red dot. I was about to make a comment when Melina raised her mocha-colored smear of eyebrow and then curled her finger over and over until I approached.

"He wants to see you." Melina tossed her head back in the direction of the principal's office.

"Okay," I said, trying to sound upbeat. At that moment, the disks of her earrings looked to me like ancient shields, each spattered with a stubborn smudge of enemy blood.

I knocked on the door, and the principal, whose name was John McDermott, told me to come in. He did not look up when I entered but kept looking at some papers that were spread across an open folder on his desk. "I was just wondering how things are going," he finally said.

I knew that McDermott was about ten years older than me, that he was in the National Guard, and that he had served in the first Gulf War. I moved slowly to the seat in front of his desk and sat down.

I could see then that he was looking at a single sheet of paper with a series of numbers on it in ascending order, all crossed out but the last, which was the number six. There was a notation in what I recognized as McDermott's handwriting. The numbers were the number of days I had been late or absent thus far that term.

I was out the day after my father had fallen and the day he had his stitches out. I was late when my father accused the neighbor who looked in on him of stealing, when he fired the home health care worker who he said used the bathroom to take drugs, and when I went to look at Pilgrim. And then there was today.

McDermott was looking at my schedule. "You have some interesting classes." He named them, and I nodded after each one. "You have some interesting kids." He named them and I tried to mentally go through my class lists. McDermott looked up. I laughed and then wished I hadn't.

"I know," I said. "They are. Really interesting."

McDermott looked down at the folder and repeated one of the names he had recited. "I was mistaken," he said. "He's not in your class."

I squirmed in my chair. "I'm sure there won't be any more problems. I know my father can adjust, and he'll be fine. I'll make every effort to get involved, *here* I mean. I'll stay after. I'll get to know them."

McDermott smiled in a way that reminded me of my father.

"Let's hope so," he said.

A bell rang. I waited. McDermott closed my file but stared at it and then me as if he could see inside both.

"Don't try and be your mother for your father," he said. I felt my face grow warm, and McDermott told me to get to class.

I stayed late in my homeroom, but nobody came by. Visiting hours were over at Pilgrim, so I called my father's room. An attendant answered and said she was getting my father ready for bed. I asked how he was. "You have to give him time to adjust," she said impatiently.

The following morning on my way into school, I was considering calling my father before my first class when footsteps approached behind me, and a hand on my shoulder stopped me in my tracks. I turned slowly and saw Ray Dolan, the guidance counselor. Ray was maybe two years older than me. I knew he was popular with the kids. And I knew he was popular with Melina. I sometimes came upon them in the office when I'd stop to pick up my mail. They always stopped talking when I came in.

"Want to run something by you," Ray said breathlessly. He was wearing his usual brave smile, as if he expected that you wouldn't understand or appreciate the latest great idea he had.

"What's that?" I said.

Ray opened his eyes and sucked in his breath. "Baseball," he said.

"Baseball?"

Ray held up his index finger in front of my face. "Baseball unites us," he said.

"That's an interesting thought," I said when he lowered his finger.

Ray twisted to face the back door of the school and shouted greetings at some students going in. One of them, a student I recognized from my

US History of the Civil War class, whom Ray greeted as Daryl Bennett, half turned and waved back. I remembered that I had put him on detention three times.

“Well, think about it, Frank.” Ray made a circular motion with the same finger he had held up to my face and pointed toward the school. “We wait for spring training in the winter, we *have* spring training in the spring, we have the regular season in the summer and we have the playoffs in the fall.”

“But we’re not in the playoffs this year,” I said. Several times in the last month I had listened to my father denounce the Red Sox who, once again, had choked in the finish.

The smile had disappeared, but the fixed intensity of his stare remained.

“And that’s my point, Frank. There’s all this unresolved *stuff* about what *might* have been, *could* have been, *should* have been.” He took a short breath and we started walking again. “People have very strong feelings about baseball.”

I nodded while I repressed a more emphatic response. “That’s certainly true.”

This seemed to hearten Ray. The smile returned and he stopped at the door. “Then you’re probably as upset as I am that—” He grimaced and shook his head. “We have no team.”

I nodded my head to indicate shared dismay. I actually wasn’t aware that John Jay didn’t have a baseball team.

“What I want to do is plant the seed, now, while they’re thinking about it.” Ray opened the door and gestured direction with a sweep of his hand. “Get a few kids together. Have them practice a little, just for fun.”

We were inside the school, and Ray’s voice dropped to an urgent hush. “Then, in the spring, we’re ready to go!”

Ray stepped back, clutched an imaginary bat, fixed his eyes on an imaginary ball, and swung into it. He followed it over the confines of an

imaginary field and then turned to me and smiled. "And I was thinking you could help?"

There was a stairway on either side of us, one leading to the classroom floors upstairs and one leading to the lavatories in the basement where students often snuck down to smoke. There were students down there now, laughing. I felt my hands get clammy.

