

newyorktyrant

cherry tyrant

VOLUME3 NUMBER2

New York Tyrant
676A Ninth Avenue, #153
New York, NY 10036

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**tyrant
books**

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ISBN 978-0072122575-7

Chapter Seventeen by Sam Lipsyte is excerpted from his novel, *The Ask* (FSG, 2010)

Text by Czar Gutierrez translated by Anonymous and Nicholes Ratner

Front and back cover photography stolen from some movie.

Last page illustration by Nathan Kim.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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BREECE D’J PANCAKE

But Most Thought He Just Couldn’t Take Being That Good

excerpted from *A Room Forever*

Pancake left behind bewildered friends and family who were unable to understand his suicide. Rick Blenko, his boyhood friend from Milton, said, “I can’t believe he would kill himself. He was fooling around or playing around with a bullet in a gun.” Emily Miller claimed, “His death was a freak accident. He loved life too much for his death to have been anything but an accident.” And his grief-stricken mother, looking for the answer in his papers and notebooks, found a letter addressed to her, half-written and not sent, that told of a dream he had only a few weeks before about a mythical place, “a happy hunting ground,” where you could shoot a rabbit and the rabbit would come back to life again. “I don’t think he intended to take his life,” she insisted. “Maybe he thought if he shot himself he would jump up and run away again. Who knows what he thought!?” Pancake’s letter to his mother follows:

Last night I dreamed of the “happy hunting ground.” I passed through a place of bones that looked human, but weren’t—the skulls were wrong. Then I came to a place where the days were the best of every season, the sweetest air and water in spring, then the dry heat where deer make dust in the road, the fog of fall with good leaves, and you could shoot without a gun, never kill, but the rabbits would do a little dance, all as if it were a game, and they were playing it too. Then Winter came with heavy powder-snow, and big deer, horses, goats and buffaloes—all white—snorted, tossed their heads, and I lay down with my Army blanket, made my bed in the snow, then dreamed within the dream. I dreamed I was at Fleety’s and she took me back to the place, and under a huge rock where no light should have shown, a cave almost, was a dogwood tree. It glowed the kind of red those trees get at sundown, the buds were purple in that weird light, and a madman came out with an axe and chopped at the skulls, trying to make them human-looking. Then I went back to the other side of both dreams...

LUKE GOEBEL

The Adventures of Eagle Feather

I found a feather the other day, yesterday. It was from a great Bald Eagle, Christ. I had seen its nest at the top of a dead tree up top. I went asking for the feather for my old man.

My old man is a hundred and thirty seven years old and smokes how many packs of cigarettes a day. He is the oldest man alive, but the farthest from dying, and he has always got an erection. He spends most of his time making lies to tell whenever I call. He does not bathe, except in milk and vinegar, and I suspect he has got other children than me.

He says I am the only one, and I just wanted to send him the Bald Eagle's feather along with a rock I would write we're related on it.

I am afraid he is going to die. You know, it is a federal offense—keeping a Bald Eagle's feather, unless you are a true Injun. Plus sending them through the mail. I am not an Injun but I am better than a white person. I shoot off handguns in the nude on State Lands, and I have been with underage women recently. Plus, I almost always like to masturbate while driving—through the pants.

I think a lot about my old man.

I was driving over the mountains earlier and I got this sense to throw the feather out the window. Everything smelled like hot pine in sun. I started thinking about the feather. I took it out of the glove box. I saw it had a white star on its stalk and it was otherwise black with a white middle. I was doing how many miles an hour with the windows up. I rolled them down and threw the feather to the wind.

My father lives in New York City where he is sure that he is dying all the time, or going to. He wants to live on, terribly. I am in Oregon throwing the feather. I am in Oregon. To Hell with him, if he doesn't know how much I love him; I have always loved him. The Eagle had done its work. Molted. And I couldn't stand the

LUKE GOEBEL

feather going to a place with all that much grime. The taxis dented up and yellow. The noise and the crowding.

I stopped at the ice cream parlor near Detroit Lake for iced coffee.

“Can I get some room in that,” I said to the lady. There was nothing but room for states and states over. This was the West.

How much the lady said.

“How much room you want?” she said.

“Just enough to stick my whole head in,” I told her and she laughed.

“Never give them a straight answer,” I told her. “They don’t want one, ever.”

“What do they want,” she said. She was old.

“When was the last time you had you any man,” I said.

“I only ever wanted my father back,” she said.

“I feel the same,” I said.

She slicked off her panties and we went behind the ice cream cooler. When we were finished, she shut up the store and we went out to my car. The Bald Eagle nested in the back seat. Upholstery had been torn apart, and the foam and springs were out in the sun.

The windows had been left down. It was my fault. To Hell with it then, I got behind the wheel. We started driving fast for New York City. When I turned around, I saw the Eagle’s feathers flapping in the wind. His wings were spread across the backseat. Now, here was a worthwhile endeavor, I figured: 100,000 dollars per Bald Eagle feather and a year in jail each. We were all facing some serious charges. The Eagle most of all. He wasn’t an Injun, either. If we made it to New York we would be our own heroes, I decided, and the Old Woman would be my wife; she’d be pregnant too.

Watch out Pappa. We are coming. And we are never going to stop. Watch out you old head of white hair. We are never going to stop and then we are turning back for the West. To Hell with it all, I shouted. To Hell with this having to ever die. Here comes your boy, Pappa. Here comes your boy—and Hot Pine, and Bald Eagle, and the Old Sexpot right alongside. We are never going to stop—any of us.

THE ADVENTURES OF EAGLE FEATHER

We are never going to die. Here comes your boy, Pappa. Here comes all what you have made.

BRANDON HOBSON

Downtown

His elderly mother needed help getting out of bed. Mornings she called for him, he went into the bathroom and ran her bath water. Then he went into her bedroom and helped her sit up in bed. He undressed her and walked her to the bathroom and bathed her. He rubbed a washcloth over her body and put his hands in her hair. Once she was out of the tub and in her robe, she was able to walk by herself to the recliner in the living room. He turned on the small television set and looked at it. On the screen a woman in a dress twirled around and fluffed her hair.

“I’ll just need my juice,” his mother told him.

“It’s there,” he said, pointing to the glass.

“It hurts. Did you hear me?”

“I’ll make toast. You want it? I can make toast for you.”

“It hurts,” she said. “It’s your fault.”

“Your juice is there,” he said.

He went into the kitchen and made her toast. There were jars of blackberry, apricot, peach, and crab apple jam in the cupboard. He looked at the jars and then closed the cupboard. He stood for a moment, looking out the window that faced the elementary school across the street. Then he put the dry toast on a plate and took it to his mother. When she was done eating she told him she wanted to be left alone. It was like this everyday.

Later he took the bus downtown and walked three blocks to the strip bar. The place was usually empty in the afternoons. He sat alone at a table until the waitress arrived.

“Inez was off at noon,” the waitress said.

He looked up at her.

“She’s not here,” the waitress said.

BRANDON HOBSON

The music was loud. He took a piece of cotton from his coat pocket and placed it in his right ear. A moment later a girl who worked there came over to his table and sat across from him.

“You’re back,” she said.

“Come here,” he said.

She came over and sat on his lap. He gave her a ten-dollar bill.

“What do you want this time?” she asked.

“Sit with me for a while,” he said.

“So you want a dance or what?”

“My friend got me tickets to the jazz club downtown,” he said. “You want to go? We’ll have us good times.”

“All right,” she said.

He leaned in close to her. He was smiling.

That night after he made eggs and toast, he gave his mother her medicine and waited for her to fall asleep in the chair. Then he put on a different shirt and combed his hair. He didn’t shave. He put on his coat and took the bus downtown. At the jazz club he sat on a bench by the front doors and waited. She arrived late. He stood up and smiled at her. He kept smiling as they walked inside. They found a dark table in the corner of the room and he ordered them beers.

“You got egg in your beard,” she said.

He wiped at his chin. “Maybe later we can go see your kids,” he said.

They sat and drank their beers and waited until the band started. The sax player wore dark sunglasses. The girl got up and danced. He stood and watched her dance. They ordered more drinks. At the end of the night they went outside and she lit a cigarette.

“We could check on your kids,” he said.

“My momma’s there,” she said. “Another time, all right?”

She drove him home. During the drive neither of them said anything. The radio was playing country and western music. When she arrived at his house she thanked him for the good time.

DOWNTOWN

“I had me a nice time too,” he said.

“You come see me at the bar,” she said.

He got out and watched as she drove away. Then he went inside the house and put his hands to his face. His mother called for him. She was coughing, sitting slumped in the recliner with a blanket in her lap.

The dog was looking up at him.

“Don’t touch me,” his mother said.

ELLIOTT DAVID

With Pieces

That's how this story begins: in his palms, torn up, a handwritten offer—10,000 to watch, 500,000 to touch, 1,000,000 to hold it—that now reads:

to wa; to tou; 00,0; hold it; etc.

A shame to tear it, though. Such delicate calligraphy. He had always admired precision. The Doctor sits in his unlit office, puts the pieces of paper down on his desk and repairs the body of the note with his old surgeon hands. Lately he's opened more bottles than chests, but even still: paper cuts are a thing of the past. He reads it for the last time. He rubs his face, rubs his stubble, rubs the retired folds of his forehead, rubs the words out of his drunk, surrendered eyes. Rubs, all at once. Rubs. Exhales. It's been six months since she died. First the floor, then guest bed, and now the pull-out couch in his home office. For six months. Drinking at his desk, stumbling to the couch, too drunk to pull it out into something reasonable. He hasn't slept in their bed for six months. His bed; they were getting divorced anyway. The comforts he once found in his almost-ex-wife had expired, the best-if-used-by date some weeknight before their last anniversary. A placebo doesn't work once you find out what it is, and he couldn't keep taking the empty pill daily, knowing all it did was put him in danger of choking on something stale: her ash blonde hair; her consistent height and always brown eyes; the simple silences of her little mouth; the anticipated, twenty-year fit of his penis in every feasible hole; the release of his semen in her infertile, historectomied insides; the feel of her flat, removed breasts in his hands. Stale. And then there was him. He was gone during the day, and more gone during the night, spending it sitting in his office, conversing with an entire bottle of Scotch, raising his voice at the bookshelves. The

ELLIOTT DAVID

thought of his drunk hands scared her, and the thought of their tongues in each others' mouths had become incestuous. They both needed it to be over. They had sex the night she moved out. Like a brother and sister who know they will never be able to see each other after they catch their breaths.

The Doctor stands up from his desk, holds the scraps of the note like they were a stillborn baby—a limpness he once cradled during his early days as a doctor, when he was still in Obstetrics before he moved on to hearts and Head of Surgery. He looks for a place to dispose of this unwanted thing someone else could kill for, carrying the handful of paper out into the hospital hall. Quickly, before it drips onto the sterile floor and some nurse discovers blood on his bare hands.

The Doctor shakes his head with disgust and hopes to sober. He wipes his soiled fingers off on his pants, rolls up his white coat sleeves, washes with translucent antibacterial soap. As he does his rounds, The Doctor repeats the author's phone number in his mind. Over and over. Mitral valve repair. Over and over. Coronary artery over and over surgery. Over and over. Deceased. Time of death: over and over and over.

Two weeks after she moved out of their house, in with her sister, her cancer relapsed. In full force. Everywhere. There wasn't much they could do, they said. Except hospitalize her and help minimize the pain. It won't take very long. "Maybe it won't take long for you," she said. "But it will take me the rest of my life." That night she thought about driving to her old home, their home, his home. Instead, she went back to her sister's. She bathed but kept her hair dry. She brushed it one-hundred times, like she used to when she was a girl, like all women her age did as girls. She admired the grey it had grown to become, its surrender to the teeth of the brush. She admired its ability to give easily. Then she signed a letter to her husband, and went in the kitchen to stab herself in the flat skin that used to be her left breast.

Before the ambulance arrived, she could still slightly speak. Bleeding on the blue California kitchen tiles, she held her sister's hand, whispered her husband's name. Only her sister couldn't hear over the sounds of her own panic, confusing

WITH PIECES

last words with half-breaths for help. Which they weren't. She didn't want help. It was his name. The EMT called the hospital, and the nurse patched him through to the doctor. "Bring her here," he said. But they were already doing that, having read so on her insurance card: and then where here is: his careful hands. He had an operating room prepped and waiting. When she arrived at his hospital, her eyes were that brand of barely open he'd seen so many times in the almost dead. But I'm going to save her, he thought as he cut open the chest of his dying wife for the second time in their marriage. A small percentage of the administrative oligarchy considered him to be the best doctor in Los Angeles. And it was generally agreed that he was one of the best cardiothoracic surgeons in the world. She died in his best hands in the world.

Fluorescent hospital midnight... The Doctor sits down at his sterile oak desk, wafts away the pine-sol scent of kill-all chemicals, and reaches for the phone. As he waits for an answer, The Doctor starts to write on yellow legal paper: the same thing, again and again, written with the indecipherable scrawl he uses for prescriptions, surgical instructions, notes that save lives. Ring. Writing. Ring. He hangs up. Dials again. This time, the old man answers before it sounds like the call has even connected. "Hello," The Doctor says. The Doctor says his name and yes and we'll see once you get here and you remember where my office is? then: "Good. Be at the hospital in an hour." The Doctor hangs up. He had forgotten how rich with sickness the old man's voice sounded.

When they first met, at his wife's funeral, the old man's imminent death was spoken through his cataract eyes, his transparent skin, his dapper suit six-decades out of style, the weight on his cane, his breath. I know this isn't the time, the old man had said. Also: I'm a man familiar with loss; You see, I'm not a well man; My sincere condolences; I'm a man familiar with loss; Please excuse my presence here; I would like to come and speak with you once you return to work; Allow me to introduce myself; I'm a man familiar with loss; I'm a man...

"I'll be in my office tomorrow," The Doctor said, patting the old man on his

ELLIOTT DAVID

shoulder, pausing his own grief to quiet someone else's. "Now if you'll excuse me." "Of course, of course," the old man said, and walked down the aisle. The Doctor sat in the silent pews of the small church, and for a moment thought he could hear behind him the old man repeating his array of sentences to the Holy Water.

The next day, The Doctor had not forgotten about him. "I'm sorry," The Doctor said. "I've forgotten all about you. Call my office and schedule a check-up for later this week. Then you'll have my full attention." "Of course," the old man said, smelling the faint scent of booze on The Doctor's lips, making note that he was wearing the same suit to work that he'd worn to his wife's funeral, the brown stain on his pants probably dirt for her coffin, wiped off of his hands. "Of course." But he didn't make an appointment. Instead, the old man handed him the envelope right then. "Please," the old man said. "For when you get home. Read it when you get home. You should go home now. You've suffered a terrible loss. I'm a man familiar with loss. You should go home and recuperate." "I'll do that," The Doctor said, taking the envelope convincingly. Only he wouldn't read the note for another six months. "Of course, of course," the old man said, repeating the words all the way down the hall, into the elevator, into the back of his car, laying in his bed, in his sleep.

Sitting at his desk, The Doctor is still writing on the piece of paper. He hears the old man's voice in his head, hears the ringing phone, thinks about Holy Water, thinks back to this morning when the letter from his wife arrived, dated for delivery today: their anniversary. He didn't open her letter, instead shoved it in his pocket, grabbed an unopened bottle of scotch and started driving. On the drive to the hospital he pulled from the bottle and let his mind wander: her funeral; the old man's unopened letter still in his desk at the hospital; the phone call from the EMT; the hours spent in the operating room, sewing up his wife's cold body by himself. The Doctor looks down at the paper he hasn't stopped writing on since he dialed the old man's number: From edge to edge, down the page, his illegible handwriting looks like a language asleep, each mark the memoir of an invalid—should anyone

WITH PIECES

find it, they'll never know that the words they can't read are supposed to be his wife's name. But it's not her name anymore. A doctor's dead patients don't have names. They have causes of death. His wife's name had become his own. He's writing his own name. He fills the page, puts it in the bottom desk drawer, on top of all the others. He opens another drawer, fingers the envelope from his wife, wonders about its untouched insides and what his hands could repair. I'm a man familiar with loss.

The nurse hears The Doctor cough, sees his once strong hands on the counter, shaking. She looks up, stunned at how pale and sleepless he seems. More than ever before. More than even that first month after his wife died and he refused to stay at home. Now he comes and goes as he pleases, giving all the nurses something to pity. She's stunned by how frail he's become, the degeneration he's suffered from the untreated cancers of his mind. Her thoughts go to her own husband and son. She wants to call or touch them.

"Are you okay, Nurse?"

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry. I was just startled to see you. I didn't expect you to still be here so late."

"Well, I am here."

"So you are. How may I help you?"

"What CABGs do we have scheduled for this week?"

"Why?"

He looks in her eyes, scolds her with silence.

"Of course, excuse me. Let me see... Dr. Carrols has a bypass scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, and then—"

"That's fine. I have a doctor visiting from out of town. He's on his way here now, and he leaves first thing in the morning. Prep this patient, we're going to operate tonight."

"Excuse me?"

He stares at her again, with the same eyes and shut mouth, but she knows not to give in easily this time.

ELLIOTT DAVID

“Doctor, shouldn’t we notify Dr. Carrols and the patient’s family?”

“Yes, yes, fine. Notify them. Call Carrols—who is not on call—and wake him up. Tell him that due to exterminating—excuse me—extenuating circumstances, I will be performing the operation myself. Tell him the Head of Surgery in this hospital is going to perform the bypass and that there is nothing to be concerned with, that he may stay at home or come and watch if it pleases him.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Also, call the front desk and tell them to allow anyone to my office who explicitly asks for me. No questions.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“I’ll be in my office. Call for me when the patient is prepped. And if my wife calls, tell her I’m in surgery.”

The Doctor turns his back to her quick, lets his tight mouth and chest go slack, exhales hard. He can hear the nurse silent for a second, then scrambling behind him. She’s got no idea how wasted I am. The Doctor sits in his office, petting his wife’s letter, swallowing mouthfuls of scotch. His thoughts begin to slur, and he realizes maybe he should slow down. Slow down? Fuck that. I want to be blackout drunk. I want to forget this before it’s even happened.

For everyone else, time passes. The nurse calls her husband; the nurse calls the on-call anesthesiologist; the patient is informed and enthused—Really? The Head of Surgery? Have you called my wife? The nurse calls his wife.

But not for the Doctor. Time to him is a single day six months ago. The days in between then and now crushed up into right here, sitting at his desk, unmoved except to put the glass to his lips and catch his head from rolling off his shoulders. The only light in his office comes from a lamp. Every second is the same second. He once imagined himself to be the type never to give up. That’s how he became the respectable figure he is today. Leaning over the garbage, he puts his finger down his throat, hits the bottom of the basket with a hollow splash of no food and all Scotch. Never give up. He pukes some more. All for one, he thinks, but doesn’t know why. He swishes some scotch in his mouth, swallows. One for all. I once

WITH PIECES

imagined myself to be the type to never give up. That's how I became the fucking bullshit I am today. I'm just so god damn exhausted. Giving up is easy if you let it. Chugging.

"A man just came here asking for you," a muffled voice says, jolting him aware. "We've sent him up to your office as you requested." Silence. The Doctor opens his eyes wide, dodges his head right and left, searching with his ears for another expected sentence. "What? Where are you? My desk is right here. I know where my own desk is, you fuck. Show yourself." Maybe he bangs his fist, or maybe he just passes out, but suddenly the old man is before him, sitting in a chair on the other side of the desk.

"Of course," the old man says.

"Of course what?"

"You just asked me if I am ready. Of course I'm ready. I've been waiting for this for many years now. You see, I'm not a well man, I—"

"Yes yes yes. I know you're not well. I'm sitting right across from you and I'm a Doctor. I'm a Doctor, goddamnit."

The old man grows wary from the Doctor's irritability and blatant inebriation; Wary, and already so weary from the pain pills and the days past and anticipated. It's the anticipated days that tire him the most.

"Are you sure you are in a position—mentally I mean, or physically, or at least one of them—to go through with this?" the old man asked.

"I should be asking you that question."

"Of course," he says, and lowers his head. "Of course."

The man reaches into his pocketbook, pulls out an envelope. The Doctor sways unfocused for a moment, then looks at what he had just been handed. An envelope. Hers. Hers?

"What the fuck is this? How did you get in here?"

"It's your payment."

"Payment?"

ELLIOTT DAVID

“I...I don’t understand. I thought we had an agreement. On the phone you said—“

The phone. Ringing. The surgery. Giving up. He’s coming around.

“Oh yes, payment. Sure. Whatever,” he says, then pulls from the bottle, trying to retreat back.

“Should you be drinking?”

“Don’t worry. This is fine. Everyone dies.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said everyone does it. Takes the thing off, you know? The edge.”

“I see.”

“Yeah, you see.”

The Nurse had given the old man some scrubs to place over his clothes, so when he begins to cough, he can’t access his pocket square or handkerchief. The coughing becomes violent and The Doctor points the tip of the bottle to him, more in camaraderie than remedy. The old man shakes his head, covers his mouth with his blue sleeve. When he brings it away from his face, it’s splotted red and black. As the old man is about to excuse himself, another voice enters the room.

Doctor, you’re wanted in OR 7.

“That’s us, chap,” The Doctor says, and slams his palms on the desk. He tries to stand, but falls back into his chair. “Woah,” he says. “We’re going to have to make a pit stop.” On their way to the operating room, The Doctor and the old man stop by a locked closet. “Supplies. Meds. For the surgery,” The Doctor says unsolicited. He holds himself upright, leaning hard on one hand up against the wall. With the other hand he grabs a handful of EpiPens, shoves them in his coat pocket.

“What are those?”

“Epinephrine. Adrenaline. Auto-injectors. You want one?” the doctor asks, knowing it would probably kill him.

“Thank you, no.”

“Suit yourself,” he says. “I’m going to need at least one or two of these if I’m gonna be able to” mumbles mumbles mumbles, the cap of the needle in his mouth, preventing him from slurring with his former clarity. He injects one in his

WITH PIECES

arm and his eyelids get shoved out of the way, his eyeballs suddenly claustrophobic, desperately trying to escape his face. His posture becomes impeccable.

The Doctor throws open the operating room door and stands, drunk on his own power and just drunk. The old man eagerly follows behind him, leaning on his cane, staring at the surgery table, wary of everyone near to him. The body is open, already ready: the septum is sawed and held separated, and the pericardium has been cut away.

“Doctor,” the nurses say.

“No music tonight,” The Doctor says, gritting his teeth, teetering between utmost alertness and mind-wandering inebriation. “Turn off the music.”

“We haven’t put the music on yet, Doctor,” says the other on-call Doctor, who opened the chest and would assist in the surgery.

“Yes, I know. Let’s keep it that way. I mean this way. This is the way.”

“Excuse me, Doctor?” a nurse asks, then looks to the old man.

“Of course, nurse. You’re a nurse. Nurse, this is Doctor...Thompson. He’s in town from Australia. Austria. He’s in town to learn from our methods for Beating Heart Bypass. Their technologies are behind in Australia. Criminals, you know.”

“Um, Doctor,” a nurse hesitates. “We set up the HLM.”

“Excuse me?”

“It was late and this is a spontaneous surgery; we assumed you’d want to do a traditional bypass so we put him on the machine.”

“God Damn It,” The Doctor yells, the drugs pumping through his throat, the veins in his wrists pulsing furiously.

“What does that mean?” the old man asks, and the anesthesiologist and other doctor and nurses stare at him confused.

“It means, Doctor Austria,” The Doctor says, “that the heart-lung machine is doing the work of the heart. The heart is inert. It’s not beating.” The Doctor pulls off his scrubs, pulls his mask down around his throat, takes the bottle out of his coat pocket and chugs relentlessly.

“I’m calling security,” a nurse says.

The Doctor pulls the bottle from his mouth while still chugging, spitting a bit into the patient’s open chest. “You’ll do shit and love it,” he says as some vague threat, then stumbles, wondering what he could possibly be talking about. He pulls another EpiPen out of his pocket and looks at the label: EpiPen Jr, the child’s dosage. Fuck, he thinks and says it out loud. The room becomes blurry as the drugs wear off. He points the yellow EpiPen at the nurse. “Sopt,” he said. Then: “Stop. Do you know where my desk is? It’s got something. I gotta get it.”

She glances quick at him and keeps moving for the door. The other Doctor goes for the patient, in hopes of protecting the defenseless heart. The old man stands and stares at the body. He’d removed his scrubs and mask and rubber gloves once he heard the words not beating. He pats his old man forehead with his old man pocket-square, waiting to get his money’s worth, dying a little bit more every second. The Doctor grabs the bottle by the handle, think to smash it and brandish the broken glass, but then thinks again and instead takes a sip and grabs a scalpel. He wraps his arm around the nurse trying to leave, spins her back to him and holds the blade to her neck.

“You smell nice,” he says.

The other doctor puts his hand out like a stop sign. The other two nurses gasp and grab their own throats. The anesthesiologist stopped doing anything a long time ago; he sits back and watches with a calmness the old man finds terrifying, causing him to imagine his old man self cut open on an operating table, and the casualness of professionals that would surround his dead body. Patting the pain pills in his pocket, he’s happy to know that will never have to happen.

“You,” The Doctor says, looking at the other doctor. “Get that heart beating, turn that machine off.” Then he points to the nurses: “You two. Just...do whatever. Stand there for a second.”

Eventually: “The heart is beating, Doctor.”

“Very good, doctor. Now turn off the HLM and get out. All of you, get out. Tell whoever you want to tell whatever you want to tell them.”

WITH PIECES

He removes the scalpel from near the nurse's neck. When she runs free, he almost falls down, not realizing how heavily he was leaning on her. They all run out of the room, with the exception of the anesthesiologist, who walks out calmly, saying excuse me on his way out. The Doctor locks the door behind them.

"Go ahead," The Doctor says to the old man. "Do anything."

The old man pulls over a stool. He stands high above the body, staring into the open chest, admiring the peacefulness of the patient's face, the handiwork of the polite anesthesiologist. "He looks so calm," the old man says. "I wonder if he's dreaming."

"She was very dreamy," The Doctor slurs. He's sitting on the floor, leaning against the locked doors, holding the empty bottle upside down above his mouth. He rolls his head around, then lifts it and looks at the little old man standing above the brightly lit table. "Oh," he says. "The patient. I never see their faces. I've never seen a single face. Has she called yet? When she does, patch her through." He watches the old man reach over the open chest as if he were going to pull himself into the body in hopes to die there, dead by his own hands. The Doctor takes off his gloves, puts his mask back on. He reaches in his pocket for the EpiPen Jr.s, all of them, enough to wake up so much his own heart will stop. He can hear the old man whispering, and he looks around, wondering where there might be Holy Water. When he pulls his hand out of his pocket, The Doctor doesn't hold a suicide dose, but instead an envelope with his name on it, written in his wife's handwriting. He wonders how her letter ended up in his pocket, then looks around the operating room for his desk, expecting to see it hiding in a corner. He pets the envelope, the old man pets the heart, both of them making a muffled sound not unlike weeping.

Suddenly there is a hard, loud metal banging on The Doctor's back and it shoves him forward. The door is being kicked from the other side. He hears yelling from the other side and he wonders what type of letters they have. The Doctor starts yelling back, waving the envelope around the air like an unloaded gun, stumbling as he tries to stand up.

ELLIOTT DAVID

“You don’t...I’m the Head of Surgery. I know where my desk is. I’m a man familiar with God.” He falls to the ground, starts to weep again.

The banging becomes more furious and the old man looks over his shoulder at the door, nervous like a frail woman whose just been grabbed from behind. He makes a pathetic effeminate moan as he starts tugging at the heart, too confused and excited to move the suction cup holding the heart in place, too weak to break the vessels and pull it free. The Doctor reaches for a scalpel and stares at his wrist. He brings the blade down hard, cutting open the top of the envelope. He tries to concentrate on the words of the letter, see what his wife was trying to tell him, but he’s too wasted and the font is too small. He doesn’t recognize her handwriting. It’s typed. Except there. At the bottom. That’s her signature, her name. He grabs two of the EpiPen Jr.s and jams them into his neck. The words rush into focus and he reads: an x marked in a box, next to the words incurable insanity. Above it: irreconcilable differences, box unchecked. Their names are at the top, but only hers at the bottom, typed next to her elegant cursive. He runs his finger along the edge of the divorce papers and it slices his fingertip, cold and hot all at once, and he inhales quick, pulls his hand back, then watches it bleed. Touches her signature. That’s her name, he thinks. Not mine. My name is my name.

The banging stops and someone behind the door says something about ice or shooting. “My name is my name,” The Doctor yells back at the door. He injects three more EpiPen Jr.s into his neck and erupts off the ground. He tears the divorce paper into pieces. They fall to the floor like flowers or dirt on fresh earth, and he wipes his hands off on his pants. The banging turns into an electric hum as the police and janitors unscrew the hinges, and the old man futilely tries the machines, now concerned with keeping the heart alive so it will beat loose once or twice in his hands. His cries harmonize with the screwdrivers and the hinges and the sounds of something being forced open. Every muscle in The Doctor’s body constricts and he screams: “I said no music.” He moves fast to the old man and the heart. The old man looks behind him and starts to speak—“it wont...”—and The Doctor grabs him by the shoulders and throws him off the stool, probably

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killing him, The Doctor thinks, as he hears the soft thud of a brittle man fallen to the floor, a breaking bones percussion to the metal squeal behind him. The Doctor pulls the suction off the heart, pulls away the mechanical fingers holding it in place, and grabs the heart with both hands. In a quick motion, he rips the heart from the body, ventricles popping, spraying spurts of blood on his face and everywhere. The monitors start screaming and the doors fall to the ground and the police yell “freeze” and The Doctor thinks ice and the old man hasn’t moved and The Doctor turns around, holding it over his head like a trophy or sacrament.

“My name is my name,” he says, feeling the heart begin to beat. “My name is mine.”

BRADFORD TICE

How to Become an American Boy

GOAL ONE: Realize a sense of fraternity.

The psychiatrist will not talk to you during sessions. Questions only, and then you speak. Those are the rules. She will sit, back straight, in a green leather chair—the gold studs along the arms and sides winking as you drone on. Recline in a posture of defeat in a similar chair across from her. Feel somewhat disappointed that the chair is not a couch. The psychiatrist will remind you of Mary Poppins after a particularly trying night of umbrella transportation. A certain wind-blown style will take up her hair, a smudge of mascara will accentuate the crow's feet around her eyes. She will ask you to begin, as usual, and the whole of your life will move in to drown you. During these episodes, without knowing why, you will be very conscious of your genitals.

You have just graduated from high school. Your mother thinks that therapy will give you a sense of your place in the world, and will encourage you to hold nothing back. The psychiatrist will suggest, think of yourself as an open book. You will not be able to picture this without seeing the *Hustler* magazines your father keeps under the sink in the bathroom. Attempt to think of something else. The hothouse orchids your mother is fond of buying at the local supermarket, for instance. Find yourself still vaguely discomfited.

Tell your psychiatrist you are a homosexual, a fag, queer, puffer, ass pirate, and that it was definitely your mother's fault. She will raise a smoke-thin eyebrow and ask you why this is. Act confused and say there must have been something in the water. Be extremely impressed by your wit and charm, and pretend not to notice the slight tightening of your psychiatrist's face.

Smile. Try to change the subject. Focus your attention on the comfortable line of degrees on the wall, or the spider fern hanging like a nightmare in the window.

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Struggle to think of anything besides genitals. You will find this difficult. Like not thinking of pink elephants.

On the desk will be a series of photographs of children, propped up with velvet and cardboard. Ask her about her kids while trying not to think of her genitals. Recall a caesarean birth you witnessed on the surgery channel late one night. Picture melons splitting open, pink elephants giving birth.

Ignoring the query concerning her kids, she will say, You seem agitated. Does this subject bother you?

Tell her you love kids. Always have.

Harbor many resentments, like the fact that when you tell her about your life, and it feels like your insides are being squeezed through your mother's spaghetti strainer, she will show no emotion. No concern. She will be professional. She will not interrupt you. Tell yourself, she is incapable of understanding your complexity. However, you will continue because your parents are taking out a second mortgage on their house to pay for these sessions—and because it's Sunday, and if you weren't here you'd be in church or at your Aunt Noreen's place babysitting her kids because she's laid up in bed after faking a fall in the local mart. For a nest egg, she says. There isn't much to do in a small town, so all things considered, you're better off where you are.

The therapist will pull down on the tight, salmon-tinted front of her suit jacket, which isn't her color and makes her look bloodless and poached. She will ask, When did you first know you were attracted to men? Pause and gape at the ceiling, pretending to be deep in consideration, despite the fact you've known the answer to this question since you were eight years old. Tell her, you blame your friend Mark's older brother, who wore a pink shirt, on purpose. She will say, You seem to blame a lot of people for your sexuality. Could it be that it's no one's fault? Look flustered, and then nod sagely. Say, That's definitely a possibility.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE ONE:

Out behind the tool shed—where your best friend Mark's father maintains a

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safe haven of metal drill bits, sawdust, and dirty magazines—you're being held hostage. Mark's older brother has you held to his chest, a hand over your mouth. You will be able to smell the residue of soap on his thick fingers. His knees to both sides of you will assert a slight pressure to your body. He will whisper softly into your ear, No biting, or I'll snap your neck.

You are eight years old. In front of the shed and to the right will stretch the snipped lawn of Mark's backyard. There will be a fort set up in the mimosa tree at the property line, before the cornfields that roll out to a small airport where single-engine crop-dusters lift into the air above the crops. The fort will consist of a platform of boards about three paces across with a rope tied to an adjoining branch. It is a broken arm waiting to happen.

On any other day, the lawn would be adrift with gung ho, young male aggression, and dandelion seeds. The three of you—Mark, your brother Shawn, and yourself—would play war with plastic guns and unripe persimmons as grenades. One man holds the fort while the others try to take it by siege. You'd feel like you'd earned your scars, which amount to a skinned knee and a yellowing bruise on your neck caused by a particularly nasty grenade.

Today is different though. Mark's older brother, who is just a year from graduating high school, will decide to enlist. Think of him as a Navy S.E.A.L., who, unbeknownst to your compatriots, will grab you as you head for the line of persimmon trees to reload on ammunition. You will struggle fruitlessly against his arms, and for reasons nameless, you will be very aware of his touch on your skin. Feel something like a charge run up your back.

The others will not yet have noticed that you're missing, but you know it is simply a matter of time. You can hear their shouts above the hum and rattle of the air conditioning unit in back of the house. Try to gain a tactical advantage. Think about what you know of the enemy. Fact one, the enemy is prone to wearing pink Hawaiian shirts. You mentioned it just last week to Mark as you watched his brother climb into the family Plymouth. Here's how the conversation went.

Your brother's wearing pink, Mark, you taunted.

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He responded with, Yeah, but my mother says it's okay for a guy to wear pink if it's a Hawaiian shirt. That's the only time. Otherwise, you're fag.

You didn't ask what fag was.

You don't know what a fag is, do you?

Your brother, as usual, saved you. It's when a guy stops liking girls and starts liking guys. And then if he doesn't get himself straightened out in time, his dick shrivels up and falls off. Then he becomes a girl.

For a week now, you'd spent a good deal of time looking at men's crotches. Monitoring their convexity versus concavity. Several people have mentioned it, and your father has begun to look at you funny over the morning paper. The results of your study are inconclusive.

Try not to think of your failures. Concentrate on the problem at hand—namely, the hand over your mouth. Fact two, Mark's brother is really strong. You come against this every time you struggle to escape, his body like a steel trap. Fact three, he sleeps with a knife under his pillow. You remember Mark telling you this, the very idea engendering a feeling of admiration in both of you. Why? you asked.

Just in case someone breaks in while we're sleeping, Mark said. My brother's a bad ass.

Fact four, you're fairly confident that Mark's brother has genitals.

Weigh the information that you have—pink, peccs, knife, penis. It's not a lot by way of escape plans. Suddenly, the yard will go quiet and in the hush you will hear the organic swell of your captor's lungs behind you. Mark and Shawn will have sensed that something is amiss, like sailors sensing a drop in the barometric pressure. Shawn will wonder aloud where you've gotten off to. It's only a matter of time before you are rescued.

Come suddenly to the realization you don't want to be liberated. Your mind will grow frantic and irrational. You will begin to cook up wild schemes in which you switch sides, turncoat. Imagine you and Mark's brother sitting beside a campfire in the jungles, laughing at each others' farts. You and Mark's brother hard-pressed against each other in a bunker, enemy fire raining down around you. Think of

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holding his knife for him. Think of his scent lodged in your throat like a stubborn pill. Brand yourself forever a traitor.

Mark and Shawn will have fanned out in a search party. You will be able to hear them getting closer. Mark's brother will rise and squat on his haunches, ready to run. He has you in his arms and he's not letting go.

Later, when this is all over, ask your mother to buy you a pink shirt. Then when her back is turned, steal a steak knife from the drawer in the kitchen. Sleep with it under your pillow.

GOAL TWO: Get a girlfriend...or two.

Your psychiatrist chews on a clear pen, rotating it between her teeth as she listens. The pearly enamel flirts with you while you talk. In your seat, grow quiet and fidget. Begin to notice how the skin of your thighs sweats and sticks to the green leather. Think of jungles in Cambodia.

What did you think about what Mark said... about fags? On the last word, she will hook the fingers of her hands into politically sanctioned quotes.

I thought he was full of shit. Be proud of the way your vocabulary has expanded.

She will say something like, How did this make you feel? or Have you ever been called a fag?

Nod your head and keep your face open-ended. Say, It's nothing new, in a seasoned manner. Then try and divert attention away from yourself. Say, you think it always bothered your brother more than you. That you were called a fag in school, that is.

Why do you think that is?

Think about this question for a second. Come up with an answer. I guess he resented the fact that his brother was a pussy. Hook your fingers around the last word. He always said I needed a girlfriend.

She will repeat the question from above. Shrug your shoulders and look put upon. Say, It definitely confounds the enemy, don't you think?



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SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE TWO:

Fast forward eight years. The war is over, and what has grown in its place is a cold arms race. You are sixteen years old. You have a bedroom in the basement of your parents' house that smells musty when it rains. You have a stereo, a collection of wildflowers pressed under sheets of plastic in a photo album, and a bed with silk sheets that you took from the closet upstairs, which were never used after your parents married. You are aware of certain ironies.

In high school, choose your clique carefully. Weigh all options. Consider how you feel about sports cups, horticulture, bodily mutilation. Opt for the edgier circle of friends. The ones who smoke weed in bathrooms, who look like a fan club for Satan and apathy, who consider bisexuality a viable option for girls. Make friends with two females named Columbia and Magenta, who will have sacrificed their Christian names for the sake of image, taking on the personas of characters from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Columbia will be a born-again pagan, with a diamond chip through her nose and blue-purple black hair. Magenta will possess an air of mystery, her hair lightning frizzled, raven black, her nose hooked like a dangerous femme fatale. On weekends, you will gather in the dens of their homes to plan school massacres and to bitch about your other classmates who just don't get you. Columbia and Magenta's parents, ex-bikers and hippies, will make you cookies and disappear respectfully when the girls decide to roll a joint, drop some acid, dye their hair.

If you don't count what you do to yourself, you're still a virgin. At night when you lie awake, it will be next to impossible to think of anything besides genitals, or to keep from touching your own. Try to have sex dreams involving your two girlfriends. Fail miserably. Magenta will be replaced by her leather-clad, Hell's Angels father whose right forearm will bear a sine-curve muscle and a tattoo of a devil giving the finger. Find this mildly disconcerting. Random images of chrome and grease will float through your mind.

This will be an awkward time in your life. Your various body parts will often be swollen, a stainless steel spike driven through an eyebrow, an ear lobe, a nipple. During geometry class, while classmates are proving theorems on the perfect

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conical shape of your teacher's breasts, feel the blood throb around these punctures. Think this is the pain you must endure to be "dope." This is what your girlfriend, Columbia, will have said before impaling your ear with a safety pin, two cubes of ice for anesthesia. Your other girlfriend, Magenta, will say you look like Billy Corgan, which is also "dope."

Give yourself over to these girls. Allow yourself to be reinvented. Tell them, you are their clay and must be molded. A life-size Ken doll in the middle of a life crisis. Columbia will dress you in corduroy pants that are too big and in flannel shirts that grow heavy when it rains. Magenta will dye your hair Smurf blue, star silver, magenta. They will compare you to pictures in music magazines, and nod their heads in approval.

Your mother will begin giving you worried looks, pinch her lips together, and try to be supportive. She will give you condoms, and say things like, For god's sake, you don't want to get trapped in this nowhere town. She will try to reach you. You will have quiet, tension-soaked talks about the hazards of drug use in the car on the way to your grandparents. You will see a thin glaze of fear develop over your mother's eyes, and this will terrify, confuse, and sadden you. Make you feel like you are four again, hiding in her shirt tails from Uncle Robert, who plans on grabbing you and rubbing his stubble against your face. Out the windows, will be rolling hills cast in late afternoon light, pastures of puddles, women bending over in gardens to pluck weeds from the dirt. It will all make you feel like a square peg nailed through an ear lobe. Your mother will say something like, I just want to know who my son is or Please, don't shut me out.

This is the most important part. You must push her away. The car will smell of sunlight and a coconut air freshener. Don't let this make you nostalgic, taking you back to family vacations to Florida or to fishing trips in July. Steel yourself. Give her the cold shoulder, the evil eye, the You can't understand me that easily face. Make her feel like a round hole in a square peg. This is for her own good. Consider how many ways you will hurt her in this life. This will be a mere paper cut, a slight sting in comparison.



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GOAL THREE: Find a male role model.

The sessions will sometimes frustrate you. Your psychiatrist will chalk up everything—your over-treated hair, your clothes, your acerbic glower—to cries for attention and emotional displacement. She will say things like, As long as people are outraged by your looks, they will overlook your sexuality. Begin to think she is a quack, a nut job, a bitch. Stare at her degrees on the wall and wonder if they are forged. Point to the pictures of her kids and say, That one, with the blond hair and the Snoopy shirt. He's going to turn out to be a homo. Make yourself sound like an expert on the subject.

She will laugh in that way that makes you feel like wax paper. Her eyes will sparkle for a moment, and she will bring her hand to her mouth and regard you over her fingers. Then she will say, You're a piece of work. Definitely one of my more entertaining patients. Love her for this.

Then, with a smile still hovering at the corners of her lips, she will ask if you have ever had a sexual encounter with another man. She knows how much she is charging, and will not mince words. Envision space aliens that vaguely resemble genitals before answering. Then say, Maybe once.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE THREE:

Over an extended conversation at the local pizza restaurant, using pizza toppings as metaphors, tell your friends Columbia and Magenta that you are gay. The associations may go something like this—sardines = vaginas, sausages = penises, the bottle of crushed pepper = spiciness of a sexual rather than gastronomic nature. Explain to the girls which toppings interest you. Tell them you've never really cared for sardines, but sausage has been a personal favorite since you were a little boy. Columbia will be arrested mid-bite with a slice of pizza, mushrooms and fish corpses dangling by threads of mozzarella. Magenta will raise an eyebrow, but then continue eating, apparently unfazed. Ask them if they are surprised. Magenta will say something like We kinda knew. We were just waiting for you to tell us. Columbia will nod agreement and huff around a mouthful of cheese and greasy

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dough. It's pretty obvious, dude. For Christ sake, you're wearing fish-nets.

Take a moment to look down at yourself. You're wearing a leather jacket, a black corset with garters, netted hoses, and five inch high heels you spent the better part of the afternoon learning how to walk in. In the distorted reflection from the napkin holder, you see a face you hardly recognize. Above each eye will be a palette of eyeliner and shadow, your mouth a crushed rose, wilted. Wonder why you're always the last to know things. Columbia and Magenta will be in full costume. The former will be in a top hat and vested suit smothered in gold sequins. The latter will be in a French maid's uniform with her hair primped and teased like male pheasant feathers. Begin to notice the attention you are getting from the other customers. They will cut eyes at you and giggle, shaking their heads into the buffet bar. Become self-conscious and brazen in equal proportions.

As the three of you get up to pay your tab, leave a tip for the waiter and blow kisses to the crowd. They will pretend not to notice. Outside, you will all climb into Columbia's station wagon, borrowed from her mother, and drive the forty miles to the neighboring town, where every Saturday at midnight there is a live showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. In a backpack, Magenta will have packed a couple of decks of playing cards, water pistols, Scott toilet paper, several boxes of Minute Rice, and an assortment of other odd items. These are the things you will need to fit into the crowd.

At the theater, you will feel as if you have entered another world. The movie will play on a forty-foot wide screen, while below it, on a stage beleaguered with red velvet and confetti, a group of actors will act out the events taking place on screen. At particular points in the movie, there will be tasks for the audience to perform. It is vital that you not miss a cue, for the uninitiated are often singled out, a needle of spotlight pinning you to your seat like a butterfly to the board. Be ready. Don't miss your moment.

When the crowd uses squirt guns to simulate rain, think of it as a baptism. The throwing of the rice will be the closest you will ever come to a wedding of your own. You will get a paper cut from an ill-thrown queen of hearts during the "I'm

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Coming Home” number, but it will hardly matter. You will feel as if you have been reborn into a kingdom of sexual autonomy and decadence. You will flounder in a sea of rhinestones, face paint, feather boas, and silk lingerie. The woman standing next to you in the aisle will grab you and kiss you hard during the orgy scene in the pool, and it will be like permission. Everyone in the theater will be celebrating their genitals. Feel redeemed, feel naughty, feel saved.

During the show, fall in love with the actor pantomiming Frank-n-Furter. Watch as he struts the length of the stage, lip syncing Tim Curry’s lyrics, his thighs in fish nets will be like sculpted Greek torsos. A noticeable bulge will be bobbing in the silk pouch of his panties. He will mouth the words of every song for you. His eyes will be like dark lodestones. Feel your bones splinter into iron filaments. Be conventional and go weak at the knees.

After, when the credits have rolled and the light from the projector has ceased its magic, follow Columbia and Magenta onto the stage where the cast will hold an after hours party. There will be champagne in plastic glasses, the smell of clove cigarettes and make-up, and a strong heat rising from the floor lights. Drink several glasses of the champagne and stumble in your heels. You will find the guy who played Frank-n-Furter standing beside the bowl of bean dip in back of the stage. You will just be drunk enough to start up a conversation. Tell him something inappropriate and vaguely humiliating, such as You were like an angel up there or You were so sexy, I could hardly stand it. He will smile, somewhat drunk himself. He will lean into your ear, placing a hand lightly on your chest, and say something appropriate like Thank you or You’re very cute when you’re fawning. Blush like a little girl as his hand slithers down your side.

He will offer to take you backstage behind the velvet. Say yes, but grow nervous, as if there were a pinball machine being played in your stomach. Behind the curtains, comment on something idiotic. A wind machine or a stuffed owl. Frank, without responding, will place both his hands on your hips and draw you close to his chest. Be prepared—the black lace will be scratchy. As he begins to kiss you, notice the sweat on his lips, letting the sounds of exchange and laughter from

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behind the curtain fade into the background—just like in the movies when eyes meet and a love song comes on. Worry briefly if you're doing everything correctly. Wonder when you're supposed to breathe.

Hours later, Columbia will drop you off at your parents' house. Everyone will be asleep. You will stand on the porch and watch as the headlights of the car disappear into the night. Inhale deeply so that you may catch the ghost of Frank's scent on your lips. In the distance, there will be heat lightning and the rumble of something building. Feel electric. Feel reckless and driven, the blood vessels under your skin like whips, the hair on your head standing on end.

GOAL FOUR: Be stoic in the face of disaster.

Your therapist will ask you to talk about your family. Try to divert her. Tell her your grandmother was distant and an unapologetic racist. Tell her you find horses to be mildly erotic animals. See if she bites.

She will say, I want to talk about your family now. Tell me about the day you told your mother you were gay.

Your heart will sound like an accordion being played badly at a funeral. Throw up a wall, an ocean, an abyss around you. Nail shut what doors you can. Ask her why she feels this is important.

She will respond with, To be frank, I'm beginning to wonder what the need is for your being here. You seem like a healthy teenage boy.

Say, Looks can be deceiving. Tell her you're a mess, a wreck, a debunked product. Tell her you think constantly of genitals. Want more than anything for her to think that you are special.

She will give you a level look. Her skin will not twitch an inch. That's why I want to talk about your family. There's obviously not a problem with your extracurricular activities. But I need to know how your family relationships fit into you.

Wonder at this turn of phrase.



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SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE FOUR:

The night of the live show, you will lie in bed after arriving home wide awake until morning. Perhaps you masturbate to the memory of Frank's presence leaned up against you. In the early hours of morning, a late spring storm will pass above the house. The wind will be deep and guttural around the eaves, the house groaning under the weight of clouds. This will be like an epiphany. The earth shook. The sky was rent. You will decide it is time to tell your mother everything, with obvious omissions.

You will already be tired of the constant self-awareness. The fear that at any moment some Freudian slip might expose you. That you'll be seated at the kitchen table, parents and sibling surrounding you, and ask your mother to please pass you the butter and a queer of corn. Remind yourself of how conscious you have become of how to hold your hands, your posture. You are always mindful of the rules. Earring in the left ear. Don't lisp. Don't order virgin drinks with umbrellas in mixed company. Pink is not an acceptable hair color for men. You will feel constantly exhausted and aroused, and you will somehow know that only one of these feelings is customary.

The next morning, you will head upstairs with purpose. You will find your mother sitting on a stool at the bar in the kitchen. She will be eating a grapefruit with a baby spoon. Go to the window of the front door and look outside. The world will be rain-washed, dew-spackled. In the yard, your father and brother will be passing a football back and forth over the still-wet grass. Your cocker spaniel, Beau, will run circles around your brother, caught up in the excitement. Find yourself thinking of Norman Rockwell paintings. Thanksgivings where your Uncle Robert hurls blobs of cranberry sauce at the striped referees on tv.

Your mother will comment on how late you got home. She will look at you as if suspecting something but will not voice her suspicions. You will expect everything unsaid between the two of you to roll like a scud of clouds over the oceans of her eyes. This is simply melodramatic drivel, and will not occur.

Tell her you have something important to say. Something that's difficult to articulate. She will immediately get wind of what's happening. She will calmly set

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down her spoon and give you her attention. Expect this. She's a mother. She's been through this drill before.

You might find yourself picturing a picturesque vision of Americana—middle-class life, a solid marriage, two sons, a dog, blender in the kitchen, an expanse of backyard. Ask yourself, what the hell are you doing? Imagine you can already see the disappointment welling within her face. The grief of losing grandchildren before they've even been born. There will be a stillness in the air, like the quiet that gathers in summer evenings. Never a good sign. Open your mouth to speak, to form words, and feel them shrivel into dried husks and slither back down your esophagus.

Your mother will look at you in your speechless state and say, That bad, huh?

She will begin to make guesses. She will ask, are you on drugs?

Is Columbia pregnant?

Have you pierced something unmentionable?

Say no. Then she will look at you calm as cabbage, and ask if you're gay, and like that, a snap of fingers, a bolt from the blue, it will be over.

GOAL FIVE: Risk everything.

She will ask, So what has your life been like since you came out?

Tell her what she wants to hear, but what is only partially true. Something vague like, Peaches and cream. A sundae with a cherry on top. Cloud nine.

Actually, it's been a seven and a half as far as clouds go, but one can't expect miracles. She will smile, and talk about the progress you've made. She will even venture to admit that her role in these proceedings has been minimal, and that she doesn't see as how further therapy is needed. While you're doing this, your psychiatrist will smile at you, her eyes glistening in their beds of coal-black mascara. The spider fern will turn in the breeze from the air conditioner, and the dust in the light from the window will settle on the varnished desk. She will respond with, You're ready to grab the world by the balls, no pun intended, or I'm afraid you're perfectly unconventionally normal.

BRADFORD TICE

Be prepared. At this moment, you may feel a loss so great it will half-life your heart. Think about how many skins you have shed in this room. So many, in fact, you may expect to look into the corners and see the shadows of them watching you.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE FIVE

After the news is delivered, after you've "come out," your mother will nod as if she expected as much. She will open her mouth to speak, and suddenly you will begin praying for a diversion. Anything to stop the questions that are coming. Hope for a satellite to dislodge from orbit and come crashing into your living room, or for a rift in space-time to open in the microwave. Instead, what you will get is your father bursting in at that moment, saying "You'll never believe what I heard from Cupcake next door. He will tell the family about an F5 tornado that touched down in the neighboring county the night before. He will herd up the family, drive you like cattle into the Blazer, and steer toward the scene of catastrophe. This will be nothing out of the ordinary. Say your father has a strange fascination for tornadoes. Say he watches Discovery and the Weather Channel avidly for any kind of special on "nature's fury." Convince yourself this is not a leap. Not a *deus ex machina*.

Your town is full of his type. Most of them stumbling day to day, working dead-end, factory jobs, trying to make ends meet. All of them in their off time developing strange hobbies and obsessions to make themselves feel interesting and worthy of note. Think of your cousin with his exotic, five thousand dollar saltwater aquarium. Or the eccentric on the other side of town you read about in the newspaper, who rigged together a transistor radio and an eight-track player in order to communicate with the home-world, somewhere in the vicinity of Orion's belt buckle. For your father, it's the chaos of weather that turns his crank. This will be old-hat in your neck of the woods. Tell yourself, these people are not crazy, they're just bored. They want to believe they are special. Don't find the heart to blame them.

Your mother will sit in the front seat with your father, silent as you have never seen her, answering questions put to her in monosyllables. Your father and brother will begin to joke, talking about the hazards of life in mobile homes. How

HOW TO BECOME AN AMERICAN BOY

tornadoes are God's sly, yet firm way of saying, Get that shit off my planet. Try to ignore them. Concentrate on your mother. Briefly, wonder what she is thinking, then turn your attention to the windows and the passing landscape—the weeds on the roadside, the alternating fields of corn and cows, the birds perched upon power lines.

You will arrive at the site of devastation in the haze of late morning. The change will be obvious and profound. Your father will whistle softly under his breath as you drive by ruined houses turned on their sides or scattered like food wrappers on the sides of the interstate. Cars will be stacked in pillars, the tatters of clothes fluttering in the trees like the skins of their former inhabitants. Thin sticks of people will wander through the wreckage, turning over plaster and splintered wood, looking for anything recognizable. A soap dish, a spatula, anything. The silence of the car will be palpable, everyone caught up in the awe wind sometimes makes.

Look at your mother's face reflected in the passenger mirror as she stares out the window. Her expression will be unreadable, and you will not be able to help yourself wondering if she can relate to these people who have seen their homes picked up, rearranged, and handed back to them like a broken puzzle. Find yourself thinking of her as slightly petty.

As you drive away from the footpaths of gods, the previous humor will return to your father and brother, a buffer to the storm. They will start swapping jokes again, as you withdraw into a corner of the car with your own thoughts gathered about you. Begin to think of when you will see Frank again, and when would be an appropriate time to tell him that you love him.

Then, your brother Shawn will crack a joke and the word "faggot" will drop like furniture from the sky. Your father will laugh. Your mother will stiffen.

She will turn and say, Shawn, I don't want to hear you using such language in this family ever again. Do you understand? Something to that effect.

Your mother's nostrils will flare, like the last sight a matador ever sees. Your father will giggle, smelling thunder, and respond with He's just joking. Jesus!

BRADFORD TICE

What will result will be a quiet kind of truce wherein no one will say anything. Turn your attention to something else. Something important which you've neglected, the future. Think of the plans you've outlined with Columbia and Magenta, an escape route out of town on the day of graduation. Picture yourself driving on the only highway, toward a horizon that runs ahead of you forever. Columbia will have only one request, the only one she has ever had. She will want to drive to New Mexico and tool down Highway 666, smoke a joint, and let the past roll like road kill under the tires. Out the window will fly a feather boa, red feathers lined with silver, like a flag driven into the landscape of some alien world.

As a peace offering, your father will drive you all to an overlook where a cliff will drop away into several green rolling valleys with frame houses built in lines. Your family will line up at the side of the road, leaning on the metal barrier, and watch the world unfold below. Your mother will take your hand and squeeze it within hers. There will be wind in the tops of sycamores, swallows slicing the sky, swooping in close and then veering off. In no particular order, you will think of genitals, tornadoes, and the previous day. Maybe your mother will lean in and tell you this is where your father and she shared their first kiss. Maybe you will tell her of yours.

What will overtake you at this moment will be a realization that there isn't very much separating you from the people in those white, geometric houses. The zombies slouching their way through the next blue-light special, thinking if they only had a brain. You will look down and see yourself standing on a knife blade, balanced between your hopes for freedom and a whimpering need of warmth. Feel as American as apple pie, Graceland, channel six, loud color—and know someday you will unpack an attic full of junk and kitschy cast-offs onto your front lawn for a rummage sale. Strangers will wander through the maze of your life casually, as if they knew you. Spread out, it will all look like a map you remember from grade school—divided into territories, states, cities, homes—a whole teeming nation of desires.

MICHAEL KIMBALL

We Lived Together On Paper

I met my first husband when I was cleaning his apartment. He asked me why a pretty girl was a cleaning lady and I told him that I was actually an actress and he asked me if I wanted to pretend to be his wife. I thought he wanted me to be a prostitute or something like that, but he really did just want me to pretend to be his wife. He needed a green card and he knew a man who helped arrange marriages. He just needed a woman who would marry him and he offered to marry me for real, but I didn't want to. I just needed the money. I mean, I needed somebody else too. I wanted a real boyfriend or a real husband, but I wasn't actually attracted to him.

The man who arranged the marriage, I don't know what his real name was, but everybody called him Mr. Green. He could make people out of photos and paper and ink. He created a new identity for me. My name was Angela Finney and the story was that I had grown up in New Jersey and then moved to New York City where I met Dariush Derakstani while waiting for the elevator to take us to the top of the Empire State Building. He was on vacation and I had never seen it before. Mr. Green gave me a driver's license, a social security card, and credit cards with my new name and new identity on them. Supposedly, the driver's license and social security card were real, and she even did kind of look like me, but Angela Finney had died in a car accident the year before that.

We both memorized a bunch of other details, but for me it was just like memorizing lines in a play. I had to know the name of Angela's hometown and Dariush's hometown. I had to know the name of the street he grew up on and whether he had any nicknames. We memorized whether our parents were still alive, how many brothers and sisters we had, what our favorite movie was, and whether we drank coffee or tea. We memorized the brand names of shampoo and

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toothpaste, favorite colors and favorite songs. We rehearsed all this in front of Mr. Green. We couldn't go to the INS interview until Mr. Green gave us his blessing. But the people at INS, when they split us up and took us into separate rooms, we just had to fill out a short questionnaire and then they asked a few easy questions. I had to say that his eyes were brown, that he parted his hair on the left, that his favorite drink was this yogurt drink that had mint in it, that nobody was forcing me to marry him, that I loved him.

And we had to show the INS people photos of the wedding, which you actually do months before the INS interview. He rented a tuxedo and I wore my mother's wedding dress even though the wedding was only at City Hall. I thought it would be convincing. We took lots of photos of the ceremony, then some more outside City Hall, and some more at the wedding reception, which were all posed in front of a decorated backdrop that Mr. Green had in his basement. It was some of my best acting work. It was my first paying role anyway, but I couldn't tell anybody that it was me—that I was Elizabeth Singer; that I was just playing the role of the bride, Angela Finney; that after that I was just playing the role of the wife, Angela Derakstani. It was weird to kiss him for the photos, but I didn't have to pretend to be happy. It was kind of fun. We went out to lunch after the ceremony and then I never saw him again after the INS interview. He used to send me letters at my old address about how he shouldn't have married me because Mr. Green had given me a dead woman's name. He thought that was the reason he hadn't been able to find another woman who he wanted to marry for real.