"I don't know, Ray," I said.

Ray nodded and bit his lip. "Not to upset you, Frank, but I hear things."

The laughter had stopped. The whole school seemed silent.

"Oh?" I tried to sound casual. "Such as?"

Ray looked at his watch and then far off. "How shall I say this: That you don't seem *comfortable* here. That maybe this isn't a good fit all around. It's the whole private school–public school thing." The smile returned. "This would show everybody that you can fit in."

I wanted to ask him if what he heard had come from McDermott, the teachers, or the students, but the bell rang. Some girls I didn't know ascended the stairs with metallic clunks. Ray called them each by name and told them to get to class. I told Ray I thought he had a great idea and I'd love to do it. He nodded as if I had told him something that he already knew. He started up the stairs ahead of me, but stopped about halfway and turned.

"And if you have any equipment, you know, bats, gloves, that kind of thing, maybe you could bring it?"

I said I sure did, and I sure would. And in my mind, I heard my father say as he had so often: "Do you know what your problem is? You don't like baseball."

It wasn't that I just didn't like baseball, I didn't like watching it with my father. He never really had any hobbies and supposedly he watched to relax, but he always seemed to bring the stresses of the job with him. He

suspected umpires of deliberately missing calls, sports announcers of bias, and players of wasting time in the dugout.

Early on, I had a fragile interest in baseball. I recognized basic plays and knew the starting lineup, but my father seemed to know the identity and behavior of every player of every team. He expected the same of me.

“RBI?” my father would say, when someone stepped up to the plate. “Traded from?”

In those moments my father kept watching me, concerned at what I didn’t know. I think he believed that I was missing some fundamental knowledge of human behavior that only baseball would teach me, something about effort and honesty and genuine skill.

“The pitcher and the catcher need to work together,” he would say. “They need to read each other’s minds. And the batter needs to adjust, play to his strengths. See that?”

A batter made a short, choppy swing. “The pitcher is crowding the batter. The batter should have stepped back.”

He pointed out sinkers and drop balls, breaking balls and brush-backs, but I still couldn’t tell a slow ball from a fastball. I just never seemed to see what my father wanted me to.

I managed to avoid Ray for the rest of the day. After the last bell, I snuck out and drove over to Pilgrim Village. When I arrived, I went to the office of the Director of Nursing and said I was on my way to see my father, but I was wondering how he was doing.

“Well, you can’t see him now,” she said, squinting at me over the rims of her glasses. “He’s being assessed by physical therapy.”

I had a moment’s panic that my father would resist, and the whole deal would be off.

“I know he can be challenging sometimes,” I said, avoiding the word “difficult.” “He’s been through a lot recently.”

The nurse snorted and pushed her glasses back close to her eyes.

"We know how to handle him," she said.

My father's second stroke had affected his mobility, not to speak of his moods. My parents sold the house where I had grown up and moved into a first-floor apartment with a ramp in the back. My mother retired to take care of him.

Sometimes, my mother would ask me to come in and shave him or stay with him while she did errands. When I tried to scrape the whiskers from his chin or fix the pillows at his back he would always say, "I'll wait for your mother." And then, when she got back, he would yell at her for taking so long.

At those times my mother would just smile and go to another room. When I followed her she would shake her head and put her finger to her lips.

"It's hard for him," she said to me, time and time again. And then, so many times, before I could say anything else, we would hear the muted rattle of my father's walker. He would come up behind my mother, raise his arms and fall against her, his arms locked around her chest and a look on his face as if he had lost her but had found her again.

"She's the greatest, you know that?" my father would say, in tears now. "She's the greatest."

On Friday, Ray met me in the corridor and proudly announced that he had rounded up a team and wanted to have a practice on Monday afternoon.

"Great!" I said. "Where?"

Ray made his brave smile and rattled off the names of the guys on the team, one of whom was Daryl Bennett. Still smiling, Ray twisted his head to the side.

"You know him," he said.

I said that I did and figured that Daryl told him about being put on detention yet again the day before.

"Where did you say the practice was?" I said.

Ray told me the name of a local city park. Then he frowned.

"You'll be there with equipment." He suddenly looked terrified. "For everyone?"

"What I don't have, I'll get," I said. Ray still looked upset.

"You know we don't have any money, Frank," he said.

I told him not to worry, that I would take care of it. Ray nodded until his fright faded and he seemed satisfied with the idea. He put his hand on my shoulder.

"The kids will see a whole different side of you," Ray said, a bit of the old smile back. "That will be good."

When I got to Pilgrim Village, I went to my father's room and found him sitting in his chair. There was a shopping bag beside him, filled with folded laundry. I noticed that each piece had a small tag attached that bore my father's name. In front of him was a new walker with wheels and a basket attached to the bars. I asked him if he liked it.

"They took the old one," his voice cracked with outrage. "They just took it."