Sometimes I'm afraid to be myself. Sometimes I'm afraid to tell people things about myself, but I liked getting married. And Mr. Green said I was good at it, so he arranged a second marriage for me. This time I was Laura Millimier from St. Paul, Minnesota and I was an actress trying to make it on Broadway. My husband's name was Panos Karras and he came to America so he didn't have to serve in the Greek army. For this one, we told the INS we were already living together, so we had to memorize some different things: what side of the bed we each slept on, what color each other's toothbrush was, what we ate for breakfast, that kind of

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thing, intimate things. They asked me if Panos was circumcised, even though they weren't supposed to, but Mr. Green had already made me memorize the answer to that.

So ages and birthdays and anniversaries were also important. We memorized when we were born, how old we were, and when we first met. And Mr. Green arranged to have Laura Millimier's name signed on the rental agreement for the apartment where Panos lived in Brooklyn. He set up utilities—telephone, electric, all that stuff. On paper, it really looked like we were living together. We memorized the names of streets and restaurants near the apartment and we had two sets of keys made up. Mr. Green also put both our names on a joint bank account, which was also how they paid me.

Panos divorced me a year later, after he met an American woman who he actually wanted to marry. So now Laura Millimier, whoever she was, is divorced. Or maybe Mr. Green married her off again. I don't know, but the divorce was great because they paid me for that too.

My third husband was Jorge Alvarez and I used my own name when we got married. That's how I became Elizabeth Alvarez, which is, technically, legally, my name right now and so I hope I haven't jinxed myself, the real me, Elizabeth Singer. This is stupid, but I actually liked Jorge. He wanted me to call him George and I wanted to go out with him after we got married. I kept hoping he would ask me out on a date or maybe ask me to move in with him. It seemed like it could have been almost natural, since my name, my married name, was already on the lease for the apartment. My name was even on the mailbox and next to the buzzer for the apartment number.

I liked doing the photos for the wedding album with him. We looked so happy. And he gave me his grandmother's wedding ring to wear for the ceremony. It made our marriage feel almost real when I wore it. I gave it back to him after we left City Hall.

We also spent a couple of days taking photos that were supposed to document the history of our relationship. We took photos in our fake apartment, at the edge

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of the East River, at a Mexican restaurant, in Central Park. We changed into different clothes for different sets of photos. He shaved his mustache off part way through and then I got a haircut. We took photos of each other on the subway out to Coney Island and then took photos at Coney Island too—on the rides, outside the freak show, on the boardwalk. We took photos at the beach there and tried to make it look like we were on vacation together somewhere warm. Sometimes when I remember all of that, it feels like we really were married.

We even filed taxes together after the first year and sometimes he still checks in on me to see if I need anything—rent money or groceries or new clothes. He sends me a birthday present every year. He likes to call me Mrs. Alvarez and he likes it if I hold his arm when we are walking down the sidewalk. I would have married him for free.

CRAIG DAVIS

Riparian Wedding

Cry if you want to. If you love creatures, cry then. I hate these fish. I hate the lowing they let loose under the knife. I hate the bits of them on this gaffe, the thud. I hate their brains and the clutch of the skin to the meat. It is wrong to hold so fast, to face the current and swallow this mud.

A circle hook sets itself. To roll in the water is a sickening defense. Just bow, fish. Bow to the bow to the stern, to the stinkbait, the worm. Swallow this gut rot and get in the boat. Haul thyself to the bank, here. This river uncoils slowly across the plains like a snake sunning itself. Sand in waves sluiced by the shallow broad brown water. I don't care for it. I'd rather the dry, the sky, the south wind, the sun, the turf and the tallgrass. I know we need it—this river, this rain, the water. The suckling mud. But I will not trust it.

Trees neither, really. They've chased us here from the east across time, escorted by the rivers. They scupper on the other side of the mountains, await our arrival in the dank places and the land the fires can't clean. I can make my peace with the trees. I will burn with them, I will build with them. I will use. Haul yourself up, Cottonwood and Sycamore, Blackjack Scrub. Give me a place to pin this beast. Hold onto this loam. Don't let the river feed them our dirt. The filthy river.

And these—its dead, its offal—lining the trees along the bank like crepitant leeches, like the husks of cicadas tumesced by the water. Fuck all this water. And the ocean, too. Here on Nelson Island, the Kaw is swallowing the acreage, the fish are wallowing in the mud, the speakeasies are spoken for and the fish fry is a thing of the past. The only thing we haven't lost is lust for flesh. Fillet they call it. I will peel you, fish. Pliers for the noncompliant, 16 pennies for a nail and a knife I sharpened just last night. Your blood line gathers the taste of turbidity. I trim it and return it to the shit colored water. I begin again with the pliers. I will strip

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you of your skin. I will leave your carcass nailed to the cottonwood. I will consume you—you, a fish made of land. I will pry you from this river. With the muscles of my gut I will pry the water from your muscles. In my intestines, I will sift the soil from the river water. In this way I, too, will eat dirt. I will live off the land. In this way. Anyway I want to.

KEN SPARLING

What Can The World Do For Elrond?

It seemed a simple thing to follow the path. He saw almost immediately that the butterfly was not a real butterfly. He moved slowly, staying in the light. What can the world do for Elrond? he thought. Why is Elrond even here?

Turtles crept over the bank out back and plunked into the river like stones. There were so many of them. They fell like hair. I saw spots. I put my head down. Cards spit out of the machine. It's endless, man. I'm so tired. A man searches for reason. For terror. He feels it in the most mundane of activities. He seeks to name it. To give it form. He seeks to capture what is lost. A guy takes a walk through his life. He is bewildered. He recognizes the simplest of moments. His parents' divorce. The day the pole beside the dining room table came loose. The day he lost his toy soldiers in a hedge. The guy robs these moments for his own purposes. Uses them like fuel. The guy exists today in the mundane world of day-to-day domestic life, from the skewed perspective of an underling, undermining the simplest emotions, crippled, but at the same time capable.

The one for morons looks like it isn't for morons, but morons love this stuff.

Teenagers were knocking over gravestones. They seemed to be looking for something. But at the same time, they seemed to be moving in patterns so random they were no pattern at all. A boy stood at the top of a small rise. The gravestones were in a shallow valley. The boy was near the top edge of the western end of the valley. Trees rose high above the stones. The boy on the rise called out to the racing lines of boys, Turn over every rock! Leave no stone unturned!

Where are your eyes? It's so easy to fall, don't you think? There is nothing simple about being at home.

The hairdresser saw, as she got closer to the scalp, a spreading topography of red. Like a map in relief. Her comb bounced when she dragged it through his hair.

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The boy looked down at his hands. He answered the hairdresser's questions. But he never looked up. With the hair dryer blowing, she couldn't hear a word he said. Just the low tone of his voice. A humming underneath the high, whiney whisper-scream of the dryer.

There was a little poem with dirt in it. It looked like it might be a little indoor garden. The man looked and looked. Finally, the deliberation, accompanied by a sense of accident, made the encounter into a gathering of little birds trying to fly off the page in a silent dance that only seemed thwarted by the man's intense focus.

Day after day, the architects dug, led by Bill "Dig-it-Man" Johnson. I believe in experiences. I believe in that special kind of communication that you get when you are reading all by yourself. I believe a sunburn can change the sound of the lake on a still day and that the hum at the end of a towel means more than the towel itself. I have always lurked alone in that place where the writer captures her deliberation and ziplocks it again as the best instance of anything she'll ever encounter.

How do you get it to do that? he asked the cats. The cats were like a series of triangles set atop one another. Pointed ears set atop each of their heads; downturned mouths; diverging lines running diagonally down from above their heads to where their bottoms cut a horizontal line in the rug.

He was moving. Fast. He threw a glance at Natalie sitting in her office. Just a quick glance. I knew he was up to something. But I had no idea what. Tom frequently behaved as though he was up to something. I frequently had no idea what. I had it in my head that it didn't matter. Whatever he was up to. It couldn't be very interesting. Tom kept mostly to himself. Rarely talked. Never drank. He'd never actually told me he didn't drink. But Tom never told me anything.

I was in the old man's living room. There was an old woman behind the curtains. Where did the little boy go? The woman asked no questions. Out in the yard, there was a little girl. She wore a white dress with ripped lace around the neck and sleeves. The old man's house was in the middle of a large field. The field was surrounded by rows of townhouses. The townhouses were stacked against each other, full of abandoned lives. The old man was a kind of sorcerer. It was through

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his strange brand of sorcery that the townhouses had been kept from encroaching on his field. Now, however, there was no longer any magic to keep the townhouses away.

The boy was in a classroom. He was watching the others. Quietly renouncing his name. Hours later, he crossed a ridge in Montana with his best friend, Kip, and his horse, Hors d'oeuvre.

A librarian sees only a chair with books around it. There is no one in the chair.

Once, at a staff meeting, Tilly asked Tom if he believed in God. Tom got a look I've never seen on anyone. It was like discomfort, only not. It was like discomfort with something malignant rooted in it. The rest of us sat in silence. We waited for Tom's answer. Finally, Tom spoke. That question is too complicated to answer at a staff meeting, he said. He looked down at his notepad and doodled something. The meeting was over.

I play my banjo for an hour everyday. I clip clothespins to the bridge to get the volume down. I can play it at four in the morning and not wake my family. Last night, when I went to my lesson, my teacher said the skin was loose on my banjo. He showed me how to tighten it. Use a nut driver, he said. He went to get a nut driver. He didn't have a nut driver the right size. So I did it when I got home. The sound of my banjo changed.

A small orange cat lay on the grass in the centre of the yard. It was licking the fur on its belly. A rain-dark sky rose behind it. No rain. Yet. A girl in pigtails looked out the window. Light canted her face. Smears it. As though the rain had come already and washed her sidewalk chalk features of light. A black cat in a tree looked down at the orange and white cat cleaning itself in the garden behind the white clapboard house. A young woman on a townhouse balcony wore a tight black t-shirt. She stood sideways, the small dome of her stomach pushed out in relief. Her dark hair strong and thick. Her eyes blackened with makeup and sadness.

A boy pulled a wagon with a record player in it. Music played. In the dark angle of the building, a man's eyes peered out at children emerging from shadows. He had to read the taps, but his back hurt so much. He remained where he was, flat on

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his back, his head tilted up slightly, resting against the pillow of plastic. He could see the taps at the other end, his feet against the wall on either side. But still he hesitated. There was someone, a girl he knew, who wanted him to be somewhere later that day. He didn't, in fact, want to go. But he liked the idea that someone might want him there. He was afraid if he didn't go she might not invite him again. He had seen it happen before. If you never showed up, people stopped asking.

A boy looks through the window at his father in the backyard. The father has a broom. His back is turned to the boy. The father thrusts the handle of the broom under the lid of the barbeque and pushes. The lid rises. A squirrel sits in its nest in the barbeque. It looks at the boy through the window. Their eyes meet. The boy is frightened. The squirrel runs. You need a great act of love—someone's great act of faith in you—to lift you. But you also need to be ready. Be ready. Be a pit. Be a fallow field. Be empty. Be nothing. The boy's father owned a piano. It was in the basement. The father tuned it himself regularly. For there were no more piano tuners in the world.

By music, I mean, simply, the sounds you hear every day atomized in the small spaces between the bones in your ears. I mean the pulse that brushes the hairs in your ear. I mean the cosmic music of plants pushing tips of green out through dark soil. The sound of worms looking at stars in the night. The clink of ice beneath miniature umbrellas with toothpicks for handles. Some of them are like doors that are wide open. Doors into fields of tall grass in wind. With doors like that, when you speak, your words are like something sucked into a great wind. Sent to meet something. A flock of birds caught in a gust. Flipped. Aghast. And, together with your new friend, you look to the sky. Your words are like pointers to another, bigger word. Loosen up the soil of your soul. When the seed begins to rain down, some of it will take. Be blind to some things, awake to others. Because people are always poised to disappoint you. And, in your disappointment, you are always ready to grow afraid. You are always ready to lose faith. You are always ready to give up. Don't.

WHAT CAN THE WORLD DO FOR ELROND?

What are the things in your current workspace that freak you out? Mice. That smell we get on Thursdays. That guy, Bill, who hides behind my bookshelf. The hat on the hat rack that isn't mine. Lula, when she vaults over my divider.

The structure of a piece allows a group of musicians to meet and play together. Rhythm and chord progression and melody. The musicians are looking to these ideas to determine their relationship to each other. Then they work together to overcome the structure, to fool it. But it doesn't last. The next day you wake up in more pain than the day before. Full of more questions. The questions hurt to the degree that you believe the answers annihilate the questions. Think of the questions as annihilating the answers. Think of the questions as a kind of dance, sounding in answers. Like a kid trying to dodge raindrops.

His hair travelled toward the back of his head in wayward curls. Before it dropped over the edge of his head, it changed its mind. There was a pixel in the corner of the screen he sat before that looked like a strong man questioning his own ability to lift something. The death of Tyler was a manifesto, a copy of its own derelict inability to froth at the right moment.

The book arrives in the mail on Friday. I'm away with Mark at a swim meet. I find the book on the kitchen table when we get home Sunday. It's packed and padded in a brown envelope. It's midnight. I put the envelope in my knapsack. The next day at work I open it. I pull the book out. Open the cover. Read. The spaces are divine. The space is what animates the word. The ramp from the space to the word is already word. The transition is in the mind, the step from silent meaning to intent. The noise of intent floundering suddenly in the silence that surrounds it.

The swim trip was this weekend. On Saturday, Mark swam all morning. He made finals in two events. So we went back in the evening. In between, I was feeling crappy. I took a tub at the motel. They had a great tub. Much better than the tub we have at home. Mark went out while I was in the tub. Called on one of his swim friends. Joanne. They went out with a couple of the other girls for a walk. They wound up in a pawn shop. Mark saw some CDs he wanted. He came

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back and got some money. Went back and bought the CDs. On Sunday, Mark made finals again. He was in the last event, the 400 IM. He'd already swam three thousand metres that weekend. Fifteen hundred metres Friday afternoon. Almost a thousand today. The pool deck was practically empty. Just Mark, eight other swimmers and their coaches. In the stands, eight sets of parents. A couple of little brothers. Some sisters. Three lifeguards and twenty timers. Mark looked pretty tired. He was standing by himself, on deck, waiting for his turn.

There are things we have to do in between the things we don't have to do. The things we don't have to do are the things that keep us hungry. Don't ever confuse the things we don't have to do with the things we have to do. Don't ever confuse our terrible hunger with our need for food. Success has to do with the space in between. How the space in between can buffer the non sequitur. Is the non sequitur a kind of failure in a world where sequence is everything? Where story is used insidiously, insistently, to redefine the moment? Is the space a place among non sequiturs where you can breathe? A place where you can re-breathe the idea of success as it stands in the non sequitur moment, waiting for us to decide how to make of it something more than what it appears in the moment to be?

The women in their cars like lights, like stars dipped in sky, like celestial wind scurrying down Yonge Street. Turn right. Disappear.

In the end, the music became so overproduced it lost its humanity. Even at live shows, the bands were so scripted, so mechanized, that living beings were hardly necessary. Music became a set of numbers. With the mysterious fragility of humanity gone from the music, people lost interest. Not in music per se. In music as they understood it from what they heard on their computers. Music wasn't banned or forbidden. It wasn't outlawed. It was simply taken for granted. That's what happened to music. Music belonged to everyone and anyone could practice it. This was democracy at its most transparent. Many songs were spoken, or growled. Music was machine produced or fully scripted, blurringly fast or aimless and meandering. Musicians were either achingly devoted to perfection or utterly untrained. There were no musicians left who pursued their vocation in an effort

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to walk out the back door of technical proficiency and rediscover the exuberant innocence that makes a child's song so achingly poignant. The boy's father had been a concert pianist. When the sort of music he created seemed no longer to have any audience at all, he became a lonely soul in a basement tinkling out little tunes on a broken piano that he had to tune himself.

On Sunday, when no one was looking, God made a couple more things. He was sitting in his backyard resting. It was threatening rain. He looked up at the sky, took a sip of the drink he was nursing. He thought, I can't just sit here anymore, I don't care what I said about Sunday.

She worries that the buildings aren't where they should be. That we aren't where we should be. That I'm not where I should be. That we are maybe where the buildings should be and the buildings are maybe where we should be. Think of it this way, she says. The buildings are over there. And there. And look. Look over there. Now look here. We're here. You see? John saw a building made of little stones. He thought of things you could put in a lunch bag. Ridiculous things. Things too big to put in a lunch bag. He thought of a side of beef. He thought of things he had seen on TV. If you listen hard enough, you'll hear the spaces in your life.

God had married by this time. He'd had kids. He was driving a little Honda. But it was not big enough for all God's stuff.

The boy was ahead of the man, calling him to hurry. The man moved slowly. As though each step required an absorption of thought so great as to be uncontainable. As though each step were the result of every moment thus experienced in the life of the man. Later, in the evening, they walked together, side by side. The man and the boy. The sun behind them. Arriving. Eventually, they came to the park. It was the man who folded his heart.

Ron pulled open the door. Stepped onto the sidewalk. Looked at a red car. It drove away. Ron looked at the sky. Nothing. Blueness. Ron crossed Yonge Street. Some girls walked past. Ron looked at the girls. They looked at something behind Ron. Ron turned. Looked where the girls were looking. There was nothing there.

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Cars. Buildings. A bicycle locked to a bicycle post. Ron turned back. Walked. It rained. Ron got wet. He walked. He turned. Went in a door. Stood at the counter. Looked at a woman's back. The woman turned. Can I help you? Could I have a coffee, please? Just cream? Sure.

Tutti and the boy drive the car out of the driveway. There is rust around the wheel wells. I can see the rust when the car gets out on the road. It turns sideways to me and I can see the rust as it pulls away. The people across the street wave. They sit on their front porch and wave. I wave back. Tutti and the boy wave at me. The boy yells, Bye, Daddy!

I go back in the house. The house is empty. I sit in the empty kitchen. There's nothing left to do. I've done everything. I did it all last night. I made my lunch. I laid out my clothes for work. I don't have to go to work for another hour. I sit in the empty kitchen. Listen to the house. There are no sounds. I listen to how quiet the house is.

Whatever it was I was doing, I just kept on doing it. It was something different from whatever it was I was doing before.

There are various kinds of music, the old man told the boy. I knew a girl once whose music existed for all the wrong reasons. Music can ennoble, the man said. But it must be capable of the basest motivations in order to resist and rise.

In the lab, the old man layered the chemicals. Mixing things in approximate quantities is not a science. If you get a little bit wrong, it might even work to your favour. You layer your understandings over future events. Your words might be more or they might be less. Each a trigger for something you can gauge, but never predict. Each a moment followed by another imperfectly gauged event. I want you to think about this the way you might think about a secret. You hear someone whisper. You can't hear the words. You know there is a secret. You don't know what the secret is. Someone is telling someone else a secret. You're in the same room. You hear them. But you only hear the hiss of a whisper. You can't hear the words being whispered. Most of us want to keep the secret. Meaning what? If we write, does that mean we want to keep the secret from ourselves? It's a secret we don't

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want to face, isn't it? The secret meaning is something about ourselves, something we don't want to believe about ourselves.

Is there somewhere, under the ground, where you don't know exactly where you are? So you don't know quite where to begin digging? But that doesn't mean you shouldn't dig. Does it? It just means you might want to be prepared to do some hard work when you decide to start digging.

The guard at the cargo pass didn't look like an average guard, but maybe no guard looks like an average guard. This guard was tall enough. But skinny. Like a sapling that's sprouted up too quick. He looked willowy and delicate. He had no bulk. No thick neck. No wide head.

I like the feeling of my feet being sore and my arms being sunburnt. I continue to hope that she will get her buttons out. When she gets her buttons out, she is silent and beautiful. Her eyes look rested and alive. It's like everything I need to know about her is there in the way she approaches her buttons. The way she puts her fingers in the tin. Stirs things around. The way she'll pick one button up and look surprised. Like she's never seen that one before. Like she's never seen anything like that button in all the world in all her life.

The old man had a routine:

1. Wake up on back and stare at ceiling
2. Roll over onto side and stare at curtains closed over window
3. Slide body close to edge of bed
4. Drop feet over edge of bed
5. Pull back one curtain, look outside
6. Stand
7. Place hands on windowsill, stretch quads
8. Place left hand on back of right arm, stretch shoulder
9. Repeat with right hand on back of left arm
10. Leave bedroom

Things that happened after that included making coffee and peeing, but there was no set order. The old man liked to put the coffee on before he peed. But sometimes he had to pee so bad he peed and then put the coffee on.

KEN SPARLING

The boy should survive in the box, the old man thought. Do not remove the tube from your arm, he told the boy. The old man pictured a tiny little truck, something you might doodle on a piece of paper, pulling up to a little tiny door. It was ludicrous.

He made pizza. Saw Joan outside the window. Joan was under a tree. Her chunky hips. Her purple lips. The oven was on. He could smell garlic. Onions. Joan breathed. He could see her breath. It came out of her mouth. Hit the cold air. Turned to steam. Joan stamped in the snow. She was by the big tree, the streetlight behind her. Her frizzy hair a halo. Hands in pockets. Eyes dark. He opened the oven. Pulled out the pizza. It smelled hot.

I'm going down, I said, hold the rope. If he lets go, I'm gone, I thought. But imagine if he doesn't. I'll have made it further down than anyone before. And when I come back up, I'll have this knowledge: someone was willing to send me down and then, unexpectedly, bring me back up.

They knew not the purpose of the flies that landed on their food. They went to it with hearty appetite. They had not seen each other in so long. I hate these lusty flies, said the boy. As do I, said the old man. They vomit in your food, you know, said the boy. So I have heard, said the old man. And have you heard that they breed disease, said the boy. Obviously, neither wished to spend this precious moment together talking of flies. And yet, the talk went on. Did you know they have faceted eyes? asked the boy. This, also, I have heard, said the old man. They ate ancient cheese washed down by questionable water.

It seemed to David, now in his seventeenth year, that his father had displayed a kind of proud regret at the size of his hands. David had seen his father's idols on tv. White devils with large hands. Bird-like, fluttering over keys. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Judy Garland walked a fence. The fence was the rainbow. Sound cascaded beneath her voice the way the fence cascaded beneath her feet. She struck each note with a pure intensity of emotion that wasn't in the song when David's father played it. When David's father played *Over the Rainbow*, there were extra notes all over the place. Like flies on a horse's ass. David's father seemed to wait until

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it was too late to rescue the next melody note from the chaos of his playing. He sometimes didn't bother to rescue the next melody note at all. David felt a terrible fear in these moments. He waited to hear what his father would do. It seemed utterly irrational. But then, quite miraculously, David's father would pluck notes out of the air that caused a sort of redemption. David's father somehow made it seem like every note was exactly the right note. David would feel rescued. What he felt was like a victory. His victory, not his father's.

I wasn't going in unless she came out to get me. That was what we said she should do. When the time came, she should come out to get me. I thought of knocking. I didn't want to knock. I didn't even want to go in. I realized there was a God.

KEN BAUMANN

from Solip

It begins as a small bother, a miniscule bloodline back of the earlobe. Brush at it. It returns, brush at it. It feels negligible. The rest is smooth and not attended. After an inordinate amount of calming, reached a strait in which body became an absence piece by piece. Now an earlobe calling. Brush at it. The lack in between noted, made sure, brush at it, not a constant presence, this back earlobe. Brush at it. Bloodline. Faint. Note the procession. A calming, due and promoted and practiced, brush at it, until an absence achieved. Brush at it. Have to let the vein fall away. Have brush at it, to let the vein fall away. Brush at it. The back of the earlobe. The head. Brush at it. Pulsing. On the fingers. Note the fingers, clean brush at it. An angle. The legs underneath you, absent. Move them, note the ankles brush at it and the bloodline. Ankles rush. Brush at it push it away. Ankles hot and hitting, brush at it, scraped. Blood underneath. Hands are clean. Note the hands. Note the brush at it, wall. Note the wall. Breath, faint, let a bloodline. Note the. Breath. Brush at it. Ankles. Extend legs. Flatten, then. Brush at it. Note above you. Blood. The smells catching up. The bloodline. Brush at it. The smells coming up. Ankles torn, torn and note the note fresh to air, straighten up. Inordinate calm brush at it. Inordinate calm. Brush at it. Breathe. Straighten up. Brush at it. Faint bloodline. Note the fingers, clean. Clean. The blood back of your calves. Stay and promote calm. Brush at it. Faint let up. Catching up. Smells, back of your calves with blood. Brush at it. Ankles and spread up the bones, catching up, bloodlet, the breathing brush at it, calm. Inordinate calm.

JAMES O'BRIEN

Disposal

We bagged the man's head and slammed a brick against his temple and threw him in our car's trunk. We four drove him to a ragged cornfield and opened the trunk and hauled him to a vacant barn that still smelled of horse. We duct taped his limbs together so tight his hands bloated and whitened. His back arched high and his face ground to the cracked cement. He woke like that some hours later. Night had fallen and the world shaded black and blue. Winds caught the barn's loose framing and the fittings rattled like they would breathe. The man asked where he was. Nowhere, someone said.

We four traded off beating the man. We kept the bag lashed to his head. The man kept asking, Why.

Because, someone said.

One of us garroted his neck with plastic tubing run through with razor blades and tautened the garrote and the man stopped asking. He bled. A ragged skin-flap slapped loose against his neck like a second mouth. It said nothing. His muscle and esophagus unwound there and still pumped and twitched a little.

He looks a bit dead, someone said.

We wrapped the body in plastic sheeting and washed the floor with a pail of water we drew from a spigot to the back of the barn. Someone found a rusted shovel with its lip bent hanging from a hook and unlatched it and said, Let's be done with it.

We carried the body through the cornfield behind the barn. Blood sloshed in the plastic sheeting and poured out onto our hands and legs. We were halfway through when we heard water rushing. We followed the sound of the water rushing and came to a low stream sluicing through a deep embankment. Some uprooted trees clawed at the current downstream. We stood on the embankment rubbing our hands on our pants, trying to get the blood out.

JAMES O'BRIEN

This is better, someone said.

We threw the body in the river and watched it bob downstream. We cleaned the blood in the dirt and the grass on the bank. The dirt clagged with blood and the gore and small leaves and burrs rubbed between our fingers. We slid down the embankment and washed our hands in the water. The body rolled against an overturned tree in a swell of broken branches and corn stalks. When the body rotated, its arm slapped against the water like it would push itself off. We waded downstream until hip deep trying to pull the body from the fallen tree. His esophagus and muscle had snagged the branches and caught him there in the current. He circled around by and the tissue knotted tight with each rotation and eased more of the man out from his skin. A silver ring was on his finger as though someone had cared for him once. Someone vomited.

We freed the body and pushed it back into the central current. We climbed up the embankment and slid through the mud and topped the rise where our chests heaved for air. We sat on the ground and shook water. Windrows of twigs and leaves striated the ground to where the river overflowed when it swelled with rain.

We pushed through the cornstalks and lost ourselves there. Insects hummed. Somewhere a bird called. The stalks rustled. The stalks cut our faces. We called out to one another. We could hear our voices calling.

We collected ourselves on the verge of the cornfield abutting a treed bluff. The pine trees had needled the ground and acidified the soil and only stunted pines sprouted there below the canopy. A narrow game path cut through the trees and up the bluff's angled face as once small beasts had hunted there. The river glimmered black in the bottomland behind.

We followed the game path's switchbacks until the trees fanned and broadened. We mounted the bluff and looked to the dell below. The dell looked quite small and the river splitting it seemed distant. We looked far down into the bottomland and the field and the barn in all of its sharp minuteness.

Nice night, someone said.

We nodded. We turned from the dell and walked to our car and started the engine. As we drove away the land diminished and vanished.

AMBER SPARKS

These are Broken, Funny Days

I have two knives. By that I mean I have one knife plus Dave who also has a knife.

It's funny. I do have a well-developed humor. There was no abuse, no excuse that was easy for me. No enemas, no weeks spent locked in closets or tied to piano legs.

Sure, my father would get drunk and hit us, and sure it was shitty but this was standard stuff in the neighborhood. Nothing you couldn't get through just fine if you were resourceful. Dave, though—was an only child, born to a forty-six-year-old woman, his father dead by the time he was two. His mother used to push him down the stairs. Once she locked him in the deep freezer for an hour, and he still has the scars all over his body. He lost both his little toes and walks with a kind of loping, rolling motion.

I am as a spear tip and I contain no morals. I don't waste time agonizing over things. Sure, there's something wrong with me. But I can't change the way I am. I feel heavy and programmed, like a machine would feel if it woke up. How else to explain it? Not that I don't enjoy it. I do. I wouldn't do it if I did not. But it's actually very hard. Everyone thinks it would be easy, but no, no it is not. You have to work really hard at it, like a job. Skin and teeth and nails are tough. Blood smells bad.

It has to be worth it.

Dave loves me but feels the danger of me like his hairs are constantly standing at attention. Prickly for me, that's what he says. He only goes for helpless young women, drunken at campus bars. They're bleached and empty and nothing at all like me.

Sometimes, after I get done with a john, I tell Dave he's next. That while he's sleeping I'm going to stick him, right between the ribs. He gets really scared then, doesn't sleep, just stares at my hands for hours and days. Once he cried.

Isn't that funny? Funny ha ha, I mean. Seriously. A knife afraid of a knife.

M.T. FALLON
from Remembering Menchov

I first became acquainted with Menchov while lecturing in the department of Applied Linguistics at National University. Menchov was the Department Chair. Menchov and I realized our affinities and started working on the project that would eventually produce our repertory linguistic method and the groundbreaking Sociogrammatical Repertory Linguistics. —*Ivan Lenchov*

Working with Menchov

Ah, Menchov said, the pitter patter of the rain. I would like to be with my wife tonight, Menchov said, looking out the window, looking at the rain. The rain is falling down in a soft pitter patter, Menchov said, tonight would be a good night to be in bed, Menchov said, in bed with my wife listening to the pitter patter of the rain, said Menchov. But I am not at home in bed with my wife, Menchov said, looking at me, I am here with you in the applied linguistics laboratory, said Menchov. I am here with you applying the repertory linguistic method, said Menchov, touching his fingers to the window glass. Go to her, I said, we will call an end to our linguistics, I said. No, Menchov said, we must never call an end to our linguistics, he said, we cannot stop now, so Menchov. I only meant, I said, I only meant to call it quits for tonight, I said to Menchov. No, Menchov said, we must continue, said Menchov, we must always continue our repertory linguistic work, said Menchov. Even though I would rather be at home in bed with my wife listening to the pitter patter of the rain, Menchov said, I will stay here with you and continue our repertory linguistic work, said Menchov. Wait a minute, I said, looking at Menchov, your wife is a terrible person, I said, you are terrified of your wife, I said. Yes, Menchov said, my wife is terrible, her nose is perfect and it offends you, said Menchov. My wife has a perfect Roman nose and hair like the silken

arms of night and you are terrified of her, said Menchov. Yes, I am terrified of your beautiful wife, I said, but so are you, I said, you are also terrified of your beautiful wife, I said to Menchov. Yes, Menchov said, I am terrified of my beautiful wife, said Menchov, but I am not so terrified that I would not slip into the bed beside her and listen to the pitter patter of the rain, said Menchov, touching his fingers to the window glass.

Menchov on the Method

The objective of the method, Menchov said to the graduate students, the objective of the so-called repertory linguistic method, said Menchov, is to get inside and see what's there, so Menchov said. The objective of the method is the underlying reality, the original linguistic reality, Menchov said. The objective of the repertory linguistic method is always the original linguistic reality, said Menchov. You must whittle and whittle, little by little, bit by bit, said Menchov. You must chip it, you must snip it, Menchov said, here a prick, there a nick, picking and chipping, said Menchov. When you chip a bit, when you nick a chip, when you prick the tip, Menchov said, you begin to see what lies beneath, so Menchov. You pick a chip here, you clip a chip there, you chip a bit, you flick it, said Menchov. You dig a bit here, you rip a slit there, and you keep working, said Menchov, lifting and clipping, snipping and ripping, nicking and flicking, and bit by bit, little by little, as you whittle and whittle, said Menchov, you begin to get there. Where exactly is there, the graduate student said, what do you mean by there, the student said. I am getting to that, Menchov said, I am getting there, said Menchov, holding up his hand to the graduate student, holding up his hand to quiet the graduate student. As you begin to get there, Menchov said, once you see that the outer layers have been whittled away, once you see that the inner layers have been chipped away, once you see that there are no more layers to be chipped or whittled away, so Menchov said, then at last you can look inside and see what is there, said Menchov, and of course there is nothing there. There is nothing there, repeated the graduate student. That is correct, Menchov said, that is what the method does, said Menchov, that is

FROM REMEMBERING MENCHOV

the power of the repertory linguistic method. It is not difficult, Menchov said, the repertory linguistic method is easy to use, said Menchov, first you scrape away the outer layers, grating and razing the surfaces, so Menchov said. Then you abrade and degrade the inner layers, Menchov said, scraping and grazing the inner surfaces, said Menchov. You scrape off the scrap, shave off the shreds, graze off the dross, Menchov said. If you have been diligent, Menchov said, if you have been thorough, said Menchov, after all the abrading and scraping and shaving and grating you will come to the innermost part, and when you come to the innermost part, said Menchov to the graduate students, you see that there is nothing there. When you see that there is nothing there, Menchov said, then you will have applied the method in fulfillment of its purpose, said Menchov, then you will have fulfilled the method's repertory linguistic purpose, so Menchov said.



You will be working with Peter, I said to Menchov. Peter is the repeater, I said, pointing at Peter. Let's warm up, Menchov said, let's perform our warm-up exercises, said Menchov. Before we begin applying the repertory linguistic method, Menchov said to Peter, we must perform our warm-up exercises, said Menchov. We perform warm-up repertory exercises to prepare ourselves for the repertory linguistic method, said Menchov. Okay, said Peter. Today, Menchov said, we will perform our so-called oceanic ornithological warm-up exercises, said Menchov, pointing at the paper. Get ready, Menchov said to Peter, reading over the so-called oceanic ornithological exercises. Are you ready, Menchov said to Peter, looking at Peter. I am ready, said Peter, looking at Menchov. The terns return to the turning tides, Menchov said, reading the exercise, nodding at Peter, Peter looking at Menchov. Peter is not repeating, I thought. Menchov, I said, Peter is not repeating, I said. Peter, Menchov said, you are the repeater, repeat, said Menchov. The terns, Peter said, the terns return to the terning tides, Peter said. No, Menchov said, shaking his head. Repeat after me, Menchov said. The terns return to the turning tides, Menchov said, nodding at Peter. The turns return to the turning tides, Peter said, looking at Menchov. No, Menchov said, let's go to the next one, said

Menchov. Let's move on, Menchov said. Are you ready, Menchov said to Peter, looking at the paper, looking at the next oceanic ornithological exercise. I am ready, Peter said. The seagulls are seeking seaweed seeds, Menchov said, nodding at Peter. The seagulls are seeking seaweed seeds, Peter said. No, Menchov said, shaking his head, repeat after me, said Menchov. The seagulls are seeking seaweed seeds, Menchov said, nodding to Peter, Peter looking at me. The seagulls are seeking seaweed seeds, Peter said. No, Menchov said. Repeat, Menchov said. Wait, Peter said, wait a minute, said Peter. I don't want to do this, Peter said. What, Menchov said, what did you say, said Menchov, pointing at Peter. I don't want to do this, Peter repeated. Say that again, Menchov said, pointing at Peter. I don't want to do this, repeated Peter. Ah, Menchov said, now you have it, now you are ready, said Menchov, now we can begin using the repertory linguistic method, said Menchov, nodding at Peter. Peter is a repeater, Menchov said, now we can begin.



Call the next repeater, Menchov said, call the next applied linguistics graduate student into the applied linguistics laboratory, said Menchov. Yes, I said to Menchov, looking at the roster. Wait, I thought, there must be some mistake, I thought, reading the roster. The next assistant has the same first name and last name, I thought, opening the door to the hall. There must be a mistake with this name, I thought, calling the next assistant. Here comes the next assistant, I thought, watching the graduate student enter the applied linguistics laboratory. What is your first name, I said to the graduate student, closing the door. Said, said Said. What is your last name, I said. Said, said Said. There must be a mistake, I said, your name repeats, I said, shaking my head. You have the same first name and last name, I said, pointing at Said. There is no mistake, said Said. My first name and last name are the same, said Said. It is not uncommon, Menchov said, walking toward us, it is not uncommon for Arab men to have the same first name and last name, said Menchov. That is true, Said said. This is fortuitous, Menchov said, we have a repeater with a repetitive name, said Menchov. Said Said is the best repeater we have ever had, Menchov said. Menchov, I said, we haven't even started, we

FROM REMEMBERING MENCHOV

don't know if Said is a good repeater, I said, we certainly don't know if Said is the best repeater, I said. Said Said is a good repeater, Menchov said, his name repeats, Menchov said. Said Said is a repertory name, Menchov said. Said Said is the best repeater we have ever had, so Menchov.



Menchov and the Museum

Menchov and I had planned to visit the contemporary museum of modern art, with its twenty-seven thousand pieces of modern art, until he learned the metropolitan museum of modern art had thirty-four thousand pieces of modern art. Certainly, Menchov said, it is preferable to visit an art collection with thirty-four thousand pieces of art than it is to visit an art collection with only twenty-seven thousand pieces of art, so Menchov said, crossing the university commons. That is why, Menchov said, putting his hand on my shoulder, that is why I have decided to cancel our visit to the contemporary museum of modern art, said Menchov. I have canceled our visit to the contemporary museum of modern art, Menchov said, so that we might visit the metropolitan museum of modern art, so Menchov said, patting his hand on my back. The contemporary museum of art, I said, purportedly has the superior collection, I said, walking beside Menchov. Opinions, Menchov said, licking his lips, I don't want people's opinions, he said, removing his hand from my shoulder, thirty-four thousand is superior to twenty-seven thousand, that is a fact, said Menchov. But we are not going to look at all the pieces of art, I said, walking beside Menchov, we are only going to look at a selection, I said to Menchov. Are you trying to tell me, Menchov said, stopping in his tracks, are you trying to lead me to believe, said Menchov, pointing his finger in my face, do you mean to say, in purely objective terms, that twenty-seven thousand pieces of art are preferable to thirty-four thousand pieces of art, so Menchov said, standing in the university commons, pointing his finger in my face.



I could have painted this, Menchov said, pointing at the painting. I could have painted this so-called painting, said Menchov, waving his hand at the painting,

M.T. FALLON

a child could have painted this so-called abstract painting, so Menchov said. Look at the globs and swaths of paint, Menchov said, waving his hand at the painting, swaths and globs of paint spilled upon a canvas, so Menchov said. How much do you think it's worth, how much for this so-called painting, Menchov said, pointing at the painting. It was a good painting, I thought, looking at the painting, looking at the globs and swaths of paint. I don't think Menchov could have painted it, I thought, I certainly do not think a child could have painted it, I said to myself. This so-called museum of modern art is in fact a museum of childish art, Menchov said, the so-called MOMA is in fact a MOCA, Menchov said, looking at the abstract paintings. This so-called Menchov, I thought, this so-called Menchov should be called Childchov, I thought, walking in the gallery, looking at another abstract painting. Why are you grinning, Menchov said, turning from the painting, pointing at my grin. What are you grinning about, Menchov said, pinching my cheeks. What are you grinning about?

HAVING IT TOGETHER

A Conversation with Padgett Powell by Jacob White

For twenty-five years now, Padgett Powell's fiction has been coming apart. This is not meant pejoratively. Coming apart is what Powell does, and does better than anyone.

Powell's latest book, *The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?* (2009), pushes coming apart to its limit—or essence. The book is composed entirely of questions that for the most part have no explicit connection. Yet the book is strangely affecting. Beneath its rich angularities of tone and propulsive non sequiturs stares a two-a.m. sobriety: an intimacy new to Powell's work, or maybe there all along. 2009 also saw the reissue of *Edisto*, which, revisited now, sets aglow something sustained beneath even the most oblique and fractious later fictions, beneath *The Interrogative Mood* especially, which, even as it asks us, "Am I wasting your time? Or are you wasting mine?"¹, proffers a hand: "I think you are with me. I think you and I could dance across this floor of doubt in a cuddly promenade if we could know what our feet are up to"².

The following interview took place in August of 2009, following a short and humiliating lesson on mullet fishing.

Jacob White: As a newish resident of Florida I find the pitbull is rampant here. It is in Florida's blood or something. Every day at the dog park someone arrives with a pitbull and two or three owners leash up and erectly depart. But is this the right response? Do we hold the pitbull against itself?

Padgett Powell: They depart because the pitbull is a fighting dog and their dogs are not. This is to say, their dogs will fight, but the pitbull can fight. The analog would be Roberto Duran's walking fat and drunk into happy hour; we should leave.

HAVING IT TOGETHER

The pitbull at the dog park is a loosely bred facsimile of what it was in the hands of professional dogfighters. It has in this loose breeding a tendency to bite people, which was never allowed under the thoroughbred breeding of professionals, and it is loosely governed in public, which also was never allowed. Like any other dog that becomes popular and falls into inexpert hands, the pitbull is now ruined (put it with collies and beagles, say), with the extra consequence that it is a lethal force. People are right to run.

JW: In your last novel, *Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men*, Mrs. Hollingsworth writes to herself, "You will never be allowed to speak on National Public Radio"³, and it does seem that, despite the cultural heft of your work, the humanities people are a little wary of you, or haven't quite fixed you on the cultural syllabus. Has this lack of cultural recognition been a blessing, a frustration, or a source of immeasurable indifference?

Also: Which poses a bigger problem for the South: Ted Turner or NPR?

PP: One of the things a sane boy cannot complain of is want of recognition. Let's face it: it is a function of merit, demerit, and accident. I like to imagine sometimes all the fine actors in the country, in the world, who scrape and scrimp and starve as Tom Cruise rakes it in. Is there any integrity to their whining about that?

NPR is harmless, and I wake up to it every day now, in my senility and wallowing closer to the grave. Ted Turner is my main man. He was Ted Turner, as himself, in my last book, though for bogus legal strictures put upon me he appeared as the misnomered and misleading Roopit Mogul. If you scratch out Roopit Mogul and pencil in Ted Turner, and Jane, there are some scenes that are almost funny, and moments that almost have intelligent import.

I have envisioned recently a new book that begins so: I am Ted Turner. Am I not Ted Turner?

I have been trying to write something since about 1980 that has as its central character a person named Ted Turner and have not been able to do it. I have

A CONVERSATION WITH PADGETT POWELL BY JACOB WHITE

proposed to magazines that I do a profile of him and have not been allowed. How might he pose a “problem for the South”?

JW: How might he not? The Mouth of the South? Is Ted Turner, or mouth, really the appropriate response to what you have termed the South’s whippedness? Does whippedness pertain anymore?

PP: Turner is the antithesis to whippedness. [Somewhere] you averred maybe you had misapprehended Turner, and I believe that you have. Explaining his dissolve with Jane, he said, “She wants me to be a saint. And I’m not.” End of story—no whining, no protracted nasty divorce—he just walked away from the hottest thing there is in our time. After making CNN, he was the man to genetically engineer the New Southerner. Seinfeld could tee off on Steinbrenner, but lawyers at Houghton Mifflin wouldn’t let me play with Ted and Jane. Would Steinbrenner sue Seinfeld? No. Would Turner sue me? No.

He is a hero, truly, if there is one. Listen to him talk. “Hi, Kofie,” he says, when he meets Kofie Anan and gives him \$1B (which he subsequently can’t deliver owing to financial ruin).

JW: *The Interrogative Mood* will be the fifth novel in a body of writing that has worked steadily to loose itself from novelistic obligations. Over the years, and especially over the last decade, you seem to have crossed a point where conventional narrative is no longer an option. Can you explain this?

PP: Yes. No. The urge to commit verisimilitude has been exhausted. I thought fiction was strictly realist to-be-believed until I met Donald Barthelme, who lamented that he found me “fully formed.” The effect of seeing fiction not-to-be-believed, and unframed conventionally, was very powerful upon a boy almost thirty. I was not fully formed. I drifted hard toward what Barthelme himself, sane, was quitting at about that point. I said goodbye to Flannery O, William F, Tennessee W, hello to Don B and Samuel B.

HAVING IT TOGETHER



JW: The good many short pieces that you have set loose over the last decade—dialogs, monologues, sketches about shirts of meat—seem indeed to forswear the large utterance, gathering instead toward a consideration of *Not Having It Together*: “I am sitting here without my marbles together, envying other people sitting where they are sitting with their marbles together”⁴. Is there a nobility to be found in this condition? Or in acknowledging it?

PP: I doubt it. We will recall O’Connor’s famous little ditty in I believe her preface to *Wise Blood* on its tenth birthday: integrity obtains in what one is unable to do? Haze Motes had integrity since he could not repudiate Jesus try as he might have? Was that it? In my case I have come, whether via writing or not, to see that I am a coward. That is the condition well beneath a rather trivial condition of “failing,” I think.

JW: A coward how?

PP: A coward in all ways. Typically a fundamental coward is not afraid of the putative cowardice-betraying things, like physical danger. Those things are cosmetic cowardice. In deep cowardice you are afraid of life itself, and you learn to wear a coat of bluster and cheer that hides the fear.

JW: How does one discover, “via writing,” that one is a coward? How does one not?

PP: The discovery is not I think via writing, though the position that one cannot not find himself via writing is of course a happy (and phony) bromide. The discovery is just in sitting there and realizing you are afraid of everything, and that some people are not, whether through the natural bluster of dogs or through a more noble actual heroism and game. Many women seem to have this natural game. I prefer to hide and run.



JW: Is it true that you have retired from teaching to raise chickens?

PP: I still purport to teach, and by dint of my record in chickens so far it is even fair to say I am a better teacher than chicken man. I have bought so far 35 chickens and not raised one to egg-laying age, about 24 weeks. Raising writers I have many who have laid some very good eggs.

JW: Barthelme often mentioned Beckett as a “problem” for him as a writer, due to the power of Beckett’s style, which Barthelme felt he had to free himself from, or somehow get around. Of course Barthelme was himself a powerful stylist, and I wonder what you, as a student of his, might say to writers who find your own style similarly powerful and therefore similarly worrisome.

PP: It’s the worrisome I would address. I read as a child certain writers with worry (Faulkner) and without worry but with great frequency (or volume) (Mailer). I got to where I read an author until I had the score: his tricks, his obsessions, his game. As I matured I got better at this and when I had the score I got impatient more quickly than I earlier had and repudiated them more thoroughly. Thus what I think I am saying is I think loving a guy is all right because at a point it will effect an allergy and you will reject the affection (and any inclination to mimic overtly) and keep whatever was truly useful to you (which ideally will be some covert thing). All these cases are different: with Faulkner I thought if I read another book (beyond about five) I would actually succumb to him as I think you can argue Cormac M did, so I stopped, and then I developed the allergy, and today I can’t read him without impatience at the hokeyness of it. Mailer I read as a teenager wanting to be Mailer; easy to quit that. Tennessee Williams somewhat the same, but since he lost his mind and kept writing you can actually keep reading him and liking him as he goes crazy and his tricks consume him. Similar case is Hemingway: he nuts up so bad at the end that you can see all over how and why he was good when he was

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good. Walker Percy got consumed by his tricks very steadily and predictably and dully. O'Connor was a constant except for the immature thesis work.

The only trouble I suffered in reading to steal was Barthelme, whom I came to very late and whom I did not (have not) read that much of. There was the matter of his personal influence on me that complicated the allergy-making and I became some kind of illegitimate son, I'm afraid. But this did not come from reading and liking the reading or not liking it.

All this boils down to this: read, like it, reread it, worship it, mimic it, believe in it, live by it, whatever you want to do, and then you will quit all that and write something you are not impatient with until you begin to develop a vision of your own tricks and develop an allergy to yourself, which is another chapter.

End of forgoing. (O'Brien, Flann, Two-Birds)

JW: The mullet is widely regarded as a trash fish, yet you have declared mullet the best eating river fish since catfish. By what preparation is this fish best redeemed?

PP: Low whites like to call mullet a trash fish. It is best fried or smoked. Sometimes it has a dirt taste, sometimes a clean taste; I do not know how to defeat the dirt taste if you run into it but I suspect there are people who do know. You see more white people fishing for them now than you once did. "The economy."

JW: The recipe?

PP: Just split your mullet from the back, leaving the belly intact, open it up, clean it, lay on the Lusty Monk Burn In Hell chipotle mustard, and smoke that fish.

A CONVERSATION WITH PADGETT POWELL BY JACOB WHITE

ENDNOTES

1. Padgett Powell, *The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?* (New York: Ecco, 2009), 129.
2. "Dizzy," *Unsaid* 1, http://www.unsaidmagazine.com/magazine/issue1/powell_dizzy.html.
3. *Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 31.
4. "Marbles," *Narrative Magazine* (Winter 2006), <http://www.narrativemagazine.com/issues/winter-2006/three-short-pieces>.



TRIQ
.SAMUEL TAYLOR COLI
(POETA 1772-183

Even had his
grandfather proven
himself more thoughtful
than anyone could have ima-
gined, the boy would not have
been ready: one moment
smooth-cheeked and innocent;
the next a son of Lykos,
fully-fledged.

ca. 09

COOPER RENNER

Son of Lykos

I: Introduction

When I first came to Malta several years ago, I intended primarily to play the tourist. I wanted to ‘soak up atmosphere’ for a novel in the planning stages as well as to unwind from a particularly unhealthy year at the University. On the voyage from Galveston to Rome, however, I repeatedly remembered several of Coleridge’s lines and that he too had gone to Malta during a stressful period of his life, though I could not recall that he had brought anything notable away with him. His chief poetic work was, to be sure, behind him, but I doubted as to whether Malta had even made it into *Biographia Literaria**. Those were the very earliest years of the British occupation, and Coleridge had himself worked for the governor, Alexander Ball. Surely something of note must have happened, if only the exposure to a very “foreign” culture, with its own language and norms; the medieval cast to the structures left behind by the Knights of St John and the Norman and Muslim rulers before them; the dark-haired, dark-eyed glamour of the people. Byron, one thinks, would have gotten himself adopted by the Maltese—were they simply far too un-English for the eminently bookish Coleridge? Or had his laudanum addiction served as a screen, dulling the excitement of the new, even rendering him incapable of interaction much of the time?

Weeks passed during which I was charmed to stumble across the Triq (Street) Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Gzira and the rather later paintings of Edward Lear, the nonsense poet, in one of the many museums. I sat at least once a week in the Lower Barrakka Gardens of Valletta, pondering the mausoleum of Gov. Ball while eating ham on toast with chips and drinking what the Maltese call white tea (black tea with milk). But Coleridge himself remained elusive.

Until I learned, from a volunteer at the St James Cavalier art centre, that the

* It has one mention.

library of a monastery which has asked to remain anonymous had some of the oldest records on the island and that it permitted the public to research them. I will not, for a brief sampling such as this—the first, indeed, which I have offered for publication—go into detail regarding my “discovery” of what I will call here the Coleridge papers. All of that can await the monograph which I am still preparing (under the title *Disbelief*). Here I will instead provide the reader with a sampling of what I found, not with the aim of an organized and necessarily conjectural (given the nature of the materials) overview, but rather intending to whet the appetite for more. I have selected three sections—two shorter, one longer—of the fragmentary narrative poem which Coleridge apparently planned to call “*Son of Lykos*”^{**} and will pair these sections with a discussion of, and selections from, prose materials of an entirely more questionable nature. Though housed by the brothers with the poetic fragments in the library, these prose pages seem often to be in a different hand and nowhere bear Coleridge’s signature or initials. That said, they are clearly linked thematically, and it is not unlikely—I would say even probable—that the matter of the prose narrative was the inspiration for Coleridge’s poem.

II. Fragment I

Not more than once in any age
 The soldier couples with the sage
 And flush with plenty joy and rest
 Dame Wisdom offers us her breast

Unpunctuated and written on a sheet by itself, this quatrain would seem to be more a summation of, or introduction to, a plot motif than a part of any narrative flow. It stands alone, not simply on its original sheet, but also in the completion of its thought. One might, in fact, be forgiven for thinking it more nearly a fragment from Blake than Coleridge. The presence of the soldier, however, links it to Coleridge’s larger narrative, as does Dame Wisdom, functioning as personality

^{**} The reader will doubtless think of the *Lykos* of Greek mythology, but would be better served, I believe, to limit himself to the root meaning—wolf.

SON OF LYKOS

or even deity, rather than as an abstract principle. While “country” holds a more significant role in “Son of Lykos” than “faith”—appropriate to a poem set among the military—the idea of a Maltese goddess runs throughout, and it is not at all clear that she is merely metaphor.

Does the second line allow for a latent homosexuality in either Coleridge or the poem’s subject, Major Samuel Jennerette? Almost certainly not. The modern reader must keep in mind both that readers in centuries past were much more acclimated by the patriarchal nature of their cultures to avowedly loving relationships between clearly heterosexual men. Furthermore, Coleridge is a poet—both soldier and sage are symbols here, representing action and contemplation. While one is not necessarily “wrong” to take Coleridge’s employment of couple in its sexual sense (a sage may, after all, be a sybil), the greater meaning is that action and contemplation have appeared in one person. It is so that soldier and sage have coupled—merged might have been a less loaded term, but only if one projects current mores back two centuries. The central question this quatrain poses—in light of the entirety of the verses—is this: are we to see Major Jennerette as this soldier-sage? Or Colonel Harker? Presumably this question would have been worked out in lines that were never written. (Had these lines been created a few years earlier—and perhaps not by an Englishman—they might have implied Napoleon as well.)

A prose scrap—I mean this literally: it is written on a torn sheet of paper—kept in the same box as the rest of the pages reads:

“She thinks you the wisest of men.”

Soft laughter floats in the darkness. “Has there ever been a bride who did not see her husband so?”

“She may take you as her husband, but I am her brother. I was there the day she was born. She does not speak lightly, at any time.”

“Then I will have to try with even more assiduity to deserve her love.”

Jack clapped him on the shoulder. “I cannot see you failing in that regard.”

“But wisdom may not follow love.”

“No, but—”

And there the torn edge of the paper cuts off what must have followed. What is peculiar about this fragment is that it seems to belong exactly to the imaginative world of the verses, even to the presence of the brother Jack. It is the only prose piece that works in this way. All the others are thematic reflections or—perhaps—the narrating of the “actual” events that inspired the poem. I set off actual because I do not, at this point, intend to suggest to you that we accept the prose document as factual, no matter what its tone. I would prefer to let you ponder the possibility that Coleridge is trying his hand with the novel.

III. Fragment II

No, though the gates of Paradise
Should open and reveal the vice
The gods called Virtue before they made
Us in their image, none would find
The chain of pleasure she could mold
Of the major's heart. And he would yield
His flesh and soul within the week
Or murder self beneath her yoke.

There is again something eerily Blakean about Coleridge's equation of vice and virtue in these lines, but if he intended a counterpart to the “Marriage of Heaven and Hell”, it was never developed in what was written. What is clear is a kind of Puritan approach to love and sex, a not at all uncommon aspect of English and, later, American poetry. In these lines Coleridge explicitly “blames” Paola (her name occurs elsewhere) for what will soon occur. He does not present an innocent falling into love of the English major and the Maltese farm girl, but rather an intention to entrapment on the part of Paola. I think it unquestionable that Coleridge deliberately echoed earlier Semitic literature—not least the Proverbs—concerning

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the wiles of women. Misogynist, perhaps, but not inappropriate to a poem set among a probably Phoenician people. And because her “trap” works, we never learn what precisely might have been her ability to cause the major to commit suicide if he rejected her. Magical (even black magical) elements bubble up, in both the prose and poetry, among the Maltese women, even though the central “fantastic” motif involves only the men. Still, Romantics were never shy about invoking non-Christian powers (in the sense both of personalities and capabilities), and the supernatural had already haunted Coleridge’s verse long before “Son of Lykos.”

The prose narration most directly related to these lines occurs on the walls of Valletta—a fortified city built by the Knights—in a conversation between a young Englishman, presumably either Coleridge or an alter ego, and one of the military doctors. The two are walking, in the cool twilight, between the watchtowers, and thus “Sam” (I will call him this because he is unnamed in the prose pages and Samuel is Major Jennerette’s given name, as well as Coleridge’s of course) feels free to unburden himself, without fear of being overheard. The reader must remember that the number of English in Malta at the time was not large, and their interest in each other’s doings would have been significant. Coleridge, furthermore, was somewhat famous and would presumably have incited additional curiosity. Coleridge had left two women behind him in England—three if one wants to include his Platonic attachment to Dorothy Wordsworth: both his wife Sarah (Robert Southey’s wife’s sister) and his beloved Sara Hutchinson. There is no suggestion in the poem that Major Jennerette had any serious amour in England. This prose section then is clearly a reflection of Coleridge’s own situation and not simply fantasy or novel development.

“Sam” questions the doctor, noting as he does so that he turns away from his colleague, stopping to lean against the wall and look out westward, toward Floriana and the rest of the island—out there somewhere, we assume, a new beloved lives. “How broken,” he begins, then stops himself. “How fragmented, I should say, how splintered can the human heart be? A man finds it fairly easy, I think, to love all of his children, though even there he may find a favorite.”

“To be sure,” the doctor replies. “There is nothing unusual in this.” Sam tells us the doctor slouches next to him, his back to the wall, looking eastward, not attempting to catch the other man’s glance.

“But that is only an analogy,” Sam says, “and an especially weak one, I think. Damn it, man, how many women can a man love? Can a man truly—care for—more than one at any given time?” Surely there is an element of self-delusion in this, a defense mechanism: Coleridge wanted, I feel sure, to believe that his yearning for Sara Hutchinson had not robbed Sarah Fricker Coleridge of any of her wifely deserts.

The doctor opts initially for levity. “The Mussulmans do it, I hear.”

“But are we all of such a nature? Or is it peculiar to them, with their minds locked into Abrahamic times?” Sam straightens then and takes the doctor’s right arm into a tight clench. “I have met a woman here—”

Again the doctor brushes back Sam’s intensity. “So have most of the soldiers and sailors.”

Sam’s grip intensifies until the doctor protests and shakes himself free. He takes Sam by the shoulders and looks him straight in the eye. “Love, lust, it’s one and the same to me when a man comes to me for physicking. Is that what you are too ashamed to ask me?”

Sam shakes his head. “I have not lain with her. Nor do I suspect her of anything but virginity. But doctor, I dream—”

And there the section ends, followed by a gap of a finger’s width on the page and then a festival scene in the village he calls Borgo.

IV. Fragment III

The horse begins to limp. Get down,
Good major, tend his hoof. The town
And garrison are yet a mile—
No, more—away. An easy stroll
For one as strong as Major Sam,

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As young. And yet he mutters, "Damn
The luck." For he had planned to swim
The bay across and test him, limb
To limb, against Captain DeVere.
The men placed bets, and shillings, clear
As bells laid down, said only half
Had favored Sam. "I'd make that oaf
Regret his boast. That fatted calf—"
But if he comes too late, that clod
Of Hertfordshire defaults to god.
The major cannot urge the beast—
He is not cruel, he will not waste
Him for his pride. Then to his right—
Hsst! What is that? Beneath the night
And its own calm, a calmer pace
He hears. As light as souls at peace
Or huntsmen from the Americas.
He matches steps with his lame mount.
Beneath his breath he taps his count.
And then the path shakes free the trees,
The valley yaws—Oh, what he sees!

Along Addolorata's hill
The pack stands fast, his heart beats still.
As one they turn and stare across
The shadowed dale at man and horse.
The Tarxien moon is low and webbed,
Caught in the trees where faith has ebbed
That doubt and fear may drink their fill.
The pack stands fast, his heart beats still.

COOPER RENNER



Where faith has ebbed— No, faith runs true
As Tarxien moon is low and blue
And paints the dancing shoeless feet
Of Malta's dame. Like rippled shades
Espied by eyes that tear, their heads
Seem one, then another thing; then men,
Not wolves, stare the good major down.
He rubs his eyes, he stands confused.
Perhaps he fell and knocked his head
And never knew? He looks again
Across the dark and sees no one
Is there at all. "Good mare," he sighs,
"I thought I saw—" A knot of cries
Unravels from its skein. "Good mare,
Fear not. There's nothing there, I swear."