I told him that the new one was really nice, and I thought he was going to cry.

"The old one was fine," he said, and I remembered that my mother had ordered it for him.

I figured that I would change the subject by talking about school.

My father had never really reacted when I told him I was going to teach at John Jay. I told him that it was a nice place, they had fixed it up. My father said nothing, but his face began to flood with color, and I was afraid that he thought I was implying he had exaggerated for all those years.

"Now, the kids," I said, "can be a handful. But, believe it or not, I keep them in line."

My father had wanted me to go to law school and was furious when I went into teaching. Now he stared at me for several endless seconds and then shook his head.

“How long do you have to stay there?” he said. I told him that I had until the end of the year, but there was always the possibility that they would ask me to stay on. My father wiped a whitish speck from the corner of his mouth.

“And that’s what you want?” he said.

“Maybe,” I said. “Who knows? We’ll just have to see.”

My father looked at his knees and muttered something I couldn’t hear. And then he looked at me.

“That’s a shame,” he said.

The next day being Saturday, I resolved to get to Pilgrim Village as early as I could. I figured I would look up sporting goods stores on the Internet, go to the closest one, and get what I needed. Unfortunately, when I began calling around, I discovered that no one within a ten-mile radius had what I wanted. Some had bats or balls, and when I asked about gloves, people grew impatient when I couldn’t specify exactly what I wanted.

“Catcher’s, pitcher’s, what?” a youngish-sounding man at a place called Best Buy Sports said. I started to explain about the team, and he expelled a short hiccup of a laugh.

“Figure out what you’re doing and call me back,” he said. “I got customers.”

I finally called a place way out on Route 9, where a woman made musical “Mmm-hmms!” to everything on my list. I asked for her hours and she said they closed promptly at five.

“But we are open Sundays. At noon.” She told someone she would be right with them and hung up.

It was now twelve-thirty. I showered and changed, and by the time I got to Pilgrim Village, the midday meal was over. When I stepped inside the lobby, I heard a roaring, then the rattle of something metallic, and

then the tinkle that comes from glasses being pulled out of a dishwasher, all clean and steamy and ready to be put away.

My father was in his chair again. He half smiled when I came in but didn't say anything. He closed his eyes, and I was afraid something had happened, so I asked him what he had for lunch.

"Nothing special," he said.

I asked him how he was sleeping, and he shrugged. I asked him if he wanted to watch TV, and he opened his eyes and glared at me.

"It doesn't work," he said.

I said I would get on it, and he closed his eyes. I figured that it would be best to let him be for a while.

I watched him doze and thought back to the end of last winter. I had noticed that sometimes my mother would stop what she was doing for a few seconds. One day she was reaching to hang up her coat when she stopped and winced. I asked her what was wrong and she waved her hand as if I was far away. "Breath." She sucked in the word. I made her promise she would call the doctor. A week later she asked me to stay with my father for a few hours. When she got home, my mother took me aside and said she needed a double bypass. She said we would tell my father she was going in for "lady troubles" so he wouldn't ask questions.

He waved her away when she left, as if she had annoyed him. She took a cab so I could stay with him, and he told me it was a disgrace that she had to do so. Within an hour, he started asking when she would be back. I told him the next day, hoping maybe we could talk to a doctor who could assure him that everything was fine.

I was scraping away the dinner he wouldn't eat when the doctor called to say that my mother had gone into arrest while they were prepping her.

"I can talk to your father if you'd like," he said. I heard my father curse and turn the TV off. I thanked the doctor but said that I should tell him first. When I went into the living room, my father was shaking even as he swatted the tears coming down his face.

"I never should have let her go!" my father yelled at me. "She didn't have to go."

Now, I watched him doze until someone tapped gently on his door and then opened it. A nurse poked her head in and asked how we were doing.

"Kind of sleepy today," I said, although my father had opened his eyes. She stepped inside and asked my father if he would like her to turn down his bed so he could nap. My father nodded.

"Sorry to interrupt your visit," she said, helping my father to his feet.

"That's okay," my father said in the strongest voice I had heard him use all day. "He wants to go anyway."

A little after eleven the next morning, I began the trek to Sports Emporium on Route 9. When I got there, I discovered that it was a small place crammed with wire barrels and bins of every conceivable kind of sports equipment. I looked around until I found a box that held baseball bats. There were black and white and metallic-blue bats, black bats with orange flames licking the side, orange and green bats, all with abbreviations that ended with "—X." I wanted a bat like those I had watched with my father, a plain wooden one. After some shifting around, I found it.

I slid the bat up and out and grasped it in my hands. Then I swung it slowly over the pile of gloves.

"No!"

I froze in mid-swing. A woman in a navy blue smock with a plastic name tag that said "Helen" came from behind me. "You're letting the bat be in charge. *You* need to be in charge."

I started to swing again, slowly. Helen shook her head.