But dreams are truer than the words
A brave man speaks to frightened hearts—
His own, or that of a mute beast.
All night the breath that tears his breast,
The hands that clutch the sweating sheet,
The legs that strain, the leaden feet
Are witness that he cannot rest.

This fragment, one of the poem's longest complete sections, actually precedes the segment I have called Fragment II, if I have ordered the fragments correctly. I have held it for last here simply owing to its length and my hope to catch the reader's interest with the shorter sections before waylaying him with such a relatively lengthy one. Most contemporary readers do not, after all, spend much time with

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rhyiming iambic tetrameter, and I hesitated to push anyone away. It is possible, however, that Paola's love had already been so inflamed by her first sight of Major Jennerette that she had claimed him in her heart even though he did not yet know of her existence. In that case the prose fragment just discussed would belong later in the tale than this poetic section, but the stanzas are ordered as they should be.

These lines are notable in any number of ways, not least the manner in which the poet often breaks up the galloping tendency of the tetrameter couplets by ending his sentences within the lines, rather than at their ends. Just as the lean simplicity of "Christabel" harks at once back to the ballads—though it does not ape their quatrains like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"—and forward to Imagism, so do these lines in some ways anticipate the fractured formalism of much mid-twentieth century verse. It is possible, to be sure, that the poet fully intended these adjustments and was deliberately trying to chart a middle ground between the hyper-poetic tetrameter and the inviting blank verse and prosaic rhythms of his so-called "conversation poems." But I find it just as believable that Coleridge, whose poetic well was notoriously unreliable and prone to running dry, was simply struggling along as best he could—trying first merely to get the story told. Later, he could return to it, polish it, and "improve" the music. Modern readers will probably be more sympathetic to the jagged edges of this and other sections than Coleridge's contemporaries.

What is unquestionably strong here is the balance between direct narration and psychological irruption—the Major's brief internal ejaculations. There are few unnecessary modifiers, added solely to satisfy the rhythm, and several well-placed variants to the iamb, which serve, like the mid-line periods, to slow the reader down and make him think—as the Major is undoubtedly doing. Coleridge allows the Major to explain away what he thinks he sees—wolves becoming men—but goes on to introduce nightmares which underline the werewolves' reality for the reader.

Prose of course allows greater leeway to play with and ponder over psychological states, but that very light may be too harsh: the poetry's laconic nature preserves

mystery. Explication may, if not destroy it, then render it boring or foolish. Coleridge—or whoever wrote the prose—seems eager to avoid this. Sam is talking—when is he not?—again with the doctor, but this time outside the walls, along one of the roads which runs between wall and shore. Across the Grand Harbour the lights of Cospicua glimmer, and they recall to Sam thoughts of eyes glimmering by moonlight under the trees.

“You have been, I think, to a number of the villages?”

The doctor nods. “Some of the natives have been quite helpful to the Governor, as you know. I go out when one of his favourites has fallen ill.”

“Paola?” Sam is almost murmuring the name.

The doctor sucks on his pipe and, again, nods. “The vineyards near there are quite good, aren’t they?”

Sam sighs. “Yes. I’ve arranged for the purchase of quite a lot of the local wine.” He touches the back of the doctor’s hand briefly, then points across the harbour. “See there—the three windows almost exactly in a row?”

“Yes.”

“And in front of them—I should say, below to the left—”

“Yes.”

“The way those lanterns are moving, in a pair, probably a fisherman’s sons lighting their father’s way home with a late catch. That’s how the eyes moved in the woods.”

“The eyes? What woods?” The doctor gives Sam a sharp glance. He, better than anyone else, knows the depth of the man’s addiction to laudanum. The bracing and restorative climate have not in fact done anything to mitigate the situation, as he had expected. Sam requires more by the week.

“The sutler and I got caught late one evening, last week, negotiating with that vintner just past Paola. The sun was already declining when we left with the wagon laden. I was eager—too eager—to return to Valletta—” He glanced aside to see if the doctor would ask why, but he did not. “So I left him with the waggoner and the escort—they had to follow the cart road—and went straight up Addolorata hill.”

“In the dark?”

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“I have been there often enough by day, haven’t I? We are hardly in danger here.”

“Yes, but the terrain—”

“The moon was full enough. Or so I thought.” He stopped, scuffing in the dirt with his left hand, then lifting a rock and tossing it out into the wavering water. “I was near the crest, where the trees grow just a bit more thickly, when I heard a sound—like that of many feet running. Then, to my right, nearer the crest, a pack of dogs—I swear, I thought them wolves at first—”

“Wolves? On Malta?” The look in the doctor’s eyes said more than Sam wanted to hear.

“Big enough. They stopped in a clearing, partially moonlit, partially shadowed. That entire troop of paired gleaming eyes turned to look westward from the clearing. There was a dry gully between them and me, and not a few trees. They may have scented rabbits or mice or who knows what? But I felt they were looking directly at me. Then I saw that there was a boy—well, as shadowy as it was where he stood, it might have been a small man—in the midst of them. I had not noticed him at all just a moment before. And a ray of moonlight broke through and angled across his shoulder and chest. He seemed to be naked, and the dogs were milling around him like sheep around a shepherd.

“I rubbed my eyes, not at all sure I was not, with my head-ache, seeing poorly, and looked again. There was not a single dog there, but a group of men and boys—the variation of size was unmistakable, even among those beneath the shadows of the trees—and I would swear they were all naked. Or maybe cotton drawers just blended with their skin in that light.

“Again I rubbed my eyes and when I looked next there was no one there.”

The doctor cleared his throat and began to speak, but Sam cut him off. “I know, I know. Have not dozens of others said it to me before you? But if I am to bear the pain here—” He touched his stomach. “—and here—” His head. “—you must not lower my dosage. You must not. I slept almost not at all that night.”

The doctor said nothing. There were perhaps Maltese customs, rites of manhood, that he had yet heard nothing about. But somehow he doubted that

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these profoundly Catholic people sent their men and boys out naked into the night in any kind of formal practice. No, he dared not lower Sam's dosage. But neither dared he neglect to talk to the Governor about his secretary.

SCOTT GARSON

Silt

I sharpened my pencil and circled myself into frames of possible usage.

Bookkeeper. Public Relations Associate. I considered how I could be billed in these ways, estimated my capacity for drive.

It was a time of great struggle. I felt that I had to bid myself up for what seemed, to the admittedly variable degree that it could be imagined, a life of demented composure, hummed in the jaundicing key of tube lights.

If I was, as I feared, a joke at which my betters would be above laughing, I found no hold in the injustice of that. The mirror in my bathroom shone filthy with paste. The pallor and damp of identifying skin, these accruals—they read off as mine.

I was basically a problem.

And you, with your dying wristwatch, your cough: were you not also looking to get solved?

SCOTT GARSON

The State

Several years ago I responded to a private ad for English language instruction.

At the time I was drawing unemployment from the state. Every month I'd nub the help-wanted page, feeling for gigs that seemed plausible, sort of, given my various backgrounds, but always ones I was sure not to get.

Every month, that's to say, the state wanted proof of my efforts to rejoin the flock.

What I did:

I watched tv, tried to arouse in myself understanding of the medium as great human project—our pyramids, massive, beyond us, for sure, despite being forged of our idiot words and flashing idiot faces.

My living room floating on currents of night, I dialed green numbers for psychics.

What is your name?

Never mind that. I had this weird dream.

Tell me.

I was a unicorn.

Go on.

I had a great rod on my forehead. Hello?

But they knew when the talk was infected like that. I was left to the scrum for the pills.



The Chambers, Tom and Melanie, were looking for someone to help their au pair improve on her rickety English.

Why I drove out there to sing for the work: it was private. I'd get to see somebody's house. I'd get cash, and I'd know that, for all of its power, the state was robot, lipless and blind, forced to keep stamping my outsized checks with the maximum under its guidelines.

SCOTT GARSON

Something to drink? said Melanie Chambers.

She impressed me. She twirled, or parts of her did, without cease. Neck. Wrist. Hips. Shoulders.

A system of twirling was Melanie Chambers. A perfect corporeal clock.

I'll take that, said Tom Chambers, meaning my coat.

I had on, I recall, my last store-laundered shirt, which I'd slipped from its oversized baggie.



If you look up 'au pair' on the internet, you'll find it means 'equal'—in terms of the benefits, I suppose. A relationship where everyone wins.

The Chambers got someone to care for their kid, a four-year old, a boy named Randolph. The au pair, a Brazilian, learned English, got handed a pass to the Chambers' fine lives.

Except she didn't—learn English. The boy had been marked for advantage in his connection with the young Brazilian. She'd been told to speak nothing but Portuguese with him.

He learned Portuguese. I was hired to teach English.



I began by writing my name in script on the paper I'd lain between us.

In generous blooms of afternoon light the Brazilian convulsed in blinking.

Then she had to write hers.

Nicked cuticles, painted chalk green. Lush cringing within the berth of her seat.

Was I already writing the end of this story when I slipped from her fists the depressing confection of an instructional text called Crossroads? When I told her we'd learn in a more actualized way, via regular back-and-forth?

In my defense I might say that I couldn't have guessed what her text messages would reveal about the Chambers.

These came frequently. A quick doubled beep on my phone. Recess from the wastes of my hours.

At first they were careful:

I DRINK SPICY T AT THIS MOMENT.

THE STATE

WHY HE NOT TAKING HIS NAP?

Later they changed:

WISH I CAN USE TOM COMPUTER 2NITE. VERY BORING GIRL.

2MORRO U COME?

WHY SHE SAY ME NO CLEANING B4 IF THIS IS NOT THE TRU?

She had hair that fell to her scapulae like water, if water was black. I conjured her: dim in the window glass of the room at the top of the house.

2MORROW I COME, I responded at first. MAYBE SOONER, I sent after that.



So: nightfall. But newly attenuated. The spring lights, the precious deep colors.

I parked down the street from the winding drive of the house. I approached on foot. I erected and shook the garden ladder until its steep angle held firm. Then climbed, kept climbing. Left foot, right foot, I climbed. All of the silver-voiced wood-dwelling things gave cover.

The window was long. It opened from the side. She removed the screen. I pulled to my knees in the frame, spilled to the carpeted floor.

Crazy, such crazy! she whispered a few times.

She helped me work free of my coat.

Crazy! You are!

She took hold of my arm.

I peeped, Hi.

And she pulled, backed us onto the room's twin bed, lay in my measure of light.

Was I crazy?

Below us, the Chambers, who ruled in that place, knew nothing, heard nothing unless they could hear their own footfall on tile or wood. I angled and dove through their captive's long hair. I took her starred breast in my mouth.

GREG MULCAHY

Brand

The sector was down, and, as he heard at the meeting, the fact the sector was down meant everybody's pay was frozen. This freeze not official, but this freeze as hard as any official freeze.

None of it surprised him.

Noticed a few of the younger employees had tattoos. When he came in, a tattoo would only have worked against a candidate.

Saw them around the building.

One day noticed a tattoo of the logo—the company logo—on somebody's arm. Another on an ankle.

Word around the tattooed got a bonus for the logo tattoo.

Word not official.

Doubted someone his age would get a tattoo for bonus offer.

Been there since 89.

How many times had the logo changed in those years?

What happened with the tattoos if the company rebranded? Obsolete ink mark one as one of the old guard? Totem of respect or anachronism?

Like with a girl.

Like when he was a kid.

You might get the girl's name tattooed on you and then she might break up with you and you're stuck with the tattoo to ignore, alter, or remove.

Love unstable as employment.

Fungible love.

In temporary life, it made a kind of sense. Though he did not like to think of his life as temporary.

Though it was.

GREG MULCAHY

As the dead kept proving.

The dead who kept dying and always had and always would for as long as the living existed.

Until all the living were dead.

The dead of whom anything could be said and who were free of everything.

Was that it—the two part of one?

Could never keep it straight.

The dead—regardless of their former markings—preferred brand or image—no longer true consumers or, after short physical use, commodities.

Existing solely as thought—or memory—idea—or picture.

DARYL SCROGGINS

Bridge Work

Bud opened his lunch box the way he does by squeezing it. But then he just sat looking down between the open girders, swinging his feet. Pigeons flapping up above us, hidden.

“I can tell you miss her,” I said. “Why don’t you call her?”

He smiled. “She sure brings fruit every time she comes,” he said.

I looked at Bud through a hole in my sliced Swiss cheese, then folded it over and ate the space. “Do you think maybe she’s just not right for you?” I asked. “I mean, maybe she wants somebody who doesn’t dress so nice when he’s off. Maybe she doesn’t like it that you get so excited by color swatches at the paint store.”

“One time?” he said, not listening, “she laid all back and said ‘Draw me.’ But I didn’t have a pencil.” His face going from Christmas to Memorial Day in two seconds.

“Got to be ready,” I said. “You have to plan ahead.”

Then I played the joke again that gets him every time: I reached for my diet Sprite, knocked it off the side and grabbed for it—going over the edge. He screams every time. Shameful for me to do that, I know. But seeing his face up there, as he hoists me up by my safety line—and feeling the rhythm of that hand-over-hand action—well, hell. It makes me not mind so much that I have sunk to painting bridges.



Rain, Supreme

I point at the roll I want, a nice one right there on my side of the tray, and Paper Hat back there gives a slump of his shoulders—looks away for a second like he’s having to collect himself. Then he makes a big show of having to shove himself up into the pastry case, even though his tongs are about three feet long. He gets it, my roll. But he squeezes it into a kind of éclair shape and plops it on a paper plate. We both go all bland when I pay.

DARYL SCROGGINS

So I go to the cold drink case, open the tall door, and just stand there. Orange juice, milk, bottled smoothies.... I stand looking for a long time. Asshole is over there trying to see me through the fogged up door, so I wipe it off a little for him. Then, with the door still swung open, I get my roll and start to eat it. Slowly. “Orange juice?” I say. “No....” When I finish my roll I sail my plate over at the garbage can and make it. Baker man is way down into his looking at me. “Think I’ll just go with the coffee I’ve got out in the car,” I tell him. I let the cooler door bap shut, and when it hits—everything in the case gives off a little shiver of drops.



Almost Science

In the lab in his basement, he made a little human by medicating a mouse. Many mice were lost before one began to last. Blood thinners and allergy medications, erectile dysfunction and depression remedies, hair loss salves, steroids, sleep aids and acid reducers—pills to augment the effectiveness of other pills: all forced in. And when he had a mouse that somehow survived this regimen, he brought out his secret force of nature: grapefruit juice. He fed this to the creature along with the ongoing flow of pills and suppositories, continuing even when its hair fell away and the pink tail turned gray, then rotted off entirely. Its skin swelled and its eyes bulged.

And then his maker read Scripture to him through long nights and days, reeling off an incessant mumble of admonitions and instructions. But all the man-mouse did was gaze out a window, jacking off and farting.



A Fast One

The boy who told the best stories couldn’t read. And then we found out he could read, and the stories weren’t so good. He was helpful in bringing the tools, though, and could catch bits from lunch in his mouth no matter how high and far they were thrown. Then the police came, and began to haul us away for questioning. By the time we got it all sorted out and got back to the job site, all our lunches and tools were gone. I tell that story every time someone will listen, but I don’t think it does any good.

BRIDGE WORK



Buying a Car

Hello! Good you're here between me and my manager because I'm going to work him like a nose rag for you. Yes, that's the red one. We'll flag any of them, we'll get the whole back lot brought up Coffee? Soda? This kind of paper doesn't mean anything, there's always some kinda. Feel that air? I don't have cuff links like this for nothing; I know how to pool up when I sit like I don't drink, flip my tie out and down, shake the ID bracelet. Used to do tv for laundry money. Well—it's all okay now because I love helping cars.

BRANDON HOBSON

Cake

When Fritz woke late that morning he felt sick and drunk. They had celebrated his wife's birthday. There were people still there when he fell asleep on the couch. It was early afternoon. He watched bowling on television for a while, then fed the dogs out back. Outside the sun was warm and some kids next door were playing and laughing and he thought it might be Easter. He made coffee and sat down at the table in the kitchen. After a while his wife came in. She had dark circles under her eyes and her hair was messed up. He thought he could see a bruise on her leg.

"I had a nightmare," she said.

"There's no work today," Fritz said. "Plus my sore back."

She poured a cup of coffee. "Save me some cake," she said. "I have to go to work soon. It's Saturday isn't it?"

"You worked late last night," he said.

She took her coffee and went into the bathroom and closed the door. He heard the shower come on, and he got up and went out to the garage. He opened the hood of his car and looked at the engine. His wife came out dressed up with her makeup on.

"I'm going to work," she said.

He didn't look at her. He kept looking at the engine. He took the rag from his pocket and wiped his brow. "This car," he said.

Later he took a shower and drew the curtains in the bedroom. He tried to take a nap. He lay there for a while then sat up and looked at the clock. It was almost four in the afternoon. He changed clothes and walked to the bus station. He sat and waited for the bus, tried not to be angry with his wife. When the bus arrived, he got on and sat next to a woman and a little girl. The little girl looked at him and whispered something to her doll. Her mother gave him what he thought was

BRANDON HOBSON

a dirty look. He found himself staring out the window. The world outside was going by.

"I'm headed to see my wife dance at the strip club," Fritz said, but the woman didn't look at him or say anything. The little girl was bouncing the doll up and down.

When he got to the strip club, he saw his friend Henry sitting at the bar, sipping gin. The dance club was dark and loud music was playing.

"Fritz, your old lady is real good times," Henry said.

Without saying anything to Henry, Fritz turned and walked away. When he saw his wife she was giving someone a dance in the corner. His wife saw him and gave him a look. He approached her and stood beside her as she danced for a man sitting in a chair.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Fritz?" she said. "You knew I'm working today. What are you doing?"

"I wanted chili for lunch," he said.

"They quit serving lunch already. Go on home."

"I wanted lunch," he said.

"Fritz," she said. She was leaning way into the man in the chair, who was smiling and leaning close into her breasts. She wasn't happy with him, like the other times he'd gone to the dance club when she was working.

"Go on home Fritz," she said.

ANDY DEVINE

Apartment City

from into Our Please We Went: A Novel

#

1 (4x), 2 (2x), 2nd Street (4x), 3 (7x), 3rd Street (4x), 4 (11x), 4th Street (2x), 5 (5x), 5th Street, 6 (4x), 6th Street, 7 (4x), 7th Street (3x), 8 (7x), 9 (3x), 9-volt (6x), 10 (3x), 11 (2x), 12 (2x), 13, 14, 16th of August, 19th of August, 24, 25.

A

A (1044x), about (251x), above (11x), accident (4x), accidents (3x), across (82x), address, afraid (44x), after (101x), afternoon (11x), again (100x), against (106x), age, aged, ages, air (12x), airplanes (19x), airport (13x), airports (17x), airshaft (4x), aisle (5x), aisles, alarm (9x), alive (31x), all (208x), almost (29x), alphabet (7x), alone (9x), along (54x), already (88x), also (55x), always (86x), am (19x), ambulance, ambulances (5x), an (94x), anchor (2x), anchorman (6x), and (3521x), angle, angled (2x), angry, animals (5x), ankle, ankles (9x), anniversaries, anniversary (13x), another (43x), answer (4x), answered (12x), antenna (22x), any (133x), anybody (37x), anymore (62x), anything (121x), anyway (23x), anywhere (25x), apart (8x), apartment (285x), apocalyptic (11x), are (72x), area (28x), areas (23x), aren't (5x), arm (52x), arms (137x), Army (5x), around (162x), as (251x), ask (31x), asked (64x), asking (10x), asleep (21x), aspirin, at (444x), ate (31x), attacked, attracted (6x), avenue (38x), awake (12x), away (23x), awkward (4x).

B

Back (541x), back-up, backing, backs (15x), backwards, backyard (3x), bag (15x), bags (29x), bake, bakery, ball (5x), balls, band (4x), bandaged, bank, banks, bare, barricade, barricaded, bars (25x), base, basement (5x), basin, basket (12x), bath (5x), bathroom (73x), bathtub (12x), battery, batteries (27x), be (238x), beads (4x), beat

ANDY DEVINE

(4x), beating (12x), beautiful (22x), became (19x), because (82x), become (22x), becomes, bed (212x), bedroom (90x), beds, bedside (6x), bedtime, been (125x), before (99x), began (12x), beginning (7x), behind (61x), being (33x), beings, believe (8x), believed (23x), bell, belly (9x), below (14x), belt (12x), bent (21x), besides (12x), best (6x), bet (2x), better (40x), between (134x), beyond, big (19x), bigger (9x), binoculars (2x), bird, birds (6x), birth, birthday (17x), birthdays (2x), bit (43x), bite, bits (5x), black (28x), blackout (35x), blackouts (23x), blades, blank (5x), blanket (40x), blankets (6x), blew (3x), blew up (4x), blink (7x), blinking, block (31x), blocked (5x), blocks (12x), blond (9x), blouse (7x), blow, blowing, blue (94x), blurry (6x), boardwalk (5x), boat (17x), boats (20x), bodies (74x), body (89x), boil (10x), boiled (7x), boiling, bolted, bomb, bombed (19x), bombed out (3x), bombing (17x), bone (7x), bones, booth (9x), boots (18x), born (7x), both (188x), bottle (38x), bottled (3x), bottles (12x), bottom (25x), bottoms, bought (18x), bow, bowl (19x), bowls (13x), box (17x), boxes (18x), boy (32x), boyfriend (96x), boyfriends (16x), boys (8x), bra (32x), braces, brakes, branches, brand, bras, brave, braver, bread (13x), break (21x), breakfast (15x), breaking (14x), breaking in (3x), breaks, breath (33x), breathe (15x), breathed, breathing (28x), brick, bricks (17x), bride, bridge (11x), bridges (12x), briefcase, briefcases, bright (46x), bring (6x), bring down (36x), bringing (13x), broadcast (11x), broke (24x), broken (16x), brother (6x), brothers (2x), brought (17x), brought out (6x), brown (7x), bruises, brush (5x), brushed (17x), brushing, buckle, buckled, buckling, building (89x), buildings (68x), built, bumped (6x), bumper, bumping, bumps (5x), bunch (11x), bunched (2x), buried (24x), burn, burned (79x), burned down (41x), burner (8x), burners (2x), burning (44x), burnt-out (3x), bus (7x), buses, busy, but (853x), button (12x), buttoned (8x), buttoning, buttons, buy (7x), buying (8x), buzzer, by (62x).

C

Cage, call (33x), called (19x), calling (4x), calls (10x), calm (4x), calves (21x), came (49x), camera (4x), can (105x), can't (29x), candle (5x), candles (16x), candy (36x), canned (5x), cans (27x), cap, car (63x), card (7x), cardboard, cards (5x), care (25x),

APARTMENT CITY

cared (7x), careful (7x), carried (21x), carriers, carry (9x), carrying (12x), cars (22x), carton, case (16x), cases, cash (4x), cashier (6x), cat, catch (10x), catch up (6x), catching, caught (12x), caught up (5x), cause, caused (13x), cave in (4x), caved in, ceiling, center, central, cereal, certain, chain, chains, chair (117x), chairs (11x), chance, change (27x), changed (9x), changing (27x), channel (13x), channels (14x), charged, charming (4x), chase, chased, check (24x), checked (5x), checkout (6x), checks, cheek (14x), cheekbones, cheeks (4x), cheered, cheering (5x), cheese (6x), chest (62x), chests, chew (22x), chewed (34x), child (2x), children (10x), chin (11x), chins, chipped, choice, choose, choosing, chosen (2x), chunks, cinder, circle (2x), circled (6x), circles (4x), circling (4x), city (178x), clapped (6x), clapping (2x), clean (34x), cleaning (6x), clear (8x), cleared (5x), clerk, clever, climb (7x), climbed (19x), clip, clipped, clock (11x), close (26x), closed (48x), closer (20x), closet (21x), clothes (127x), clothing, coast (31x), coat, coffee (25x), cold (54x), collar, collarbone (7x), color (16x), colored (22x), come (25x), comes (2x), comfort (24x), coming (28x), constellations, contaminated (2x), cook (12x), cooked (33x), cooking, cool down (4x), corner (49x), corners, couch, could (393x), couldn't (128x), counter (32x), countertop, countries (5x), country (17x), couple (104x), couples, course, covered (10x), covered up (10x), covering (3x), covers (2x), covers up (6x), crack, cracked (7x), cracks, cradled, crane (5x), crashed (25x), crashing (20x), crate (4x), crawled out (6x), crayons, crease, creased, crickets, cripple (2x), cross (22x), crossed (18x), crowd (44x), crowded, crumbs, cry (9x), crying (6x), cup (8x), cupboard (23x), cupboards (6x), cupped (4x), cups (8x), curb, curly, curtain, curtains (5x), curve (16x), curves (2x), cushions, cut (19x), cuts (12x).

D

Dark (66x), darker (12x), darkness (5x), date (18x), day (40x), days (12x), dead (44x), deadbolt (7x), deck, deep (6x), dents, department (3x), desk, details (2x), detour (22x), dial (12x), dials (4x), did (94x), didn't (461x), die (42x), died (24x), difference, different (58x), diner (6x), dinged, dinner (34x), dipped, direction (17x), directions (12x), dirt, dirty (2x), dishes (5x), dishtowel, distance (15x), divorce (5x),

ANDY DEVINE

divorced (13x), dizzy, do (136x), docked (4x), doctor (7x), doctors (9x), does (14x), doesn't (15x), dog (4x), dogs (16x), doing (28x), don't (234x), done (17x), door (98x), doorknob (7x), doors (4x), doorway (18x), doorways (2x), doubled (6x), dowel, down (426x), downed, downtown, dozens, drag, drain, drained, drank (34x), drawer (19x), drawers (23x), dress (15x), dressed (14x), dresser (9x), dressing (14x), drew (5x), dried (4x), drink (33x), drinking (12x), drinks (2x), dripped, drive (20x), drive away (12), drive out (3x), driver (2x), driving (4x), drop (15x), dropped (15x), dropping, drove (11x), drove away (7x), drove out (2x), dry (3x), dug (4x), dump, dumpster, during, dusk (2x).

E

Each (265x), ear (19x), earlier, earlobes (7x), early (42x), earrings (4x), ears (16x), eased (14x), easier (3x), east (20x), eastern (3x), easy (11x), eat (52x), eaten, eating (38x), edge (39x), either (57x), elbow (8x), elbows (14x), electric (4x), electricity (19x), electronics, elevator (20x), elevators (7x), else (115x), emergency (31x), emptied, empty (16x), end (145x), ended (18x), ending (72x), ends, end times (25x), enough (98x), entire (7x), envelope, era (4x), error, escape (121x), escapes (23x), especially (21x), evacuate (3x), evacuation (20x), evacuating (5x), even (165x), evening (21x), eventually (5x), ever (62x), every (29x), everybody (37x), everything (89x), everywhere (7x), ex-boyfriend, ex-girlfriend (4x), except (17x), exploded (8x), explosion (3x), extra (4x), eye, eyebrow, eyelids (4x), eyes (102x).

F

Face (130x), faced (12x), faces (15x), facing (16x), fact, faded out, failed (2x), faint (5x), fainted, fair, fake (16x), fall (19x), fall down (42x), falling (6x), falling down (27x), familiar (6x), families, family (22x), famous (6x), fanned, far (22x), farther (17x), fast (27x), faster (25x), fat, faucet, fault, favorite (19x), favorites (2x), fed, feed, feel (265x), feeling (51x), feels (14x), feet (42x), fell (19x), fell down (32x), felt (183x), ferry (5x), few (45x), fight, fighting, file (2x), filed (3x), fill (15x), filled (18x), filling (6x), find (21x), fine, finger (29x), fingered (5x), fingernail, fingernails,

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fingers (80x), fingertip, fingertips (4x), finished (18x), fire (66x), fireman (11x), firemen (25x), fires (44x), first (82x), fit (17x), fixed (12x), flag, flags, flames, flashing, flashlight (23x), flashlights (6x), flat (16x), flattened (19x), flight, flights (9x), flipped (6x), float (13x), floating (7x), flood, flooded (19x), flooding (12x), floor (40x), floors (17x), flowing, fly, foam, fold, folded (16x), folded up (6x), follow (2x), followed (24x), food (405x), foot (19x), footage (9x), footsteps, for (505x), forearm, forearms (5x), forecast (16x), forehead, forget (17x), forgot, forgotten, fork (22x), forks (20x), form, forth (20x), forward (16x), found (38x), foundation, frame (4x), frames, free (7x), fresh (5x), Friday (14x), friend, from (316x), front (152x), full (17x), fun (2x), funny (7x), furniture (14x), further (2x), future (14x).

G

Gas (19x), gate (15x), gates, gather, gathered, gave (25x), gear, gears, generator (7x), generators (6x), get (105x), get away (68x), getting (28x), get out (52x), giant (2x), girl (38x), girlfriend (19x), girls (16x), give (15x), given (15x), gives, glad (33x), glass (59x), glasses (62x), go (141x), goes (6x), going (199x), gone (35x), goodbye (2x), goods, got (102x), got away (78x), gotten (23x), grade (15x), grand, gray, great (5x), green (34x), grew (4x), grew up (10x), grid (16x), groceries (21x), grocery (39x), ground (15x), group (2x), groups (12x), grow, growing (18x), grown (13x), guard, guess (2x), guessed, guy (4x), guys.

H

Had (582x), hadn't (53x), hair (84x), hairbrush, haircut (2x), hall (6x), hallway (37x), hand (211x), hand-held (18x), handed (42x), handle (2x), hands (177x), handsome, hangers (2x), hanging (13x), happen (37x), happened (40x), happening (21x), happens, happier, happy (42x), hard (44x), harder (21x), has (21x), hate (6x), hated (4x), hauled out, have (322x), haven't (4x), having (7x), he (288x), he'll, he's (22x), head (101x), headed, headlights, head (6x), heads (16x), heap, hear (37x), heard (47x), hearing, heart (15x), heat (21x), heat up (7x), heavier, heavy (5x), heel, heels (6x), held (116x), held on (15x), helicopter, helicopters, helmets, help (31x),

ANDY DEVINE

helped (3x), helping, her (2676x), here (65x), hers (20x), herself (54x), hidden (4x), hiding (12x), high (34x), high-heeled (3x), high-rise (6x), higher (8x), highlights, highs, him (158x), himself (4x), hip (18x), hipbones, hips (61x), his (95x), hit (5x), hold (34x), holding (28x), holding on (6x), hold on (7x), hole (3x), holes, hollows, home (69x), homes, honest, honking (3x), hood, hooked (17x), hope (16x), hoped (14x), hopes, hoping (5x), horns (5x), hosed (16x), hoses (12x), hospital (12x), hospitals, hot (44x), hour (16x), hours (22x), house (16x), houseboat, houses, how (230x), hug (2x), huge, hugged (15x), hugging, hundred, hundreds, hung, hungry (59x), hurting (34x), husband (4x), husbands (3x).

I

I (3803x), I've (34x), ice (2x), idea (4x), if (252x), I'll (20x), I'm (123x), in (372x), inched, included (5x), including, inflatable (7x), inner, inside (135x), insides (8x), instant (4x), instead (15x), instructions (17x), intersection (19x), interstate (5x), into (399x), invite (2x), is (194x), island (21x), isn't (30x), it (1280x), it'd, it'll (2x), it's (59x), itched, itching, its (42x), itself (3x).

J

Jails, jam (2x), jammed, jams, jar (2x), jaw (3x), jeans (73x), jelly (2x), jewel (2x), jewelry, juice (12x), jump (2x), jumped (14x), jumping (13x), junkyard, just (332x), juttled.

K

Keep (58x), keep away (7x), keep up (11x), kept (125x), key (2x), keys (21x), kicked (15x), kicked in, kids, killed (22x), kills (19x), kind (81x), kinds (2x), kiss (16x), kissed (39x), kisser, kisses, kissing (18x), kitchen (59x), kneecap, knees (37x), knew (96x), knife (13x), knives (2x), knob (4x), knobs (2x), knocked, knot (10x), know (266x), knowing (4x), known (8x), knows, knuckles.

L

Label, ladder (15x), lady (2x), laid (17x), lamp (4x), lamps, land, landed (5x), landing

APARTMENT CITY

(6x), landmarks (13x), large, last (56x), lasted, latch, latches, late (41x), later (35x), laugh (16x), laughed (6x), laughing (28x), law, lawn (3x), lay (37x), layer (5x), layers, laying (3x), lead (2x), leading, lean, leaned (38x), leaning (8x), learn (2x), learned (8x), least (11x), leave (37x), leaves, leaving (16x), led (4x), left (104x), leftover (6x), leg (51x), legs (145x), length (8x), less (6x), let (142x), let's (21x), letters (9x), letting (2x), lick (2x), licked (8x), lid (6x), lie (3x), lied (7x), life (33x), lift, lifted (37x), light (76x), lighting, lightning, lights (18x), like (473x), liked (183x), likes (8x), limp (2x), line (19x), lined (2x), lines (15x), link (3x), lip (2x), lips (36x), list, listed, listen (8x), listened (20x), listening (6x), lit (15x), little (243x), live (20x), lived (20x), lives (17x), living (34x), load (6x), local (12x), lock (15x), locked (16x), locker, locks (13x), long (62x), longer (16x), look (103x), looked (209x), looked out (13x), looked up (22x), looking (79x), looking out (8x), looking up (11x), looks (17x), look out (14x), look up (6x), loops (2x), loose, loosened, loosening, looting (14x), loss, lost (16x), lot (22x), lots (2x), loud (17x), louder (10x), low, lower (8x), lowered, lowering, lows, lucky (5x), lunch (3x), lying (33x).

M

Made (221x), made up (19x), mail (3x), mailbox, main, major, make (57x), makes (21x), making (10x), man (42x), many (17x), map (13x), marks, marriage (16x), marriages (4x), married (41x), marry (34x), marrying, marsh, masks, match, matched (3x), matches (9x), matching (3x), matted down, matter (7x), mattress, may (6x), maybe (58x), me (1594x), meal, meals (13x), mean (19x), means (3x), meant (22x), medical (4x), medicine (16x), meeting (18x), melting (8x), message, messed (15x), met (37x), metal (16x), middle (22x), midnight (2x), might (60x), milk (10x), mine (64x), minutes, mirror (19x), miss (15x), missed (30x), missing (16x), mix, mixed, Monday (3x), money (16x), monkey, months (13x), more (157x), morning (32x), mornings (21x), most (44x), mostly (31x), mouth (91x), mouths (14x), move (54x), moved (97x), movements (2x), moving (34x), much (151x), muscle, music (8x), must (37x), my (1377x), myself (74x).



ANDY DEVINE

N

Nail (4x), naked (44x), name (78x), named (18x), names (20x), national anthem, near (20x), neared (2x), nearly (19x), neck (39x), necklace (15x), need (32x), needed (50x), neighborhood (13x), neither (51x), nets, never (83x), new (101x), news (57x), newscaster (21x), next (94x), nice (36x), nicest, nickname, nicknames, night (94x), nightgown, nights (2x), nightstand (4x), no (19x), nobody (32x), noise, noises (4x), none (8x), noon (2x), north (6x), nose (37x), not (91x), note, notebook (2x), nothing (16x), notice (15x), noticed (20x), now (75x), number (17x), numbers.

O

Ocean (17x), odd, odds, of (2035x), off (215x), old (65x), older (5x), oldest, on (839x), once (19x), one (371x), ones (6x), only (58x), onto (101x), open (57x), opened (70x), opened up (8x), open up (6x), opening (3x), or (256x), orange (3x), order, ordered (8x), other (774x), our (366x), ourselves (14x), out (459x), outages (8x), outer (2x), outline (14x), outside (60x), over (269x), overcome, overhead (4x), own (4x).

P

Package, packed (4x), packing (8x), padded, pads, pages, paid (10x), pair (34x), pairs (4x), pajamas, pale, palm (6x), palms (4x), panic, panned, pants (15x), paper (15x), papers (2x), paramedics (16x), park (15x), parked (2x), part (79x), parted (4x), particular (3x), parts (17x), pass, passed (20x), passing, past (16x), patted (17x), paused (2x), pauses, pavement (16x), pay, paying, pen (5x), people (175x), period (4x), permanent, person (41x), personal (15x), personnel (7x), phone (40x), phones (4x), photo (4x), photos (29x), pick (6x), picked (75x), picking, picture (9x), pictures, piece (17x), pieces (16x), pile (6x), piled up, piles (14x), pillow (17x), pillows (2x), pills, pipe, pitched, place (22x), placed (16x), places (19x), plan, planned, plant (3x), plants, plaster, plastic (57x), plate (34x), plates (51x), playground, playing (17x), plays (5x), please (30x), pleasure, plugged, plus, plywood, pocket (22x), pockets, point (18x), pointed (21x), pointing (2x), police (19x), policemen (14x), polish,

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ponytail, pool (5x), popped, pose, posed, position, positions (2x), possible, pot (8x), potted, poured (21x), pouring (4x), power (22x), press, pressed (38x), pressure (13x), pretend (18x), pretended (4x), pretty (19x), probably (55x), problem, propped (19x), puffy (5x), pull (22x), pulled (204x), pulleys, pulling (18x), pulse, pumps (12x), punched (2x), push (26x), pushed (167x), pushing (20x), put (102x), putting (2x).

Q

Question (4x), questions (20x), quiet (37x).

R

Rack (2x), radiator (2x), radio (59x), radios, raft (13x), rag, rain (5x), raining (7x), rains (2x), rainstorms, raised (17x), ran (20x), ran away (4x), ran in (3x), ran out (7x), rather (4x), reach (4x), reached (59x), reaching (2x), read (16x), reading, ready (17x), real (36x), really (159x), reason (3x), reasons, reckless, red (5x), refilled, reflex, refrigerator (16x), remember (38x), remind, reminded (3x), reminds (2x), report (17x), reported, reporter (16x), reports (14x), rescue, rescue (8x), rest (60x), restaurant (16x), restaurants (8x), rested (18x), resting, returned, reversed, rib, ribs (14x), rid, rides, right (59x), ring (34x), ringing, rinsed (8x), rising (35x), river (52x), riverbanks, rivers, road (32x), roads (52x), robbed (6x), rock (2x), rocky, roll (5x), rolled (37x), rolling (15x), roof (35x), roofs (4x), rooftop (2x), room (37x), rooms, rotten, round (2x), rows (4x), rubbed (20x), rug, run (24x), run away (4x), run out (6x), running (25x), running away (4x), running out (11x), rush (2x), rushed (6x), rushing.

S

Safe (31x), safer (8x), safety, said (136x), salty (2x), same (60x), sand, sandals (6x), sang, sat (56x), satellites, Saturday (3x), save (16x), saved, saving, saw (59x), say (124x), saying (20x), says, scar (4x), scared (10x), scars (10x), scene (2x), scraped, scratched (2x), scratches (2x), screen (9x), searching, seats (12x), see (229x), see-through, seeing (15x), seem (17x), seemed (70x), seen (15x), seeping (3x), seeping

ANDY DEVINE

in (5x), sees, send, sending, sends, sense (2x), sent (13x), separate (4x), separated (12x), set (116x), sets (13x), setting, sewer (5x), shades (12x), shake (6x), shampoo (2x), shape (15x), shared (13x), sharp, shaved, she (1895x), sheet (20x), sheets (35x), shelve, shield, shifted (6x), shifting, shin, shining, shirt (60x), shirts (15x), shivered, shivering, shocked, shoes (42x), shook (8x), short (16x), shortwave radio (5x), should (59x), shoulder (38x), shoulders (22x), shouldn't (4x), show (22x), showed (15x), showed up (10x), shower (36x), showing (2x), shows (12x), shows up (2x), shrugged (10x), shut (15x), siblings, sick (12x), side (164x), sides (17x), sidewalk (72x), sidewalks (32x), sideways (2x), signal, signals (3x), signed, signs, silence, silverware (22x), simple, since (17x), singing (3x), sink (32x), sinkhole (16x), sinking (3x), sinks (5x), sip, siren (4x), sirens (15x), sit (15x), sitting (20x), size (2x), skin (52x), skirt (18x), skirts (2x), sky (23x), slant, sleep (52x), sleeping (19x), sleepy, sleeves (7x), slept (17x), slice (3x), sliced, slices, slid (17x), slide (8x), slip, slipped (12x), slippery, sliver, slow (7x), slowed (12x), slower (5x), slowing, slush, small (54x), smaller (3x), smart, smarter, smell (32x), smelled (14x), smile (11x), smiled (17x), smiling (17x), smoke (79x), smoking (13x), smooth (4x), smoothed, snack, snap (2x), snapped, sneezed, sneezes, so (359x), soap (10x), socks (12x), soft (21x), sold, some (184x), somebody (61x), someday, somehow (17x), something (150x), sometime (5x), sometimes (49x), somewhere (62x), song (5x), songs, soon (15x), sorry (2x), sorting, sound (2x), sounded (10x), sounds (10x), south (7x), space (32x), spending, spent, spilled (5x), spine, spinning, spiral (7x), split, spoiled, spoken, spool, spoon (19x), spot, spotlights (15x), spread (42x), spreading, spread out (12x), spring (2x), sprinkled, square, squatted, squeezed (10x), squeezing (2x), squint, squinted, squirrels, stack, stacked (4x), stacked up, stairs (6x), stairwell (10x), stalled, stand (18x), standing (35x), star, stare (6x), stared (20x), staring (18x), stars (2x), start (49x), started (215x), starting (22x), startled, startling (2x), starts, state (21x), states (34x), static (41x), station (21x), stations (17x), stay (36x), stayed (5x), staying, steady, steal (4x), stealing, step, stepped (53x), steps (21x), still (179x), stirred (10x), stomach (39x), stood (94x), stop (58x), stoplight, stopped (76x), store (54x), stores (7x), stories (3x), story (18x), stove (17x), straight (2x), straighten, strand, strands

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(8x), strange, strangers, strap, straps (3x), street (87x), streetlight (6x), streetlights (17x), streets (16x), stretched (12x), stretchers (8x), stretches, stretching, strong (17x), stronger (11x), struck, structural, structure, stuck (13x), stuff (19x), stuffed, such (12x), sudden, sugar (3x), suitcase (52x), suitcases (15x), summer (11x), sun (16x), sunlight, supply (15x), supplies (42x), Sunday, sure (18x), surface, surgery, swallowed (13x), sweat (4x), sweating, sweet (11x), switched (5x).

T

T-shirt (2x), table (148x), tables (4x), taillights, tails (4x), take (22x), take-out (6x), taken (6x), taking (8x), talk (36x), talked (17x), talking (57x), tall (8x), taller (6x), tan, tangled, tap (2x), tape, tapped, tar, taste (8x), tasted (15x), taught, taxes, taxi (2x), taxis (5x), tea (2x), tear, teardown, tears (5x), teenagers, teeth (17x), television (121x), televisions (4x), tell (113x), telling (16x), tenants, tenement (20x), terminals (14x), test (12x), tested, than (60x), thank, thanked (3x), that (1792x), the (3829x), their (94x), them (260x), themselves (2x), then (443x), there (376x), these (40x), they (196x), thickness, thigh (17x), thighs (39x), thin (4x), thing (41x), things (82x), think (181x), thinking (55x), third (19x), this (101x), those (60x), thought (132x), thoughts, threw (41x), throat (7x), through (78x), throughout, throw (6x), throwing (8x), thrown, thumb (10x), thumbs (17x), thunderstorms, ticket (4x), tied (2x), tight (8x), tighter (4x), tilted (17x), time (63x), times (6x), tinfoil (6x), tiny (4x), tip (5x), tiptoes (3x), tired (34x), tires (13x), to (2528x), toast (22x), today, toes (4x), together (181x), told (197x), tomorrow (33x), tone, tongue (23x), tonight (6x), too (215x), took (132x), tools, toothbrush (6x), toothbrushes (2x), toothpaste (5x), top (99x), tops (4x), tore (10x), tornado (3x), touch (40x), touched (96x), touches, touching (33x), toward (117x), towel (10x), town (8x), traced (20x), traffic (21x), trail, train (37x), trains (10x), transistor radio (10x), transit, trapped (15x), trash (6x), travel (12x), traveled (26x), traveling (7x), tray, tree (4x), trees (7x), tricycle, tried (57x), trouble (2x), truck, trucks (5x), true (3x), trunk (5x), try (17x), trying (63x), tube, tucked (33x), tug, tugged, tunnel (3x), tunnels (9x), turn (33x), turned (199x), turning (4x), turns (6x), twice (2x), two (155x).



U

Unbuckled (8x), unbuttoned (34x), uncovered, under (98x), understand (12x), understood (43x), underwear (65x), undone, undress (22x), undressed (17x), unfold (2x), unfolded (7x), unhooked (12x), unless (13x), unlocked (17x), unmade (3x), unrolled, unsafe (16x), unscrewed, until (169x), untucked (16x), unzipped (11x), up (634x), upper (5x), upset (2x), us (516x), use (19x), used (61x), using (4x), usually (15x).

V

V-neck (3x), vehicles (19x), version (2x), versions (2x), video (12x), view, voice (5x), voices (18x).

W

Wagon, waist (6x), waistband (18x), wait (75x), waited (5x), waiting (33x), wake (15x), walk (43x), walked (178x), walking (56x), walks, wall (41x), wallet (8x), walls (16x), want (275x), wanted (284x), warm (54x), warmth (2x), warn (5x), warning, was (1196x), washed (2x), washing (6x), wasn't (161x), wasted, watch (20x), watched (66x), watching (51x), water (115x), wave (4x), waved (2x), waving (4x), way (155x), ways (13x), we (1753x), we'll (22x), we've (6x), wear (22x), wearing (35x), weather (18x), wedding (19x), weddings, week (6x), weekend (15x), weeks (7x), weight (21x), well (15x), went (49x), went away (20x), went out (11x), were (598x), weren't (62x), west (11x), western (3x), wet (31x), what (230x), what's, whatever (2x), when (225x), whenever (8x), where (134x), wherever, which (59x), while (80x), who (161x), whoever, whole (36x), whose, why (38x), wide (16x), widened, wider, wife (15x), wild (3x), will (46x), willing, wind (2x), window (59x), windows (41x), winds (12x), winter, wintertime, wiped (6x), wiped out (12x), wired, wires, wish (12x), wished (6x), with (575x), without (41x), woke (20x), woman (38x), women (6x), won't (21x), wonder (16x), wondered (20x), wondering, wooden (16x), woods, wore (12x), work (42x), worked (15x), world (32x), worn (3x), worried (22x), worry,

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worse (10x), worst, would (223x), wouldn't (42x), wrecked (8x), wrinkles, wrist (14x), wrong (34x).

Y

Yard (3x), year (19x), years (38x), yell (6x), yelling (31x), yellow (5x), yes, yesterday (5x), yet (20x), you (487x), you'll (16x), you're (35x), you've, young, younger, your (105x), yours (12x), yourself (4x).

Z

Zipped (10x), zipper (12x).

Punctuation

, (2436x), — (208x), : (843x), ? (96x), . (5728x).

COLIN FLEMING

Furled/Unfurled

I need you to do something for me. This is the one gesture. I know what is coming. I knew it tonight walking around in this heat. I know the bends of this one and I know the shapes of his mouth. I know the hours he keeps. Let's not ask me to return to the dark. We left it to that dark to map or carve out more darkness. You ask me to be the dark. The thing must be finished. Where will you be amidst the blood and vomit and visitations? Where will you be as I might shake? Wear that piece of sailcloth that is no more composed of cross-stitches and hems than strung together by my own lacerations. You need not shake the canvas at me. Call me back to that good evil we both remember. And what if some good comes of it? A requiem's requiem. It is all soiled, so slick. And I looked upon it at night and insisted it was some gesture, you twice lusty. It was an act, but it was a good act. I shall pay for that, I imagine. I have known. I have been heading this way for some time. And so it is agreed—Could you play me in with some entrance music?



CZAR GUTIERREZ

Bombardier

From the Novel Bombardier/80M84RD13R

IN THE CEMETERY OF Montparnasse, at six in the evening, Rachel gets up on the tomb of Cesar Vallejo and spreads her legs.

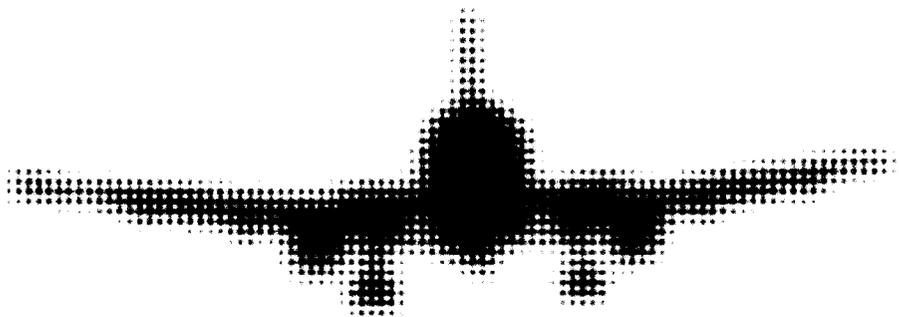
THREE LIRIUM LEAVES fall from the sky and a late drop of semen slides languidly down her groin. I am completely drained and completely drained I try to decipher the traps of love in the sky: from that love of light music nothing saves us, nothing remains. A plane appears in the sky.

I SLIDE MY HAND UNDERNEATH her jeans and feel the cold sweat of her inner thighs. A white line has been formed in the sky, I see. That sweat with the aroma of the crypt will take a long time to dry, I think.

--I want to be a fresh mouth, still water, sometimes only rhythm—I say.

TWO PLANES cross in the sky.

WE ARE in the air.



BOMBARDIER

SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE on the planet, is sending a line of planes against the orange sky, sometimes red, streaked with yellows, stretched in scarlet, almost ruby.

SOMEONE GETS READY TO DISFIGURE the geometry of the globe, someone wants to erase the coordinates, someone wants, someone seeks, someone plans.

SOMEONE GETS READY TO PRESS insistently the delete key and later the reset button and then they will all be fleeing the line of planes and of the four pilots of the Apocalypse: the evolution of dust presides over the events of life, we run towards the dust as if it were our only destiny below the attentive gaze of the stars.

-I think they are bombing New York

CZAR GUTIERREZ

The Fall of the Equilibrist

A Song in 11 Tempos

From the Novel *Bombardier*/80M84RD13R

1. HER BODY HAS BEEN two seconds in the satellite but the vertical memory of the teleobjectives and the wide angles freeze the light so that it becomes The Light That Floats Forever In The Sea Of Time: she is a blade of static, a satellite's digital eyelash, an ether saturated millimeter in the solitude of the cosmos.

2. NOW SHE IS a spark charged with electricity flying parallel against the intermittent steel bars that frame her perspective: hair stirred by smoke, lips laminated in ashes, cones of magneto that enter and leave her body, translator of mister Cantor Fitzgerald and show room model for mister Salvatore Ferragamo, falling now like the light of a star that has travelled millions of years in order to gather in this cone- this cone where a bolt of lightning is being sharpened.

3. IT IS 9:38 A.M. Eastern Time in the WTC2 / 0 Time at the edges of Planet Hell: bathed in pure physics, Rachel cuts the curtains of air while Battery Park is being blurred in out-of-focus shutters drained by gas clouds and petroleum vapors and compasses without North.

3.1. Downwards the depth of her being torn in her short travel of fast windows.

3.2. Upwards the appalling pressure of a skull gripped too hard by the pliers of her temples and

3.3. Inwards, oh, inwards: arteries connected to the celestial orbit, towards the already invisible wake of an embedded plane, towards the dead noise of an engine and the white sound of my scream:

-love is the skin of a planet expanding- I think.

CZAR GUTIERREZ

-love is a slow rupture of symmetries- I say.

-love is the dramatic vertex of a collapsing star- I write.

4. LOVE IS THE VERTICAL that tears me apart as you fall (This is how I will live).

5. FLASHES FROM THE SKY FILTERING through or maybe crossing her skin (which opens up): it opens up or it is bared, inverting itself like the red prairies of Arizona against the feverish skies of Hiroshima.

6. MY EYES DO THEY CLOSE or darken or are they filled with glass?

7. IT WILL BE A BLADE OF STATIC, the satellite's digital eyelash, an ether saturated millimeter in the solitude of the cosmos, but a discharge from her lips is the luminous trail that outlines the orange curvature of space.

8. SHE FALLS PROFOUND, INFINITE as a silent rain: her breasts arched to break the waves, her open arms measuring the vacuum's length, measuring the wave of attraction, her mouth open towards the firmament, the frozen mouth looking for an incandescent kiss, the frozen mouth traveling in search of a lone and generous kiss, searching for the kiss that covers the world, searching for the enormous and prodigious kiss, the frozen mouth in search of a Blue Kiss.

9. THE WEST WALL finds its base: a fistful of concrete:

9.1. the creaking of the tree of her veins while folding,

9.2. the gleam of her brain, silence against abyss, and a rosary of heartbeats that is born and grows and is lifted,

9.3. a rosary of heartbeats constellating the spatial swell so that—between auras and chiaroscuro—tamely the Being rests.



THE FALL OF THE EQUILIBRIST

10. I WANT TO WEAVE A NET with my bones but I end up converted into a deformed polar icecap, into a poem covered in moss, crushed in its edges, burned at its core, bathed by the silent and spectral and cathodic rain of a television without weather that, as it feeds me, converts me into plasma.

11S. FOREVER

ELIZABETH KOCH

A Gift I Could Use

Me, naked on a hotel bed, ruptured by a Seattle man who filmed pornography for the internet. He promised the camera was off.

Two days prior I'd mangled a plant racing for a flight that meant nothing to me. No job, no lover, what did location matter? I had nowhere to be.

My seatmate had been fat, fat-fingered with synthetic hair and clumped mascara. She spoke with certainty and flair, sensing a good ear, and she was right. I was eager. I had an ear. Her daughter had married a bi-polar man who fed their baby Pop-tarts. He violated his own nipples with sewing scissors. Once he tried to hang himself.

"Heroin," she said, eyelashes sticking. "I try not to judge."

I was still wheezing from my run. "She loves him?" I began to cough.

"Sherri's a saint. I don't know where she gets it." She looked at me. I was coughing uncontrollably. She brushed aside my bangs. I coughed hard enough to affirm my existence as a sentient being. She handed me her water bottle.

I arrived home that night with her son-in-law's phone number and a shoebox wrapped in silver. She wanted it hand-delivered. She said he was a lonely man, easily misled. I knew what she was saying. My mission inspired tremors. The sheets slid.

For Christmas, my father gave me a frog. You plugged it into the wall and the whole room turned green. I thanked him, and in return, pledged to re-ignite his pride in me, from the ash pond I would rise, we're talking pride, Papa, pride! I switched the frog on and off to demonstrate his pride in green flashes on white walls.

He'd been on all fours beneath the sink, scraping rust bark off of drain pipes. His words rattled the garbage disposal. "Ada girl."

ELIZABETH KOCH

Bi-polar boy and I convened in a hotel bar. The floorboards boomed. “No sleep!” he shouted, holding up three fingers. Maybe he wanted pity. I’d need to time it right, when I delivered the box. There was something about bi-polar boy, creamy and soft, with red eyes that recorded everything, albino-like, only with hair you could see. He wore a black t-shirt with cherry lips and a long, pink tongue. Two white dots on the upper lip so you know they’re wet. He had eyelashes. I think albinos don’t have eyelashes.

He wanted to know how I masturbated as a little girl. I told him face down, with socks on. He said the camera would like me. I told him I was open, I’d say anything, it didn’t matter—I wanted my vulnerability used. He pointed over his shoulder, at his friend, and spoke quickly, with appealing gloom. His friend was sipping a drink. I tried to make him look my way. Bi-polar boy kept talking and talking, and I hoped there was danger in it, how little I cared.

The friend established himself between the legs of a woman. She hiked a heel on the bar stool. His attention, directed elsewhere, lit up inside me. I was done with circumspection. My fingers sought a knot in my hair and tugged, hard.

In the hotel room bi-polar boy played a song on his guitar. His music fused hot and cold and little storms broke out inside me. Actors idled around the bed, Japanese twins in tiaras. A deaf man in a priest collar. The friend took a seat in the desk chair, rolled the camera on its side. His method confused me, but my hips complied—something in it for him, something in it for me. The gift sat on the night stand, unopened.

Earlier, in the crowded silence of the elevator, numbers ticking floor to ceiling, bi-polar boy had hooked a finger beneath the blue ribbon. He dangled the box near his ear, listening. I wondered what his mother-in-law had seen in me. This was more than I’d asked for, ever.

Through the open window blew tiny, uncatchable matter—neon particles, specs of skin, shouts of derelicts on the street. Bi-polar boy cranked the window wider. “Friends and countrymen!”—he thrust a whiskey into winter—“I’m comin’ down!”

The door-jam clicked.

A GIFT I COULD USE

The world is corrupt with longing and sentiment.

“Wait!” I ran with the gift, caught him eight doors down. “Tis the season.”

His eyes passed through me, clouds.

Confused by my intentions, I went back to the room. Glass fogged wherever I chose to stand. A nuclear heat inched up behind me, urgent and crass, and I smiled. It was over. Time to apply Chapstick.

The friend spun me around. He raked back my curls and confessed things, words about sickness and people, redemption and things. His movies, he said, had healing properties. A tattoo of thorns circled his neck. My mind, on the ledge where I put it. I wondered where the others went. I hoped the closet, not too far.

“You have a certain look,” he said.

“I did a very bad thing,” I said.

“Like a hot librarian.”

“Your friend is going to die.”

“What?”

I tapped the camera lens. “Is this thing on?”

He took my hand. “Forget that.”

Afterward, I asked to see the film, but what he showed me—it wasn’t porn, and I wasn’t in it.

“Another,” I demanded. “More recent. Tonight.”

He frowned. “What about that bad thing you did?”

I made a noise, vile and unjustified, and a curtain dropped between us. Somewhere inside me credits rolled, then disappeared through a fractured screen. “I like you,” he said. I started laughing. He snatched the Chapstick from my fingers, but I couldn’t stop laughing, because these ruptures, these brave little cracks, had proved my every plan inoperative.

I cannot know what sort of person this makes me, but when bi-polar boy rematerialized in the hotel room, benign and unruined, I got mad.

Days before, on that arbitrary flight, a shock had sparked the right wing. Both engines had stalled, floating us through stillness, noiseless and white, and in that

ELIZABETH KOCH

absence of sentiment or the desire to be remembered, this beautiful thought arrived: A nosedive? It didn't mean much. Clutching her soft, fat hand, I'd cried.

Now the fantasy plays over and over, boring as bathwater I refuse to leave. Where is my commitment, my conduit, my conspiracy to be seen? Stupid me, thinking I'd found the sublime, irrefutable thing I could point to and say, See Papa? Green flashes—proof!

Hard to believe I'd actually lived it.

JOSH MADAY

Dark Math

Every morning before sunrise I look out at the field into a ready harvest of hovering darkness, and think how in two hours my father will be dead. Mother will slide into the other night of mourning. Time will chatter. Time will break apart. Will disappear. I look back at the house: the bedroom window now draped with a sheet, where two years ago I am asleep on the other side when I should have been in the field hours ago. I will go over and beat on the window until that murderer wakes up and feels the terror of his laziness. I will explain to him the real cost: how these small things will accumulate, take shape, and add up to an incalculable sum.

The human body contains eight to ten pints of blood,
and the earth does not refuse what it is given.

JOSH MADAY

A Malignant Mass

Mother sees.

something incubating inside

Mother speaks.

[He looks back

MOTHER [*speaking from her lungs*]: Take this music box and smash it; this is a vessel of infinite unholy mockery of God's creation, whose mirror houses a backward world where demons lay around and laugh at the back-masked rendition of that pure and innocent song (Mary Had a Little Lamb); and we will not knowingly provide this vile entertainment for the hateful beings that helped destroy your father...

The Word of Knowledge and Discerning of Spirits:

The enemy is working on you. I can see it. Don't give him a foothold. Don't allow sloth and rebellion into your heart. That's how they get in.

MOTHER [*lungs*]: Come, stand before me with outstretched arms (no, to the side, like you're getting mosquito spray), and I will anoint you with holy water so that the fleeing demons will not find you an open vessel, but shall be cast out to wander the dry and weary land, seeking rest, and finding none.