"Loosen your grip so your wrists are freer. Wrist rotation gives you more acceleration and that gives you more power."

I wasn't sure what that meant, but I kept shifting and swinging. Helen laughed.

"It's fun once you know what you're doing," she said.

I swung a few more times. Suddenly, playing baseball seemed real to me.

On Monday morning, I met Ray in the corridor. He pointed to his watch.

“Three o’clock! You remember where?”

I told him where and then rattled off the equipment I had bought. Ray hardened his face into a grave expression and nodded.

“Very good!” he said in a serious tone. I’m impressed.” Then his face relaxed a little. “I think you may work out okay. I’ll admit I had some concerns.” The corridor was empty and his words were loud enough for anyone to hear.

Ray looked at me, waiting for a reply. There had been heavy traffic coming back from Sports Emporium, so I never got back to see my father. I debated whether to tell Ray that I had hoped to run over to Pilgrim Village before the practice when the bell rang. I pointed to my watch and Ray slapped me on the back. I thanked him and headed down the corridor.

I was about five feet away when Ray shouted back: “Oh, and Melina is coming to the practice! I figured it would help morale.”

“Good thought,” I said.

I was determined to get to Pilgrim Village, even if it was only for ten minutes. I was afraid that Ray would suggest we all go together to the park, so I beat it out the door after the last bell.

When I got there, sprinklers were watering wedges of lawn. Near the entrance, one sprinkler suddenly came to life. It sputtered and hissed and gray veils of water rose and spun in the air. I watched until the spigot stopped spinning. Even then, the spiral of water hung in the air for a fragment of time before it crashed to the ground.

I knocked on my father’s door and he yelled from the inside that it was unlocked.

"I thought you were the cable guy," my father said. He looked over at the blackened screen and nodded in a way that reminded me of how he'd look at leaves not raked or a sidewalk not shoveled. "For the television."

"I'll call them," I said. "They should have been here by now." My stomach began to tighten.

My father moved soundlessly to his chair and sank into it.

"I'm sorry I didn't make it yesterday," I said. I was about to tell him why, thinking maybe I could rescue the moment if I told him about the equipment I had bought. But I recognized the expression on his face and every thought I had disappeared. "I'm afraid I can't stay. I have to get back for meetings." I hesitated and I knew that he knew I was lying before I said it. "I'm on the finance committee."

I stood up and backed toward the door. "I'll call about the cable and check back."

My father shifted as if something had stung him. "You don't want to come here."

"That's not true, Pa." I didn't want a scene, for his sake and for mine. "I'm doing the best I can."

Up until now, it had been the lady next door, the home health care worker. Before them, it had been my mother who always seemed to know what to say. Now it was me. My father leaned forward, his face blotchy and strained.

"I suppose you're showing up just to make me feel better. You think you'll make it easier on me." I knew what he meant.

"I know it's hard," I said. "We're all trying."

A clock in the hall struck three, and the expression on my face must have told him I needed to go. His mouth crumpled into a half-smile.

"Get out," he said.

I drove straight from Pilgrim and when I arrived, I saw Ray, Melina, and a few guys standing by the entrance. The only one I recognized was Daryl. I parked my car and slammed the door shut but nobody moved.

"I have equipment," I shouted at the trunk. I opened it and gathered up the gloves, bat, and ball that lay there in a heap. I pushed the trunk shut with my elbow and headed towards them. I smiled at Melina whose earrings were gold concentric hoops and then at Ray who glared for a nanosecond and then smiled back.

"Okay!" Ray touched Melina's elbow and then approached, plucking the ball and a glove from the crook of my elbow. Then he called the four guys by name, one by one, and told them to get what they needed.

One by one, they each took a glove. I tried to remember the names Ray had used. I got Jersey right, but I confused Aldo with Jose. Daryl was the last and I called him by name. He took his glove without looking at me and went off to join the others.

The last remaining glove was for the catcher. I looked over at Ray who was talking to Melina. He held up a finger to indicate his immediate return and leaned toward me.

"Great!" he shouted hoarsely. "Can you be catcher?"

"Sure!" I said. I had never caught a baseball in my life.

"Okay!" Ray said in a mock announcer's voice. "Looks like we're ready!"

The field was a playground the city seemed to have forgotten. There were a few benches, scarred with names and obscene instructions. No one had cut the grass in what looked like years, but there were enough patches of gravelly dirt to carve out some bases and a pitcher's mound.

Ray designated spots in the dirt as bases. Then he threw the ball to Jersey and pointed out a spot for the pitcher's mound. The four guys spread out and threw the ball to each other as they moved farther away.

Ray said something to Melina who nodded, making her gold rings swing in and out of each other. At one point, Ray looked over at me, and I waved with my catcher's mitt on, but Ray brushed the air with his fingers so that I would move back.

The guys did this for several minutes until Ray summoned them together. I moved in but did not join the circle.

"Great!" Ray said. "Now, let's take some time practicing positions, as many as we can." One of the guys made a sound like an aborted whimper, but Ray kept going. "We'll have a batter, a pitcher, and two fielders. We have a catcher." I didn't wave this time, nor did Ray look over at me. The guys mumbled assent, and Ray tossed the ball to Aldo and handed the bat to Jersey. "Play ball!"

We all spread out in a rough triangle. I followed Jersey and stood behind him once we stopped. He took a few practice swings and Aldo threw the pitch that sailed past me and hit the fence that bordered the field.

"Whoops!" I said. "The sun was in my eyes!" I pawed at some weeds and located the ball behind a Coors can. "Found it!" I shouted over my shoulder. I went back to where I was and tossed the ball to Aldo. It arced and landed about two feet in front of him. "Sorry!" I said. Aldo sighed loud enough for me to hear him as he retrieved the ball.

Jersey swung at the second pitch and the ball sailed up and out, about twenty feet beyond Aldo. He got to first and then saw Daryl and Jose trying to find the ball, so he stole second. Jose finally found the ball and threw it to Aldo who called him a wuss for taking so long.

"Okay, okay," Ray said, with a hint of tension. "We're all on the same team."

"We're out of team, aren't we?" Jersey said. "Now there'll be only one guy fielding."

Ray thought for a moment and mumbled something to Melina who removed her amber-tinted sunglasses, needless in the fading sun.

"Right!" Ray said.

"So, are we done?" Jose said.

Ray grimaced. "How about you switch with Jersey who just got a base hit!" He gave Jersey back his glove who took it without comment.

Jose got a hit on the first pitch and the ball went over everyone's heads and into a thick clump of tall grass. Jose just stood there while Daryl and Jersey searched for the ball. When Daryl finally found it, Jersey pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and started to say a word that began with "f."

"Sorry, Mr. Dolan, I gotta go. Remember? I said?"

Ray nodded slowly and Jersey sprinted to the edge of the field and beyond. Jose and Aldo looked at each other and shrugged. Aldo threw the ball to Ray.

"Now are we done?" Jose said cheerfully.

"Daryl hasn't had a chance," I said.

Daryl turned and looked at me suspiciously.

"Everybody else had one," I said. "You deserve one."

He looked at me more suspiciously, as if I was trying to set him up. He hadn't really done much during the practice, and I feared in that moment that maybe I was. I looked over at Ray who stared back at me without expression.

"Dar-yl, Dar-yl," Melina started clapping her hands over her head, exposing a sliver of flesh at her midriff that I didn't dare look at. Daryl looked over at Aldo who shrugged his shoulders.

"What the you-know-what," Daryl said. Jose laughed when he handed over the bat, as if it was an inside joke.

Ray sighed and nodded, and then wiggled his fingers into his glove Jersey had given him. He smacked the ball three times into the glove and then said wearily, "Okay, let's go."

Daryl took the bat from Jose and took a few practice swings. Ray was pounding the ball into his glove. I remembered what my father had

said about the pitcher and the catcher, but then I stopped. I didn't want to think about my father at that moment.

I felt like I should say something to Daryl, but I didn't know what. I remained standing so that when Daryl swung and missed the first pitch, I caught it.

I threw the ball back to Ray who sprinted forward and caught it.

"Don't let the bat be in charge," I said. "You be in charge." Then I crouched down and waited.

Daryl swung at the next pitch. The ball cracked against the bat and flew in a low arc far to the right of Aldo's shoulder and sputtered through some weeds where it disappeared.

I got to my feet. "That was a home run!" I said.

"Nah," Daryl inspected the bat and took a few more swings. "It was a foul."

"I'm not lookin' for that ball again," Aldo said. He walked over to Ray and handed over his glove. Ray nodded slowly and went to join Melina.

Daryl took a few more swings until Jose came up to him and pointed to his open cell phone. "It's late," he said, snapping the phone shut. "You coming?"

"Sorry about the ball," Daryl said. Then he took my catcher's mitt and went off to give it to Ray who was holding all of the others.

With the guys gone, I was just standing there. The sky had thickened to a purplish dusk. I approached Ray and Melina.

"Why don't you just hang on to everything," I said. "For next time."

Neither acknowledged me. Melina was saying something to Ray, her golden loops undulating in and out like the rhythms of the universe. Ray had a look I had seen my father give my mother, one that said that everything in the world was wrong and only she could make it better. I backed up slowly and then returned to my car.

I suppose I drove back to Pilgrim Village because my father would assume that I wouldn't. Or, maybe it was because I had assumed that I wouldn't.

I knew that dinner would be served soon, but even if I only had ten minutes, I wanted to be there. My father opened his door when I knocked. If he was surprised to see me, he didn't show it.

"Hi," he said without expression.

My father backed up and headed to his TV. On the screen, a woman in a bright green dress was selling diamonds.