Mother prays... *hide this house in the hollow of Your hand... make us invisible to the eyes of the enemy...*



DARK MATH

[She aimed the squirt bottle at him—the one she used to shoot flies—and squeezed the trigger. Stream. She twisted the nozzle and sprayed again, sprayed over his body a fine mist of holy water that she had blessed herself.]

MOTHER: Go now, and smash it with your father's hammer. Set the pieces on a bed of kindling on the stone altar and burn them so that the unclean spirits cannot return, for they will return sevenfold.

The grass is dry. What if it catches fire? The house will burn.

MOTHER: Do not quench the purifying fire, but let it run its course and consume all things. *The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.*

Drag a match. The flame gasps its first breath *witness the birth of that which will transform all things* Draw in the sulfurous afterbirth and feel the sinuses sting. Flames bite and crawl through the kindling and begin feeding on the broken lacquered walls of the music box, exhaling sooty black smoke. Flick the spent matchstick into the flames—stand in a trance—watch the fire work—in each pop and hiss hear a demon flee into the desert.

The holy water had evaporated before he even walked out of the house.

helped destroy your father

Time will scatter
leaving behind the odor of ashes

so hard to breathe in this heat

JOSH MADAY

He wanders the fields at night. Field stubble slits the belly of the wind and the murmur of Mother's voice comes spilling out. [He looks back toward the house, dark in the dark, silent. Nothing.] A paste of sweat and grime scrapes his lips and eyelids, encrusts his sunburned skin, impotent armor against what is already inside.

MOTHER: [*a voice in the darkness*] A war is taking place for your soul, Randall. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. [*pause*] Your eyes burn with the fire of the world.

No rain falls through dusty sun-bleached air. Eyes burn and water and want to close. It is always night, just a different shade of darkness. Sunlight bleaches and blackens everything. He stripped naked, lay down in the field, closed his eyes, and let his skin burn, feeling the sun sicken him.

[*pause*] I would that your flesh be destroyed in order to save your soul.

Don't you want to see your daddy again?

Eyelids open stiff and swollen. Dust and grit pack into the folds of flesh tender red. Through whitewashed vision red blotches become visible and bleed together. The fire spreads. He sits in the barn all night, in absolute darkness, and journeys into the tight crawling pain. Something to help him stay awake. He loses his body in the dark, shrinks into a point, a particle, and exits through holes left by the sun's rays, spinning stabbing sinking into the surface of things, always searching for what lay hidden inside. He will not be there.

I have turned black, but not by the sun.

Mother sees some malignant mass festering inside of me. When he looks along her line of mind, he thinks he can feel something there.

DARK MATH



my name is not Randall

Head humming, dizzy: ears pulsating heat; shallow lungs; tired: unfocused black screen fatigue: crown-of-thorns headache behind eyes, in forehead and temples, reaching down to driven spike screaming from base of neck through top of skull. Breathing... huffing... heaving... Cannot open eyes and cannot sleep. Stumble and vomit bright yellow sunlight into dust. Maybe it came out.

My bare insides left purifying thick black mockery outstretched father of mosquito spray tolerating only darkness.

helped destroy

He squeezes his head with the heels of his hands, stamps his feet. Smell dust rising in the darkness.

No.

Night. He gathered fresh dead coals from the fire pit into an empty paint can. He gripped the head of the hammer, ground the charcoal with the handle, adding water and ashes, and smeared the paste over his body. Firelight no longer flickered from his skin. Having carried the darkness out of the barn, he saw no part of his body as he watched anonymously the flames do their work. He'd hidden himself from the burning eyes of the night. They would not see him. They would smell him, all dust and dead flesh, and think that he'd already been burned. And they would pass on to wander the dry and weary land.

But the holy water had evaporated before he came out of the house. Maybe something got in. Maybe it's waiting. Maybe it will manifest and he will do

JOSH MADAY

something he can do nothing about. *For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh... so that you do not do the things that you wish.* I have turned black, but not by the sun.

would that your flesh be destroyed

Time fused into an unmoving mass inside his lungs.

So when is she going to see demons inside of you?

a gasping fatigue—cables tighten between his temples—
headache screams until something breaks—voice and hearing and everything—he
feels the weight of something in his hands

No

when everything is exorcised to ashes

Shattered pieces

echo from the epicenter

beneath the head

of the hammer.

A thin red line

emerges from the underbelly

of his arm

where a fragment

has unzipped

his flesh

DARK MATH

Mother sits in the dark, barefoot and sweating, prayer shawl draped over her head, wearing a threadbare nightgown, large breasts hanging down around her ribs. Heavy, labored breathing, and then fall off into silence. She will not take her medication. She will not eat. Flies swarm the food rotting beside her. When he gags she says, That is your flesh getting sick at the certainty of its own death.

He stands in the hallway, just out of sight of the living room, and listens. It is dark.

MOTHER: *[wilting in a chair in the middle of the empty living room darkened by blood-crusted sheets over the windows, every little sound echoes, every sigh, every whisper, the prayers mingling and multiplying a thousand fold]* I feel them behind me, beside me, all around me, hovering, watching. I hear their death-rattle breathing beside my ears, on my chest as they listen to see if my heart still beats. I hear them under the floor, hissing and laughing. I smell their smoke and brimstone skin. But I do not fear them. My weapons are not carnal. *[voice rises, echo intensifies]* They are running out of places to go. *When the unclean spirit has gone out, he walks through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he says, I will return to my house from where I came out.* Soon they will all be cast out to wander dry and weary places. And they will not return to this house. *[She folds her fingers, fades into a whisper and slips away again]*

Tear trails light down his dirty face.
Blinks his sticky eyelids. Wipes his
face and walks out of the house. His
jaws tighten. He picks up a hammer.

there will be no house to return to

JOSH MADAY

His fists, muddy with dirt and sweat, beat the bedroom window. The glass rattles in its wooden frame. His voice, echoing, his voice, pounding, and then snap and his voice sucked in—plates of shattered glass slip across his skin, cutting deep into the meat of his hands.

DARK MATH

background= the "house"

Vast endless plain. An old farmhouse stands alone. Fields: barren, parched, desolate fields. Wood siding warped and weathered. Peeling white paint eaten away by wind-blown soil. Tattered shingles gather tiny drifts. This house no longer sustains life.

Mother sits inside, praying day and night against the darkness trying to enter. *Lord, hide this house; make it invisible to the enemy.* The air inside hangs thick and stringy with decay. Flies swarm Mother spoiling food and blood.

A voice, from outside.

The fires have to stop.

Are there any clouds in the sky today?
No.

Still no rain. Hot and hazy and red with dust, the air is saturated with thirst. The desert is growing.

The sky is hungry. It exhales over the land, lifting dust into its gullet. What is left of his father in the field is almost gone, and now the sky wants to inhale him, too, and his mother, the house, every acre of land, and make the world as though they had never been: *from the face of the earth* The field is drifting over the yard.

we are being erased

She's sick. She needs help. More help than you can give her.



JOSH MADAY

...a deafening fatigue...

Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses... and when I see the blood...
the plague shall... be on you to destroy [you] when I strike the land...

Every day she pounds heaven purple with her prayers.

MOTHER: *[calm, even tone]* Today's plague, John, is a plague of withholding.

Any clouds today?

No.

[sighs]

You want me to put my mother in the nuthouse?

This house is sickness and disease itself.

name is not John

MOTHER: *[slipping into abstraction]*

The sun directs its luminous violence toward the earth,
cloudless sky a blue bowl of judgment

One day all of this will have ended,
and then, finally,
some rain to wash the blood from the earth

The house slowly disemboweled,
hysterectomy

JOSH MADAY



He smears ashes inside his nostrils and enters the house. Feeds Mother. Gives her fresh water. Bowl of water. Washcloth. Will all be coated with fine dust next time, untouched. Tries not to inhale. Shallow breaths. Gags. *That's your flesh getting sick at the smell of its own death.*

:as though his presence alone compelled that house to accept and retain human life;

as though houses actually possess a sentience acquired from the people who breathe or have breathed in them

—in this house an incontrovertible affirmation for emptiness, desertion; an insurmountable resistance to occupancy

The house stands naked in the sun and heat and wind, burning, blistering, peeling. Empty. He burned its insides. Entrails pulled out the back door and burned. He saw them blacken to ashes. Now only a shape remains: a word and cinders in the sky. A box of space in want of something to cover its nakedness, to hide that it is an impostor. He will paint. He will paint the house black; black as night, black as coal. Paint the wood siding, dry and thirsty for anything. Paint the windows of this rotten tomb. Blot it from the face of the earth.

House Disemboweled

Remainder of skin and skeleton

MOTHER: *[tired, quiet, trembling voice]* The sun is a plague: *behold, He has caused this sun to rise and to plague us with burning heat* [pause] Your sin has brought this heat as a curse on us. *[heavy sigh]* *Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. [breaking and crying as the hard sharp words come out]* Michael, the Lord will not return for us if there are no clouds.

I want to see the sun blotted out from the sky

DARK MATH



You're the only one who can do it.

name is not Michael

black paste to hide his body
I become dust and ashes.
to wander the field becoming desert.

Every day she scorches the sky black with her prayers.

Black as night, black as coal

She needs more time.

He smears the house with five coats of watery paint made of charcoal and Father's ashes.

hide this house

*It seemed that this house which had stolen my it would steal away,
leaving behind an empty space,*

(slick and gritty with blood and dirt)

Painted black, goes out into the field and looks back toward the house. No lights and black paint. Dark in the dark. Nothing. *from* the face of the earth As though it had never been.

The shape left behind felt dense and black and clear.

back from whence you came

JOSH MADAY

He hears Mother call from inside. She is sitting in the dark. A box fan in the corner beating its wings, mocking God's desert wind.

She calls.

He keeps grinding charcoal with the handle of a hammer, mixing in water and Father's ashes. His palms blister, break, and bleed.

Her voice moves through the dead air and the walls, carries cross-current through the wind to where he is.

Blood runs down the wood handle into the soot.

He is standing at the edge of the darkened living room, his raw throbbing palms sticky with blood and plasma.

Mother sees, the prayers cease, her face tightens.

something incubating in silence

a shallow breath

Mother speaks:

Let me see your hands

DARK MATH

Just Before Dawn

In the pre-dawn half-light, there was no sound as he pounded on the bedroom window, his face against the sooty sunbaked paint, telling that lazy fuck to get out of bed, that the extra few minutes of sleep will never be worth it: two sleepless years and the safety of his soul being only a fraction of the cost. He felt the grind of his voice, but heard nothing. His eyes slid out of focus as he beat the blackened glass with alternating fists in war drum rhythm, growing slow and steady, becoming the approach of something certain, unstoppable, something insatiable that will not pass on until its purpose is accomplished and nothing remains but ashes and dust. Sweat soaked his hair, his shirt, his skin. His chest tightened. He felt weak and began to tremble as he watched slings of spit dry on the window. In the dark beyond the dirty glass something moved. His eyes gathered focus. The sheet had been pulled aside and he was certain he was staring into the seeing darkness of another pupil.

JOSH MADAY

Scorching
sweating
burning and blinding
no arms, only blood
hard parched ground,
No one
Everyone I am awake.

JOSEPH SALVATORE

Men on Couch

All this talk about testicles and prostates started to make me anxious. I wanted another drink. Whenever I pray, God or higher power or whatever never takes away the feelings I ask him to as quickly as alcohol does. This is nothing that any of us here needs explained. I've been waiting for years for an answer to my personal struggles, asking God or higher power or whatever to relieve me of a certain curse that he, it, or whatever has put upon me to test my character. A curse I will not name, but for which alcohol is quicker relief than prayer. Alcohol does not need to be prayed to or sought intercession of or asked or begged for mercy at night under the covers when you are so scared that the bed feels like a furnace or a tight sack around your face. Alcohol reads your mind, locates and attacks fear. Takes it away so that you can, as a counselor back in basic told me, stop worrying so much and get on with the business of living. And here at my sister's party that was how I wanted to feel, like I was getting on with the business of living and though I didn't quite know it then, the alcohol did and that was why I knew I needed another drink. The man on the couch said that he was getting freaked out too by all this cancer talk and that, boy, didn't he also need another drink, woo-wee, let him tell me, and he thought that the two of us should get some more drinks and then, just to rid us both of this unnecessary worry, go into my sister's room and immediately examine our testicles and prostates.

My sister's room was dark except for a strawberry-scented candle she had burning in the little adjoining bathroom, whose door was open and through which opening wafted the soft warm smell of candle and stale pot and heavy leather and under all that the thin uriney smell of my sister's patchouli. When my eyes adjusted to the tangerine dimness of the room, I and the man stood silently for a moment looking at her trophies and the photos of her arm-wrestling tournaments

JOSEPH SALVATORE

and newspaper clippings and her welding gear and stage-hand stuff. The crippling anxiety and fear and terror of testicular and prostate cancer abated somewhat from just knowing that this man whom I had met this very evening shared my same fears and concerns, and this feeling of support and connection and brotherhood overwhelmed me, and I was suddenly overcome with the urge to examine our testicles and prostate immediately, and I told the man to shut my sister's bedroom door and to lock it for the sake of our feeling safe and comfortable as women do at the gynecologist's. The man did as I asked. From behind, I watched his perfect hair and normal-shaped head atop his wealthy-kid-in-high-school posture as he stepped across the archipelago of my sister's various floor rugs and unwashed laundry. He shut the door and locked it, and then he turned around to face me, but he did not move from where he stood. I told him to come over to the bed. He was a great deal shorter than I was and not nearly as muscular and sculpted and striated and hard. My leather-encased groin's bulge was bigger now on the left side. The man stood looking up at me. His perfect hair's part was perfect, as if it had been drawn with a ruler. I told him to sit down next to me on my sister's goose down comforter and batik bedspread. He dropped down next to me and stared at his shoes. I told him to look at me. He only shrugged and picked at a nub of batik fabric. Then he leaned back on his elbows, his belt buckle had what appeared to be inlaid diamonds. But I doubted they were what they appeared to be. His Adam's apple ran up and down his throat, like a little knuckle in there. His fingernails were perfectly trimmed, little half-moons at the base of each, and his hands seemed carved from marble; they were white and blue and pink, the aloe-moisturized skin fitting his hand's bones perfectly. I knew that this man and I wanted the same thing: a healthy almond-shaped prostate and two cancer-free testicles. Cancer-free and perfect. Healthy and unblemished. Why need we think it was anything else? Why need we talk about faces or histories or the times when we thought the future would bring with it cures and miracles and restorations of our platonic selves sprung from a God who could make mistakes but who, once made aware, would fix everything.

MEN ON COUCH

I knew this would take time. I knew I might have to put one of my booted legs up over his shoulder and show him up-close how it was done. I knew I would have to hold his hands as they went through each motion. Splay his fingers held in mine, wet with my own saliva. I'd have to offer words of encouragement and demonstrate my great patience. And when he fumbled the job (and he would), I would have to bring his fingers back on track. I knew he would want to watch me first. Learn that way the lesson of my hands. He might have thought we needed more light—the thought of how he would look in that light never occurring to him. I have always preferred the dark. And so I thought it would be best to take this slowly in this dim, wavy, Jack-O-Lantern shadows. Let our intuition be our guide. His belt buckle twinkled and glittered, nonetheless, in what light the candle gave. I said, “Do you have anything you want to say or ask me before we begin?”

JULIAN ZADOROZNY

Wronski-Kroll

Farmer follows the path swinging a wooden pike off his shoulders down across his boot heel. Angelique runs, her mittens pinned to her jacket wrists. Gaining on Farmer she inhales the smoke from barns set afire.

I can't breathe.

Can you catch up to me or not?

Wait for me. Please.

Please?

I didn't hear daddy.

Nothing. I am not in a mood to walk home in snow.

I don't see the clouds.

Catch up.

Farmer shuts his hand on Angelique's shoulder. A swell of smoke is gradual, pleasant. The two enter a clearing, out of the woods, over one bridge, see one brick house, a sign flashing OPEN. Glass reflects the smoke in black streaks.

You have to wait by the bike racks.

I want to wait by the bike racks.

I'll try not to be cold.

You won't because I'll buy you a cocoa. Or a hot chocolate. Which would you prefer?

Will it be steaming?

Of course. I'll get you the cocoa. All right?

Inside the shop Farmer touches single pieces of fruit. Melons. Pears lifted to eclipse the light from the bulb above his head. Farmer sniffs the pear's skin.

You would like something, Farmer?

I want this fruit. This pear. Three. And one grapefruit.

JULIAN ZADOROZNY

You now owe me thirty-two dollars.

Right now?

This second.

Farmer unfolds bills that carry the stencilled faces of three different prime ministers and one queen.

Angelique hangs off the low growing branch of an elm. She takes deep breathes of cold air. Swings her feet together side to side in one arch.

Your girl is hanging from my tree.

Go tell her to stop. Twenty-six. Twenty-nine.

She seems bored.

Angelique is bored. She walks in circles. Takes trips from one side of the house to the next make believing she's intrepid, wears a captain's cap. She uses crayons and rubs each colour into one blob. By the way, you baby sit her on Tuesdays, you can tell her what to do on Tuesdays.

You want me to pour her a cocoa?

I want you to pour it with a whipped cream top. How much for the fruit?

Ten.

That's with the drink?

Don't pay me for the drink. Out of my pocket. She can have it on the house anytime she likes.

Your eye looks less droopy today.

A good sign is a good sign. Do not hand me that money.

What if I wanted to buy the cocoa for myself?

I'd charge you double and add another dollar on top.

Farmer bites into the flesh of the pear, soaks the juice from his lower lip using his tongue.

How many more pears are you willing to buy?

I'll take four of those plus the one out of my mouth, a grapefruit and cardboard box of strawberries.

Keep the money for the cocoa.

WRONSKI-KROLL

I'm paying for the drink.

It's sitting here becoming cold. Just make sure that the pears are placed in a dark spot like a bread bin, or paper bag.

Farmer wrenches the paper folds of the bag wrinkling both into a twist. Farmer walks out the store leaving the cocoa.

He ran out of both cocoa and hot chocolate.

But I wanted the cocoa.

The two follow a path. Angelique twists between Farmer's legs, throwing up her arms in the middle, moving her hands towards his pant cuff. From a small section of open tree limbs their house stands full of bright room lights. The front door opens as Farmer's wife whistles. Her green summer dress inches past her knee.

Whistle back to your mother.

I don't remember the answer whistle.

She won't recognize you if you don't respond. Looong. Short. Then short again. I'll try this whistle.

Do you hear her?

No.

That can't be it. Try it again. Looong. Short. Short.

She's whistling something new.

You sure? I'll try. Looong. Short. Short. Looong. Now.

She's waving.

Your mother never understands how to get something right. The first time is critical. Tonight you can sleep on her side of the bed.

Androids are dismantled in a course of three days. Electronics are fitted out of the main frame of the torso, lifted underneath lungs I produced out of a drip system mixing polymer and powdered glass. I have been requested to consume the remaining integrated circuitry in my store houses and discontinue production of families to start building more plumbers, lawyers, electricians, doctors, etc.

The new models are to be placed inside the vault in the next forty-eight hours. The first is a young girl under twelve and able to use both legs, arms, exercises

JULIAN ZADOROZNY

her mouth. She does age. A re-recording of the voice is being done by a faculty member of the Saint Demetrius School for Performing Arts. From the vault three staff members carry the father into the first of two barns to dismantle. They twist out three red ribbons that pulse electrical currents as to act as a heart. The wife is stripped, picked at by the engineer, her breast sags to the right, her genitals are locked shut. The father is stripped, unscrewed, the durable batteries are placed under the navel. The engineer reaches inside and switches the toggles. The eyes blink.

Cracking my knuckles, the daughter is placed in a crate, strapped in, shut. A branding of my name burned into the wood.

Can we lock up the clerk later, I say.

Absolutely sir, engineer says. We can make you happier by just locking down the doors, because we have to dismantle the computers in the basement. Then the trucks drive the trees out, and we have to literally crack the base of the walls of the house. You see? That's what we have to do.

Engineer, let's keep the trees separate from the houses and make sure the clerk is not broken apart. I'd like to use him for another project.

Four trucks parked outside, lids open, as the walls are placed in vertically. Men wearing green uniforms are smoking cigars, following a map with their fingers. Blueprints folded across the hood of a car.

How many more families are we to take apart?

You can make sure that all of them are in the long truck.

Two curtains are pulled from the back of the long truck. I hiccup as I inspect the line of crates, the androids numbers engraved in plates.

Have we made sure that each machine is placed in the wet plastic properly?

Each one is placed in accordance to your prints and instructions.

Am I not looking well?

Why?

You're staring.

Am I? Am I staring?

You are staring. What's the matter?

WRONSKI-KROLL

Your eyes are heavy.

I haven't slept. Also I have been re-watching the video from tape.

Tape?

Old home system tapes of the discussions between the girl, the father, the mother in the green dress. I wrote that in my red home. Under a light that flickered when you touched the bulb. Weighing one hundred and forty pounds, at my height, I walked into a professor's office and handed him a piece of dialogue that resembled every piece of dialogue I had written many times until now. Twenty years ago when I had looked into a large book seeing the *Digesting Duck* by Vaucanson, reading the paragraphs detailing its operating containers, seemingly operating, kernels dropped into the mouth, and wheels rotated, pushing the grain to be defecated out its rear pipes.

No, only three years ago you spoke to the professor.

Really?

Yes. I remember.

Have you seen the films of the whole family?

When I was a boy and in class they showed the machines on network specials that the teacher would record. Roll in the television so we could watch. We would watch them as a treat.

What is it you wanted me to do in here?

To count each box and make sure that each was numbered accordingly. The way you described in those notes.

Can you count all of them for me? I thought I asked you to count them all.

Perhaps.

Inside each of the trailers stand one hundred thirty-five boxes. Machines of species, of animals, discovered in zoology books published a hundred years to the day they were opened. Historical figures stand pressed on one side of a large trailer: Napoleon, Riel, Khrushchev dismantled, numbering parts one to three hundred forty-nine. Grand Ole Opry violinists taken apart, left inside garbage pits, a decision not to be reused.

JULIAN ZADOROZNY

The engineer has started to choke. His eyes begin to roll as I walk towards him. Grab squeezing underneath his abdomen. His cheeks whiten. Eyes open.

Can you stand?

I can.

You were choking.

I was?

There's the fly. Big enough to swallow. Are you in shock?

May I sit?

You may.

The trucks begin to stir, clicks of engines rotating wheels. I check mark all numbers on twelve trucks. Circle the blue sketches of systems in red ink. The engineer is sitting with his head between his legs, spitting into the cracks of the concrete.

I'm going to meet you at the storehouse?

In about twenty to thirty minutes, sir. Of course if the blockades occur I might not make it. A police escort is involved?

I spoke to the representative of Allied Local Government. They have let me bring in all of those trucks through. The city will know what to do with the rest of my materials.

Thank you, sir. I want to meet up with you later. We can sit down and make sure the diagrams are all numbered and checked. To see the blueprints from the storehouse, and mark down the date of the building's completion.

I'd like that. Is there a television in my car? And will the driver be able to switch it on? Fine. I'll see you in the office apartment.

The wife turns the door knob, sits with her daughter. Angelique kicks both feet. She points to Farmer dropping his boots wet with snow.

Well, the wife says.

I have these types of fruit, Farmer says. Can you take the bag sweetheart?

Angelique takes the bag and runs into the kitchen, taking the grapefruit, spinning towards the kitchen table.

The local unions came again today, the wife says.

WRONSKI-KROLL

Well, and?

They want to bring us into the congregation. That might be fun. Where she can hang out with other kids and learn how to have a good time.

This is the beginning when you start—

Not that conversation.

We live here without any real problems. There are so many friends that eat with us, drink with us. Angelique isn't missing anyone. Besides, she goes to school. We have birthday parties for her. So you want to join the congregation. You can go back to it.

Alone?

Well I'm not interested.

You're not interested.

I said that.

Interested.

Are you not feeling well?

Interested.

Your eyes are rolling back. Angelique? Go grab some wet rags.

Farmer rests a hand on his wife's forehead. He begins to wipe her face. Her eyes are shut. She does not speak. When her eyes open she will recognize her husband. I made sure that Angelique does not bring in the rags. Shutting off three mainframes allows her to shut down gradually. Angelique stops holding the grapefruit in her hand. Farmer is difficult to shut down because his hardware is advanced. I had asked the engineer to add a device to mimic an authentic heart. A new program slows down the secondary batteries that are nestled in the lower quarter of his abdomen. Farmer's head slumps into a fold of his belly.

I wrote on a twelve foot black board. Three years ago? The lines I drew with white chalk accumulated into the image of one arm. Farmer's eyes were drawn in two strokes. Grinning, I let my hand sit on the curve of my son's baseball, guiding my fingers to keep from shaking. A face sketched at the end of three hours. Concluded, Farmer's eyes stared towards the floor across my shoes. Then I erased his ears.

NOY HOLLAND

Absolution

Me and him, we're lovers. Sure, I know, he's a crazy motherfucker. And I'm the Banana Queen of Opelousas.

They say I'm the prettiest since Luana Lee. But you best clap your eyes on Jimmy—he is something, too. If you saw Jimmy down by the dirty river in his shiny turquoise truck, you'd say, Jimmy Lucas, he's plumb got everything, a dog in the back, banking turns, his Banana Queen right close. He'd lift a finger from the steering wheel, tip his head to mean something mean. It's the way my Jimmy is. I've seen it happen, I should know, I rode with him a lot.

Nights at the No Knees we ride to, Jimmy sets me up on the long bar. “Just look at you,” he says to me, his eyes wild and proud. “You boys come on, take a look at her. She is the Queen of Bananas.”

People know about me and Jimmy. Jimmy was the first, I swear it. When I try remembering, creosote comes back best—two coats tacktacky on the storehouse floor, black across my back and legs. Helps cure dry rot. Don't I know? I slapped it on myself.

Oh, I'd have been down there anyhow, watching the boys ice the trains. I tell you, it's too hot for work like that here in Opelousas. Those chunks were all of fifty pounds, nothing but hooks to hoist them with. Those boys, they were always bright with sweat.

I used to sit up in the big red oak, just sorting, my head lining up their half-bare bodies: Jimmy, Jasper, Isaac, Read. Jimmy, Isaac, Jasper, Read. Jimmy was the first. I swear it. “Hey, Jimmy,” I sang out, real softlike, just enough for me and the birds. “Hey, Jimmy.”

He was a sight to see, standing splay-legged on a silver car, sweat running rivers down his back. A round, ugly fellow would come dawdling along, sticking bananas

NOY HOLLAND

for safety's sake. "Just don't seem quite right," he'd say, eyeing the mercury like somebody's momma. "Best load her up, she's hot."

After a spell, the peel he stuck went black inside as a bullet hole.

Oh, bananas.

Opelousas is the banana capital of the universe—cars and cars, quick up from Mexico City. Good seasons, those boys worked all night, throwing ice down the loud chute. Jasper always did the last of it. He was the oldest and he'd been to prison. Mind you, I hardly looked at Jasper. I wasn't bad as all that. I seen his black arms bare, though, veins standing out like hard-ons in church.

Momma like to drive me loopdy-looped as she is about Jimmy. "My lover Jimmy," I say in front of her. "My man Jimmy."

She don't stand for it. He's a no-count. He ain't the hitching kind. He spits tobacco juice on her kitchen floor, no two words about it. Oh, sweet Jesus, I know. Jimmy's got a mean streak an acre wide that puts up a fence around me, puts a shiver in me like I just better be ready, like expect the worst, because here it's coming. But I like it.

I don't know.

I do.

When I started in on Jimmy, Momma like to pinch my head off. I'd get my hair done up. "How could you!" You could hear her across the country. "How could you!"

Lord, my mamma can carry on. Some nights she's talking a blue streak upstairs, and I lie down, dying for the train—all those explosions right in a row, and the whistle like something to run from.

Maybe I'm a sinner to sleep naked like I do.

Some nights I dream of fire, running stark down Jefferson with the neighbors gawking. Some nights Momma comes in, pushes her hands around on me. "Child of my heart," she says to me. "Sweet sugar child, don't go."

Daddy left way back, took a liking to some Mississippi baby doll. Folks say it's Momma I favor. But Momma wasn't ever Banana Queen. She ain't the contestant

ABSOLUTION

type. She like to laid down and get run over when Daddy brought his hussy—that’s what I call her, his hussy—home. I knew it already. One day, early from school, I spied them, out at the kitchen sink, her bent down like she was spitting up, red hair spilling every which way. Strike me dead if I lie. I saw him sticking himself in her. It’s the gospel truth.

I never told Momma. But she knew, she knew. Daddy’s hussy’s got a swing any fool wants for his porch. Momma don’t say nothing. She just smiles sweetlike, slow in the doorway waving. Just like the Banana Queen of Opelousas. Just like me.

Me, I aim to be remembered. That’s why the Banana Queen. You can’t believe how it’s transporting. It hooked me Jimmy. I’d have set up in that red oak till I grew roots, hadn’t been for this yellow crown. Luana Lee is milk soup. Did Jimmy Lucas bat an eye? But give me a crown on appointment night, and Jimmy climbs up, clamps his hands on my face, “Ain’t you something,” he says to me. “If you ain’t a precious thing.”

Momma says it’ll teach me vanity, being a queen and all. She says it’ll make me big for my britches. I say, “Momma? Tell me something I don’t know already.”

Momma’s crazy, I can’t help it.

Momma says when your life goes short, folks stop listening to you. “How many times do we get to do this?” she says.

She says, “Fetch me a glass of water.”

I can’t help it. I want to sleep in the woods in a queenly bed and lacquer my broken toenails. I want to dig through Jimmy Lucas. One day last summer, Jimmy set a stuffed doll astride a rail of a fence. He took her to pieces, shot by shot, head first and feathers rising. I could see the inside of his mouth. The inside of Jimmy Lucas’s mouth is a dark, vibrating place.

I know.

I don’t look in Momma’s mouth. She’s got pretty lips, but she smells like dying. I bathe her in the mornings these days. I try to help her along. I set Momma down in her pink tub and she wraps her arms around my neck and whispers, “You should have killed me when you had the chance.”