"Good, they fixed it," I said, not knowing what else to say. My father dropped into his chair with a sigh.

"Put on what you want," he said.

The irony about the hullabaloo over his television was that, over the years, my father didn't watch much television. He watched the news, a few quiz shows, and, of course, baseball, and that was about it. But now, as I glanced over at him, he seemed to be staring with rapt attention while trays of gems rolled across the screen and prices flashed underneath them.

"Look at what they get for those things," my father said.

"Amazing, isn't it?" I said. I pulled a chair in from his kitchenette and sat beside him.

My father watched while the young woman swept her hand over a necklace of sapphires encircling a pair of earrings and a bracelet of the same pattern. I imagined Melina wearing them.

"Still, there's a lot of craftsmanship there," my father said, rather wistfully I thought. "Look at that."

And so I did. I thought I should be saying something more, but it seemed enough for that moment, both of us watching his television and taking in the cost and the delicacy of things.

Contributors

HERNAN ARDILA is a Spanish artist whose work is composed of non-figurative pieces. Recent solo exhibitions have been held at Boeckercontemporary, Heidelberg (2016), and Galeria Esther Montoriol, Barcelona (2013). He was awarded first prize in both drawing and painting in the Salon Francisco Antonio Cano, Universidad Nacional de Colombia in 1989.

SARAH ARVIO is the author of *night thoughts: 70 dream poems & notes from an analysis, Sono: Cantos*, and *Visits from the Seventh*. A recipient of the Rome Prize and the Bogliasco and Guggenheim fellowships, she worked for many years as a translator for the United Nations in New York and Switzerland. She has also taught poetry at Princeton.

GABRIEL BROWNSTEIN is the author of two books of fiction: *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, Apt. 3W*, winner of the PEN/Hemingway Award, and *The Man from Beyond*, a New York Times Editor's Choice. He is an associate professor of English at St. John's University in New York.

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY's *Star Journal: Selected Poems* is published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016. He is the editor of *Bear Flag Republic: Prose Poems and Poetics from California*, 2008, and *One for the Money: The Sentence as a Poetic Form*, 2012, both with Gary Young. He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in Poetry, two National Endowment for the Arts grants in poetry, a Fulbright Award, and four Pushcart Prizes.

RICHARD CARSON taught English at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester and worked as an editor for Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and other publishing houses. "Assisted Living" is his first published work of fiction.

CARL DENNIS is the author of twelve books of poems. His thirteenth, *Night School*, will be out from Penguin in 2018.

STUART GELZER's essays and stories have appeared in *Eclectica*, *Hippocampus*, and *Carolina Quarterly*. He is a singer specializing in folk music from the Republic of Georgia (kavkasia.org). He lives in northern New Mexico, where he teaches film.

DAVID GEWANTER's new poetry book is *Fort Necessity* (University of Chicago Press, 2018); previous poetry books include *War Bird*; *The Sleep of Reason*; and *In the Belly*, all from Chicago. The recipient of awards from the Whiting and Witter Bynner Foundations, the Academy of American Poets, and the English Speaking Union, he teaches at Georgetown University.

JODY GLADDING has translated thirty books from French and published three collections of poems, most recently *Translations from Bark Beetle* (Milkweed Editions, 2014). A new collection is forthcoming from Ahsahta Press. She directs the Writing Program at the Vermont Studio Center and lives in East Calais, Vermont.

MAGS HARRIES is a sculptor who has worked in collaboration with the architect Lajos Heder in the Harries Héder Collaborative. Her exhibitions include the Neuberger Museum, the Peabody Essex Museum, the Cardiff Bay Art Trust, the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, and the Massachusetts Institute of Contemporary Art. She is the recipient of PAN awards in 2012, 2008, 2005, 2004, 2002, and a Massachusetts Governor's Design Award. She teaches at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Tufts University.

VINCENT HAWKINS is a London-based artist. His group shows include *Old Subject New Object*, Bonington Gallery, Nottingham, 1990, and an exhibition at Clapham Art Gallery, London 1997. He holds numerous awards and was selected for Tracey Emin's Curated Room project at the Royal Academy in 2008.

TERRANCE HAYES is the author of five collections of poetry, including *How to Be Drawn* (Penguin, 2015). His honors include a 2010 National Book Award, a 2014 MacArthur Fellowship, and a 2016 NAACP Image Award for Poetry. His website is terrancehayes.com.

FADY JOUDAH is the author of four collections of poetry. His first, *The Earth in the Attic*, won the Yale Series for Younger Poets in 2007, and his fourth, *Footnotes in the Order of Disappearance*, is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions in 2018. The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Griffin Poetry Prize, a PEN USA translation prize, a Pushcart, and two Best American Poetry publications, he practices medicine in Houston, Texas.

GARRET KEIZER is a contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine*, a Guggenheim Fellow, and the author of eight books of prose, the most recent of which are *Getting Schooled* (2014), *Privacy* (2012), and *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want* (2010). His poetry has appeared in *Agni*, *Antioch Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Image*, *Ploughshares*, *Raritan*, *The New Yorker*, and *Best American Poetry*.

SYLVIA LEGRIS's latest poetry collection is *The Hideous Hidden* (New Directions, 2016). Her third book, *Nerve Squall*, won the 2006 Griffin Poetry Prize. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Poetry*, *Kenyon Review*, *Web Conjunctions*, and *New American Writing*.

ANNE LILLY has taught at MIT, Massachusetts College of Art, the Art Institute of Boston, the DeCordova School, and Maud Morgan Arts. Her work has been collected by the DeCordova Museum, the New Britain Museum of American Art, the Middlebury College Museum of Art, and is held in corporate and private collections internationally. In 2013, she received the Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation Grant Award for Lifetime Achievement.

CONTRIBUTORS

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA (1898–1936) was born in Andalusia and grew up in Granada. His works include the *Gypsy Ballads* and the homoerotic *Dark Love Sonnets*, which did not see print until almost fifty years after his death. His murder in 1936 by Fascist forces at the outset of the Spanish Civil War became a literary cause célèbre; in Spain, his writings were banned until 1954.

MOIRA MCCAVANA is a recent graduate of Harvard University, where she was the recipient of a Hoopes Prize as well as the Le Baron Russell Briggs Thesis Prize for her undergraduate fiction. She is currently working on a collection of stories set in the Spanish Basque Country.

LAURA MCCULLOUGH is the author of eleven books, including *Panic*, which won the Kinereth Genseler Award. Her manuscript *The Wild Night Dress* was a finalist for the 2017 Miller Williams Poetry Prize. She teaches at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey and is on the faculty of the Sierra Nevada low-res MFA. She is the founding editor of *Mead: the Magazine of Literature and Libations*.

DAVID MCDONALD was born in Liverpool, England. He has exhibited at Peter Blake Gallery, Laguna Beach; Carter and Citizen, Los Angeles; Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York; and Clifford Smith Gallery, Boston. His group exhibitions include Torrance Art Museum, Irvine Fine Arts Center, Riverside Art Museum, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

BEN MILLER is the author of *River Bend Chronicle* (Lookout Books). His prose has appeared in the *Kenyon Review*, the *New England Review*, *AGNI*, *Ecotone*, *Raritan*, *Antioch Review*, *One Story*, and *Best American Essays*. Miller's awards include fellowships from the NEA and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, as well as a grant from the Schlesinger Library.

JOHN MINCZESKI is the author of several collections including *A Letter to Serafin* (University of Akron Press, 2009). Recent and forthcoming publications include the *Cortland Review*, *Chattahoochie*, *Lime Hawk*, *Tampa Review*, and *The New Yorker*. He worked as an itinerant poet in the schools in Minnesota for many years, and currently lives in St. Paul.

SCOTT NADELSON is the author of three story collections, most recently *Aftermath*, and a memoir, *The Next Scott Nadelson: A Life in Progress*. He teaches at Willamette University and in the Rainier Writing Workshop MFA Program at Pacific Lutheran University.

ERIC PANKEY is the author of many collections of poetry, most recently *Augury* (Milkweed 2017). He teaches in the BFA and MFA programs at George Mason University.

CECILY PARKS is the author of the poetry collections *Field Folly Snow* (University of Georgia Press, 2008) and *O'Nights* (Alice James Books, 2015), and editor of *The Echoing Green: Poems of Fields, Meadows, and Grasses* (Everyman's Library Pocket Poets, 2016). She teaches in the MFA Program at Texas State University.

EILEEN POLLACK's most recent novel, *Breaking and Entering* (Four Way Books, 2012), was awarded the Grub Street National Book Prize, chosen as a finalist for the John Gardner Fiction Book Award, and named a New York Times Editor's Choice selection. She currently teaches on the faculty of the MFA Program in creative writing at the University of Michigan.

HANNAH ROSEFIELD is a PhD candidate in the English department of Harvard University, where she studies Victorian literature. Her work has appeared in the *New Republic*, *The Point*, the *New Statesman* and *The New Yorker online*, among other publications.

SHERRY SIMPSON's most recent book is *Dominion of Bears*, which won the John Burroughs Medal in 2015. She teaches literary nonfiction in the MFA programs at the University of Alaska Anchorage and the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University. Her essay collection *The Way Winter Comes* is forthcoming from Shorefast Editions.

TRACY K. SMITH is the author of the memoir *Ordinary Light* (Knopf, 2015) and three books of poetry: *Life on Mars*, which won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize, *Duende*, winner of the 2006 James Laughlin Award, and *The Body's Question*, winner of the 2002 Cave Canem Poetry Prize. A recipient of a Rona Jaffe Writer's Award, a Whiting Award, and an Academy Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets, she is the director of the Program in Creative Writing at Princeton University.

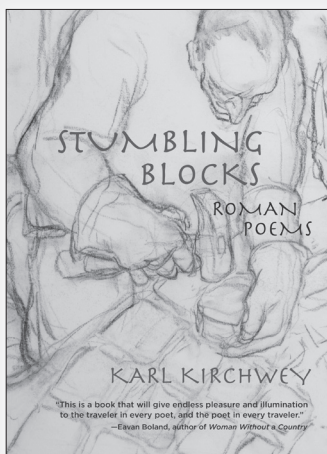
BRUCE SNIDER is the author of the poetry collections, *Paradise, Indiana* winner of the 2011 Lena-Miles Wever Todd Poetry Prize, and *The Year We Studied Women*, winner of the Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry. A former Wallace Stegner fellow and Jones Lecturer at Stanford University, he is an assistant professor at the University of San Francisco.

KRISTA SVALBONAS is a mixed-media artist based in Pennsylvania. The recipient of a Bemis Fellowship, as well as residencies from Cooper Union, Vermont Studio Center, and the New Arts Program, her work is in the permanent collection of the Cesis Art Museum in Latvia. She is an assistant professor of photography at St. Joseph's University.

WILLIAM WENTHE's fourth book of poems, *God's Foolishness*, was published by LSU Press in 2016. He has received poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Texas Commission on the Arts, as well as two Pushcart Prizes. He teaches at Texas Tech University.

JOAN WICKERSHAM's most recent book of fiction is *The News from Spain*. Her memoir *The Suicide Index* was a National Book Award finalist. Her short fiction and essays have appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, and many other publications.

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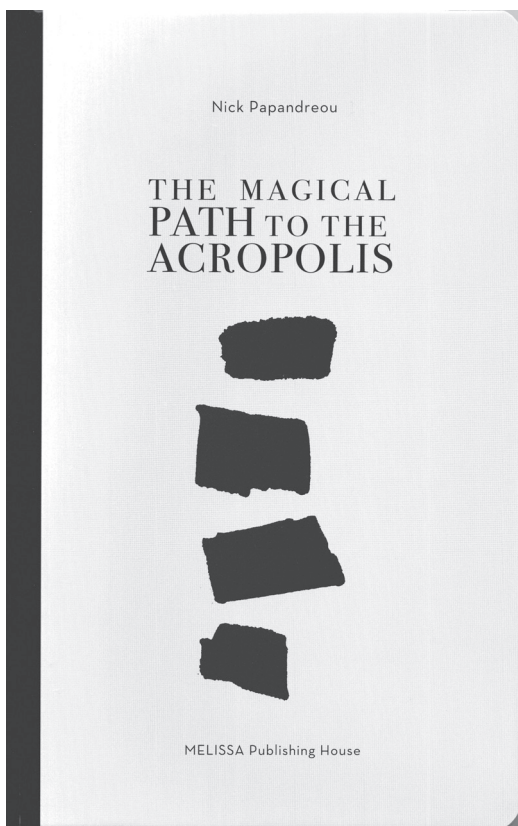
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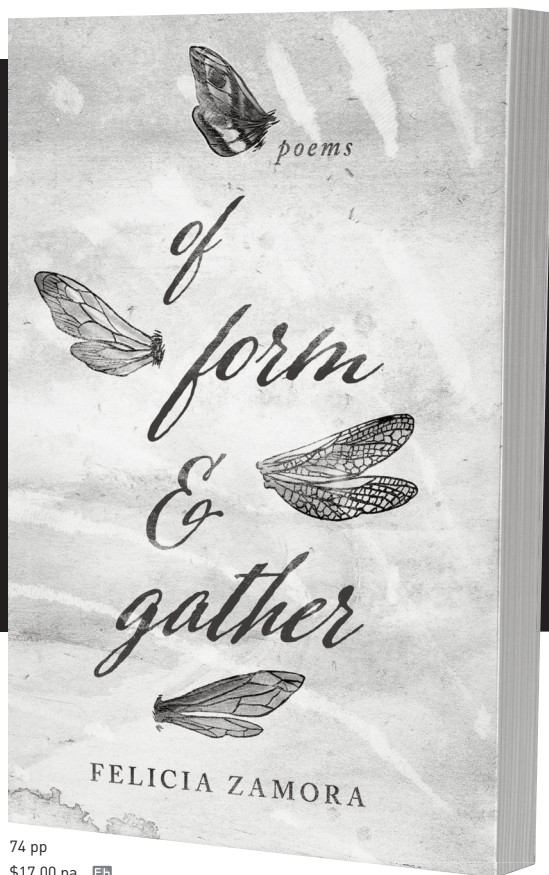



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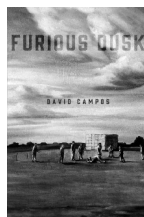
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