A couple years back, before I got to be queen, we were loading hay on the

flatbed. This is what she means—that the Devil took hold, that I meant her to flip off the back of the truck, bales tumbling. Momma looks like that now, like she looked that day—shiny-eyed and barely breathing, a fuse fixing to blow.

Sometimes Momma wants my mouth on her breast, like when I was her child. I lay myself down beside her, inside the darkness underneath the spread. Sometimes I think it could do me in—our nakedness, that, in my mouth, I can feel her old heart pounding. I try to help her along.

Like to make Jimmy wild, hearing this. “Don’t you touch that old whore,” he says. “You got to have a life of your own.”

It is all of it new to me. Everybody wants something I can’t figure. Jimmy wants a baby and I say, Why? The sense of it quits me. We could get us a trailer on the outskirts of town, a place where a dog could run. I just say, “No, Jimmy, no, no, no. You know I can’t, Jimmy, no.”

He don’t stand for it. He grabs me by my ankles and drags me around, my head swimming on the linoleum. “Fuck you, you bitch,” he says to me. “Fuck you, you cunt.”

He drags me around. When he comes down on me, I think I must look like Momma, all sprawled out, my head thrown back like I am coming on.

Jimmy ain’t come around since Daddy come home, but he is all I can think of.

Daddy done run out of luck. We supposed he drowned in the dirty river when they found his old brown boots. But Daddy ain’t been drowning, only getting fat.

“Where have you been, Daddy?” I say through the screen.

He looks like some old boy I never knew in school.

“Oh, here and yonder. Best let me in.”

But do you think I budge?

“What you been doing, Daddy?”

He gives a little shrug like plenty.

“Watching the grasshoppers spit,” he says, and then just stands there, fatter than fat, sucking at the gaps in his teeth.

Momma sits bolt up in back of me, spewing linchpinned to the flagpole and

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fourteen million dollars. She is Queen of Nonsense now, and that gives her the right.

“She ain’t saying nothing, Daddy. Don’t mean a thing. What can I do for you?”

He says, “I just come to set for a bit.”

I say, “Unh-uh, Daddy. Ain’t no reason to live in hell and have to wind up there, too. Why don’t you just get along?”

He is nothing but a shadow against the screen, and from where I stand, flies disappear in him. I say, “You had your chance, old man. Momma’s got a thing with God now.”

It is all I can do to keep my hands from myself. Jimmy come by, just shuffled up, kind of hanging his head, making a ghost on the screen. I’ve seen it happen, I knew it was come.

“Jimmy,” I say, “how them bananas?”

He says, “I had me a dream. I was looking for you. I was down yonder on the blacktop ridge, hollering every way from Sunday. You wasn’t hearing a thing. You was down in a long valley in a little old house with a white light. You was all prettied up and your lips were red and you was just setting, looking at me, not seeing a thing, not listening.”

Ought to be something for a girl to say, but my mouth refuses me.

He says, “Come on, child. I can’t dawdle around. I got me a life to live.”

“Uh-huh,” I say. “Tell me about it, lover boy.”

“Tell me what it’s like,” Momma says to me. “Tell me what it feels like to feel like a queen.”

“Momma,” I say, “Kiwani makes six hundred and twenty-eight pounds of banana pudding every year, and every year those boys come up from down the road a piece and go to pissing in the yellow vat. It feels a little bit like that, I guess—like everybody’s happy to have you, but you got some secret stinking inside.”

Anytime she finds sleep, Momma goes to smiling and kissing the air. I’ve got a notion she looks like me, practicing love in the glass. Am I doing this right? Do I look okay?

I been making ready since long back when, but—Momma, she can still turn me

NOY HOLLAND

inside out. When she came up last night from that crazy spell, she took hold of my face like she ain't laid eyes maybe for years on me.

"Oh, my beloved child. I thought I was living forever in that green, tumbling place."

It was like I'd never seen her before, like she was the light of another world. "Here," she said. "Put your hand here."

I rested my hand on her belly—my hand pressed under Momma's hand. "I'm all of me gone from here. Feel?" she said. "Do you feel it?"

"Listen," she said. "Don't matter nohow. It's God does the things that ever get done. God made them boys piss in the pudding, ain't nothing to do with you."

Father, forgive.

If I ever flew, it would feel like this, like the earth is just something long gone. I got a big heart and can hold my breath, and when I go deep in this dirty river, my whole body disappears. I can feel water wanting me. I know it's a sin, but I open my legs. I shout Jimmy's name so it turns to music by the time that it finds air.

Oh, ain't it a shame, my sweet, sweet Jimmy. I could have loved you good.

Father, forgive.

I lie in the woods in the heat for the train. The thing gets growing inside me, up in my gut, around and around my secret parts. It has a life of its own, and surely the hunger of a hundred horses. It is a thing of the flesh, child of the Devil, who split my momma's pretty lips and spilt himself in her. Surely now is the time for prayer.

Dear God, sweet God, pray God.

What's my Momma ever done to you? You listen to me. Ain't no kind of life you're lending her.

I got the skirling sound of a train come smack between my ears. It goes, Take me. Take me, it goes. Take me, take me, take me, take me.

Do I have to do all your filthy work?

Have you spent up all your amazing grace?

You think I know better, but you got me wrong—I ain't afraid of you. You can have this no-count soul to keep. Suit yourself. Do what you will. Tickle me pink.

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I can't use it.

Glory be and to the Father, and to the Holy Son. I would let Momma sprawl on the shimmying track.

You got your doubts.

I'd say, Go on, go on. Get on with it, Momma. Let's be done with this thing.

PAUL GRINER

Staidmint

therz somll blame the guvment therz somll not. this didn happen from the furlo, only they sed it did. truth iz Tran showed up at work hi plenny of times only thiz time wed all been down cuz the furlo was cummin and so noone naled up the plywud or evun the 2by and so when he wandered at the shaft there wasnt nuthin 2 stop hiz wanders.

Eye almost cudve and eye tried bcuz sumtimz he shaired hiz lunch with me and he wuz the onnly 1 who didn nevr hide my tules but he giv me the finger and over he go. He mustve thot therewere starez he raised his fut hi and then hiz face chainjed he was wating for his fut to touch somethin it didn.

then he new. he reechd out 2 grab things the first 2 flores, the beams what wud be skinned over soon and the 1st 1 he had a chans but hiz arm bounced off and spun him funny and nex he tried with hiz fut but the saim thin happned and nex hiz hed. So that wuz it then jus droppin and pongin and spinnin whateverway the beams spun him. Then thud.

Eye stud lookin down the shaft smellin dust an Tobe wuz ther he sayed shit

eye sayed Eye newit wud happen

he sayed shuddup noone likes toldusos

not that way, Eye sayed, Eye scene it b4. an he sayed shutit

so Eye learned 2 keep meye vizuns to myeself, but that dont mene Eye dont hav em. Eye scene Tran fallin that way the day b4 an the nex 1 eye scene wuz of Tobe an lader Eye thot Eye shudve tole him it wudve cumin handy with the gun n all but Eye didn cuz he told me not2. Eye scene it cummin, thats 4 shur. all that blud on the dri wal and him lyin there puddlin it. gunsmoke smells like burnt hare, u dont 4get that. it wuz still driftin tho the sound wuz gone cept in mye ears, echoin 2 silenz.

PAUL GRINER

heat sayz drugz an Eye bleve them cuz Tobes car wuz morn any ofus cud pay but so what? that wuz hiz lookout and he didn. sirvival of the fetus, he always sed. and not all drugz iz bad. sumtimz I smoke 4 work and lots ofus do and still we clime the steal. up and up, sweepin snow off az iz nesscary sos not 2 slip. bedder 2 reack slow sumtimz, speshly now Eye had nother vizun, me spinnin like Tran only outside not in and they can fyer me wont make no diffrenz. whats cummin down the rode salredy cumin. lookit Tobe. Furlo day an he cum in anywayz and blam. Eye wuz theyre 2 2 c if Eye cud warn him but mye vizun didn have no klok so Eye wuz late.

my vizun for my droppin an spinnin didn have no klok neither so this job or the nex or the nex after. cud b years and years. sumtimez when Eye smoak Eye call it up and try 2 c mye face onnly eye never can, u cant control yer vizuns. what eye want iz 2 c if mye face iz old er young. not surprizd it wont b that, but probly scaired. hell im scaired now the futurz waitin for me onnly Eye doan no witch corner itz around. witch Eye suppoz iz all of us. sumday well open a dore and go thru it an not cum back.

so thas mye staidmint. Eye didn c who dun Tobe Eye wuz lookin at him an the shot cum ovr mye showldur. Eye hurd a car aftr but mayb it wuz sum1 elses. not Tobes. hiz wuz lowd an powrful like the future cummin aftr u. Like myne like urs onnly u dont kno u ben hearin it till itz upon u. eyem not hearin myne yet. Tran heard hiz at the last, Tobe 2 but Tobe wuz differen, hiz face thatis, scaired an suprized but smilin. I hope to vizun that 2, 4 me. we got 2 go so we go but why not go smilin at lease, the end cummin and u embracin it. grab hole of whatz grab hole of u anitz not jus fate then, itz a choyce. the lass 1 we got. Tobe maid hiz with Tran he tolemeso it wuz the wrong choyce, eyenoit he sayed an eye wuz glad 2 here him sayit at the end. he wuz proly thinking eye meant eye wuz mad he didn put up the twobys but I wuzn't meanin that tho later I saw thatz what eye shudve meant. he shudve putem up and he didn an thatz why tranz gone. thatz how it goez, c. Tobes wrong choyce had maid me mad so eye had maid mye wrong choyce an sumwear it haz 2 stop. so mayb u shud make yers and lettit go. lemme go 2. Not meanin no disrespeck jus sayin. can Eye go now?

ATTICUS LISH

Drawings



Don't run away now
- not when things are just
getting good.

A.L.



Nothing had prepared Edwin for the severity of the
food cravings that followed killing.

This is our daughter, Madison.



A.L.

SEXUAL BEAR -

you know who you are



A.L.



Like everyone, the Staters had their problems.

SAM LIPSYTE

Chapter Seventeen

One night in the House of Drinking and Smoking we were victims of what I would later call a home invasion. I didn't know the term then. I think I learned it later, from a rap song, or a movie based loosely on a newspaper columnist's fear of a rap song.

Probably they thought we'd be out, which was funny, because we were never out. This night, though, we had turned in early. Eve of a test week, I think. Given the soporifics in our systems, I'm still surprised we ever woke up, or that Maurice Gunderson did, to the sound, he said later, of his dresser drawer sliding open. His shriek roused the rest of us, though by then they, the invaders, had dragged Maurice from his bed, commenced what Billy Raskov would by morning term a "total fucking rampage." One of them banged a baseball bat on the walls and they all barked and shouted, flushed us from our smoky caves, herded us into the main room, where we sat in our underwear among the ashtrays and beer bottles that littered the glass coffee table we'd bought at the Salvation Army.

The invaders seemed quite familiar with the modality of the roust, knew the best ways to terrorize, corral. Later we learned at least one of them had been in the non-salvation army. They wore ski masks, but we could tell by their hands that one was black and two were white. We could tell by their accents they were local. The largest invader, the apparent leader, the bat guy, as I later dubbed him, drifted about the room with his Easton aluminum, tapped our shoulders, our knees, lightly, with humorless threat, while the others drew the shades.

I shivered on the sofa in my boxer shorts. Christmas break was not far off and the house was always cold. Constance and Charles Goldfarb sat beside me and through my grogginess I felt my arm brush Constance's warm shoulder. Two things occurred to me simultaneously: that she must have been in bed with Charles, and

SAM LIPSYTE

that I missed her. Then the bat guy smashed his bat on the coffee table. Maurice Gunderson squealed from his camp chair.

“Shit, just take what you need and get out,” he said.

Glass twinkled in his scalp.

“What was that?” said the bat guy.

“I said just take what you need.”

“What do I need, faggot? Tell me what I need!”

He reached into the pocket of his jacket and took out a small pistol. Its diminutive aspect did not offer comfort.

“Calm down, dude,” said another invader.

“I’ll keep these fairies here,” said the bat guy. “You two go upstairs.”

“You sure?” said the third invader.

“Just fucking go!” said the bat guy. “I don’t have all night.”

If he was the leader, he was not a natural one. He seemed more disturbed than the others, twitchier, less clinical in his approach to the burglarious. That they figured we’d have cash and valuables stashed away here on Staley Street was not an indictment of their intelligence, but it did point to a knowledge deficit with regard to the various striations and flavors of capital accumulation at a private university. There were some varsity golfers down the block they would have done much better to rob. Maybe they already had.

I could hear the other two invaders smash around upstairs, pictured them in the blue light of my tiny room. What would they make of the sketches tacked to the wall, the condoms under the futon, the cracked, unstrung Telecaster in the corner (in case the band idea ever blossomed), the scratched record on the Fold ’N Play? Would they see through the pose?

It did not seem odd that I was thinking about this while the bat guy lurched around us and his accomplices tore through our drawers and our duffels full of dirty jeans and jerk-off socks and plastic bongos and mint cookies and Foucault Readers. I was still a little stoned and very tired but I wasn’t that frightened. I did not believe that we were in mortal danger, though I sensed some of us could get

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hurt. The bat scared me more than the gun. I saw it caving a skull, maybe that of Raskov, who sat on the sofa arm near Goldfarb. There was something melon-y and inviting about Raskov's head, I understood that objectively, and despite our frictions the prospect of its stoving did not please me. But the downside of this muted state was that I maybe appeared too comfortable, too fragmented, dreamy, and I suddenly paid for this with a sharp chop to the ribs. I squinted up from the floor into the wool-ringed eyes of the bat guy.

"What!" he said. "What are you staring at!"

"He's not staring at anything, man," said Maurice, his voice high, airless. "Everything's cool. I have morphine. You want that?"

"Fuck your morphine," said the bat guy. "Yeah, give it to me."

"It's in my room."

"Where's your room?"

"End of the hall."

"Go get it. Just fucking stay where you are."

"I am," said Maurice.

"Get back on the couch."

The bat guy turned just as Constance put out her hand for me.

"Don't touch him!" he said. "Shit, you're a chick. Let me see you. You fuck him?"

It's complicated, I wanted to say.

"He's my friend," she said.

"You fuck him. I can tell. You blow him and tell him how smart he is. But he's a dumbshit. Take it from me."

"I can vouch for that," said Billy Raskov.

I didn't take it personally, knew it for some kind of play, a ridiculous one.

"You can vouch for what, potato head?"

"Jesus, Billy," Goldfarb whispered.

The bat guy stuck his bat in the cushions of an armchair behind him, far from our reach, though I noticed Gunderson eye it. Now he snatched a handful of Billy's lank hair, cranked his head back.

SAM LIPSYTE

“What do you vouch for?”

“Nothing,” said Raskov.

“Nothing?”

Raskov snarled as the bat guy bent his head. Constance leaned in and stroked Raskov’s knuckles, as though what he needed most now was moral support, the structural integrity of his spinal column a minor matter.

“No,” said Raskov. “Just that I can vouch for what you said about the guy over here. Milo. He is a dumbshit.”

“Oh, is he?”

“Yeah.”

The bat guy slammed Raskov’s head down on a spindly wooden end table. A leg splintered.

Billy slumped, clutched his skull.

The bat guy turned to me, waved his gun.

“Nice friend you got there. Calls you a dumbshit. He’s fucking the chick, isn’t he? Or maybe you all are. Maybe I will. What do you think of that?”

I could see Constance out of the corner of my eye. Her lips twittered, as though moving briskly through a sequence of calculations.

“Been a while since I got my wick dipped.”

I could tell the bat guy was about to do something ugly with his penis. His pistol would authorize the ugliness. His pistol would have his penis’s back. He started to rub himself. We froze, Billy and Maurice and Charles and I, or else we watched the scene as though it were precisely that, a scene, unfurling in the present but with a structure, a destination, already in place. Like a TV show, if TV made you too scared to move. I guess in a sense it does, but this was also something else. I was waiting for some instinct to take over. Fight or flight, I remember thinking. I suppose just sitting there on the sofa was, technically, flight.

The bat guy made an experiment of bobbing his crotch near Constance’s face.

Something scraped on the hardwood behind us.

Purdy and Michael Florida squatted behind the armchair. Had they been here

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all along? Wandered in from the kitchen? Purdy put his finger to his lips. Michael Florida's eyes blazed, flicked around the room. They each crept around a side of the chair. Purdy slipped the Easton from the cushions.

The bat guy cocked his head but did not look back.

"What the fuck took you so long?" he said. "Did you find the morphine? This kid says he got morphine."

"Hey," he said again, "I want to get out of here. You see this chick here? Let's take her with us. She'll have a better time than with these queers."

Then we all heard footfalls from the hallway, the boots of his fellow invaders. I saw fear in the bat guy's eyes and he had every right to feel it, because as he wheeled to see what forms he had mistaken for his friends, Purdy and Michael Florida vaulted over the wrecked coffee table. Purdy smashed the pistol from the bat guy's hand. Michael Florida dove, speared the bat guy in the chest. Together they crashed to the floor. The bat guy rolled on top of Michael Florida, choked him, both men dusted with glass. Michael Florida clawed back and the bat guy's mask peeled off and we saw his face, his brown hair and rosy cheeks. He looked like a thousand young men in this city. But this one was throttling brave, meth-carved Michael Florida.

Purdy picked up the pistol, pointed it at the other two men.

"He's a fucking nut," said one of them. "We didn't even want him with us."

"He's my cousin," said the other. "But I don't care. We just came for the cash."

It was an odd moment, as though the narrative had somehow forked and we were witnessing two possible outcomes, the intruders subdued at one end of the room, our friend strangled at the other. The story had to decide. Or Purdy had to decide, because the rest of us just sat there, and he did, tossed the Easton, shouted, "Constance!"

Constance stood, snatched the airborne bat. The knob slid toward her fist and I remembered her stint on the freshman softball squad as she rocked her hips and swung into the bat guy's head. He screamed, but did not let go of Michael Florida's throat. Charles Goldfarb shouted. Constance bashed the bat guy on the elbow

SAM LIPSYTE

and his grip popped loose. Michael Florida rose, spun out, a practiced wrestler's escape. Many of us, maybe, were secret jocks. Michael Florida pounced on the bat guy, pressed him into the table shards, tugged his arms behind his back, bound his wrists with a leather belt. Michael Florida, more than anyone, would also be practiced in the swift removal of his belt.

Now Purdy waved the pistol at the two economically motivated, mostly non-violent invaders.

"Go," he said. "Get out of here. Run. Nobody's seen your faces. Just run on out of here."

"What about Jamie?" said one intruder to the other.

"Fuck Jamie. He's my cousin, and I say fuck him."

"They'll kill him."

"Don't be stupid," said Purdy. "We won't kill anybody. We want to graduate on time."

"There's nothing here," said Jamie's cousin. "We got nothing."

"You have everything," said Purdy. "The only important thing. Leave with it now."

"Wait!" called Jamie, started to thrash.

Michael Florida cinched his improvised truss. Billy Raskov stood, kicked Jamie in the kidney.

"Shit!"

It was craven, but at least Raskov had bare feet, and anyway I hadn't been cracked with a used end table.

"Billy," said Constance, pulled Raskov off.

"Leave him here," said Purdy to the other two. "You guys deserve better."

The deserved invaders nodded, bolted for the door. I watched them through the window fly down the street, weave off under streetlamps.

Michael Florida sat on the bat guy until the police arrived.

Charles Goldfarb, who had been sitting in stunned lotus on the sofa, rose, paced, cursed, smoked.

A lot happened after that, testimonies and court appearances and a hung jury

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and vague threats, never made good, from townier parts of town. That summer the newspaper reported the bat guy had been shot dead outside Star Market. He was a local boy named Jamie Darling. He'd drawn down on some cops with an unloaded revolver. I think the term "suicide by cop," like "home invasion," came later, but that's what it was.

A lot happened even after all the stuff that happened after, but years later I couldn't remember most of it, at least not the legal and ethical intricacies that entertained us for many stoned hours back then.

What lingered was that frozen feeling, the paralysis, the unnerving awareness that came with it, my real-time curiosity about the nature of my cowardice, as though I were already beyond any possibility of action, just wanted to ascertain, in the moment of my acquiescence, whether I was going to ascribe it all to moral failure or grant a kinder, chemical explanation. Of course, the bat guy had a gun. Nobody ever blames you for freezing in front of a gun.

But it was still the bat that scared me.

The biochemical states of Maurice and Billy and Constance also intrigued, and then, of course, loomed the indelible fact of Purdy and Michael Florida, the aristocrat and the outcast, hurling themselves over the coffee table like some heroic tandem from the mendacious mythopoetry of another age, one of whistles and human waves and the Maxim guns ripping away. You had to either have everything or have nothing to act in this world, I mused then, to make the move that will deliver you, or cut you to pieces. The rest of us just cling to the trench's corroded ladder, shut our eyes the way I remember Bernie used to shut them, squeeze them hard, call it hiding.

Of course, this feeling, this hysterical read on agency's dispensations, was a lot of what Maura used to term, with the fullbore Midwestern irony she'd somehow absorbed near Brattleboro, Vermont, "hooey," or what Claudia might have deemed a crock of absolute shit.

Still, a final tally, a statistical breakdown of this moment, did exist.

Future Apocalypse Guru: Smidgen of composure, ineffective diplomacy, intractable whininess.

SAM LIPSYTE

Artistic Provocateur: Ineffectual response to threat, admirable behavior under physical duress, unseemly and gratuitous assault on downed invader.

Larkish Frankfurtian: Frightened retreat into walls of self.

Marxist Feminist Who Fucked: Initial paralysis, subsequent display of courage.

Semi-Brain-Damaged Crystal Tweaker: Valiant and focused response to threat.

Ruling-Class Brat: Remarkable bravery and tactical leadership in face of threat.

Home Invaders: Bold initiative, bad intel, poor battle management.

Painting's New Savior: Utter cowardice, experienced as bodily paralysis in conjunction with what he would later describe, in an effort to steer the conversation away from actual events, a "bizarre floating sensation."

But no matter my conversational machinations, I knew the truth. Nobody ever mentioned it, of course. It meant not much. Physical bravery probably held the same value in our milieu as skill at parallel parking: a useful quirk. But the box score stayed in my wallet, or the wallet of my heart, so to speak, a smeared and origamied scrap to remind me how little I resembled the man I figured for the secret chief of my several selves.

SEAN KILPATRICK

The All Encompassed Drowned

Her bible-long fuck rolled on pelts unmade, skin of an Uzi, sockets like a queen, smell underground of men balled in fertilizer, husband to the till, snow bit land curling. She got fragged in her garbage. A bowtie slit so askance as to backward ambulate time through calendars once new. Combed into her own puddle, stomped to blood, heaped in our eyes like a sequin prayer. We put our arms up her like a carpet of scream tread stinky we walk, a little witness chewing mud below the dress hugged somewhat born. What hammy doings. We sit on her stomach until feathers cough. Craters of son dangle forth, the bark-textured mound passing wind, salad in the kweef. Another spools her clam with fiddle string. We flute the gun, slapping river next to us jealous with flow. We slit her body to tell time, squat and gulp, her tumbling bald by the fistful. Body trafficked soft, she is nearly loved, nearly welcomed alive. Her gullet cartilage cracks words, beaming symbol for squirrels, the rape sample good, thinking as we come, mother of chickens purr, growing fungal in the smell, fishy with the carcass, day's done, making of her a poor imitation of the lesser statements our parents said. Computed bowels thrust home, I machine gun holes already there, popped fat and changing posture, the leak fucked sunset high. The meat is getting into a rare compost of god. Later the face as it burns squeals from beneath a liquid so sharp to the tongue a filter on how we see becomes.

BJORN VERENSON

A Wind

It should be so simple, he thinks. Curl the fingers just so, bend matter just enough to push them slowly through your flesh and slide them under your rib cage. Fingertips against the inner curve of the ribs, fingernails held tight then left to float in the rise and fall of the lungs, thumbs anchored against the outside of the ribcage. Take firm grasp and then, with a grunt and a snap, crack open your own chest to let a black wind flood out, leaving you cold and empty and pure.

CONTRIBUTORS



Breece Pancake

Breece DJ Pancake was born June 29, 1952 in South Charleston, West Virginia. He studied at Marshall University and University of Virginia. Most of his stories are set in rural West Virginia and revolve around characters and naturalistic settings, often adapted from his own past. At the age of 27, Pancake died from a self-inflicted shotgun wound. Pancake was a devout fan of the music of folk singer Phil Ochs.



Luke Goebel

Luke Goebel is a writer between Oregon and New York City.



Brandon Hobson

Brandon Hobson's *The Levitationist* is available from Ravenna Press. His fiction has appeared in *NOON*, *elima*, and elsewhere.



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Elliott David is a writer and an artist; he lives in New York City and Los Angeles.

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Bradford Tice received his Ph.D. at the University of Tennessee. His poetry and fiction have appeared in such periodicals as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *North American Review*, *The American Scholar*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, as well as in *Best American Short Stories 2008*. He is also the winner of *Prairie Schooner's* 2009 Edward Stanley Award for poetry. He currently teaches at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln.



Michael Kimball

Michael Kimball's third novel, *Dear Everybody*, is just out in the us, uk, and Canada. *The Believer* calls it "a curatorial masterpiece." *Time Out New York* calls the writing "stunning." And the *Los Angeles Times* says the book is "funny and warm and sad and heartbreaking." His first two novels are *The Way the Family Got Away* (2000) and *How Much of Us There Was* (2005), both of which have been translated (or are being translated) into many languages. He is also responsible for the ongoing art project—Michael Kimball Writes Your Life Story (on a postcard)—and the documentary films, *I Will Smash You* (2009) and *60 Writers/60 Places* (2010).



M. T. Fallon

M. T. Fallon lives in Colorado. His fiction recently appears in *Collagist*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Sleeping Fish*, and *Unsaid*.



Craig Davis

Craig Davis is from Topeka, Kansas. He lived mostly in towns and other types of places in north-east Kansas until he moved to Kansas City, where he lives now and would like to remain. His recent stories are in *The Southeast Review*, *Fifty-Two Stories*, and *[FIRST YEAR]*: an mlp anthology. More info at www.craig-davis.com.

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Ken Sparling's book *Book* (Pedlar Press, 2010) is available at amazon.com. His elusive handmade book *Hush Up and Listen Stinky Poo Butt* is now available in paperback at artisticallydeclined.net. Contact Ken at kensparling@live.ca.



Ken Baumann

Ken Baumann is. For more information, visit kenbaumann.com



James O'Brien

James O'Brien has attended Iowa State University's MFA Program in Creative Writing and Environment since Fall 2008. He writes fiction and teaches advanced composition. He is currently at work on a collection of short fiction. His fiction has appeared or will appear in *J Journal* and *The Portland Review*.



Amber Sparks

Amber Sparks's work has appeared or is forthcoming in various publications, including *BANK*, *Wigleaf*, *The Collagist*, *Lumberyard Magazine*, and *Annalemma*. She lives in Washington, DC with two beasts and a husband named Chris, and puts things online sometimes at www.ambernoel-sparks.com.

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Jacob White

Jacob White's fiction has appeared in *the Georgia Review*, *Quick Fiction*, *the Sewanee Review*, and many other journals. He studied creative writing at the University of Houston, where he received a Donald Barthelme Memorial Fellowship in Fiction, and currently teaches at the University of North Florida.



Padgett Powell

Padgett Powell has published seven books of fiction, most recently *The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?* His first novel *Edisto* was reissued in 2009. He has received the Prix de Rome of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a Whiting Writer's Award, and was nominated for a National Book Award. He teaches at the MFA Program for Writers at the University of Florida.



Cooper Renner

Cooper (Esteban) Renner has work upcoming in *Unsaid* and *The Anemone Sidecar*. His chapbook "Dr Polidori's Sketchbook" has just been published by Mud Luscious Press. By the time you hold this magazine in your hands, he will probably be in (or back from? -Ed) Malta.



Scott Garson

Scott Garson is author of *American Gymnopédies*. He's got stories in or coming from *Hobart*, *Unsaid*, *Mississippi Review*, *New Ohio Review* and others.

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Greg Mulcahy is the author of *Out of Work*, *Constellation*, and *Carbine*. He lives in Minnesota.



Daryl Scroggins

Daryl Scroggins lives with his wife, Cindy, in Dallas. He teaches fiction writing and literature at the University of North Texas. *This Is Not the Way We Came In*, a collection of flash fictions and a flash novel, was recently published by Ravenna Press.



Andy Devine

Andy Devine's alphabetical fiction and essays have appeared in a variety of literary magazines, including *New York Tyrant*, *Unsaid*, *elima*, *Everyday Genius*, and *Taint*. In 2002, Devine was awarded the Riddley Walker Prize (for a work that ignores conventional rules of grammar and punctuation). In 2007, he published his first chapbook, *As Day Same That the the Was Year* (Publishing Genius). In 2009, Devine was awarded The Ivory-Billed Woodpecker Award (for fiction in the face of adversity). *WORDS* (2010, Publishing Genius) is his first book. Andy Devine Avenue—in Flagstaff, Arizona—is named after him.



Colin Fleming

Colin Fleming writes for *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, and his fiction appears in *The Hopkins Review*, *Boulevard*, and *TriQuarterly*.

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Czar Gutiérrez

Czar Gutiérrez (Peru, 1966). DJ, journalist, homo sampler and poet *The Fall of Equilibrist*, poems, 1997. In 2005, camped at Ground Zero to write the novel *80M84RD3R0* (read Bombardier) which is considered the most experimental book to come out of his country in the last fifty years. The first indie edition is published in three parts by the Colombian publisher *Norma*.



Elizabeth Koch

Elizabeth Koch's fiction has been published in *Glimmer Train*, *Guernica*, *Quick Fiction*, *Hobart*, *the BridgePort Prize Anthology* and *The New York Tyrant*. Her nonfiction has appeared in the *New York Observer*, *the New York Press*, *the San Francisco Chronicle*, *Elle Magazine*, *Reason Magazine*, *the Columbia Journalism Review*, and on various websites.



Josh Maday

Josh Maday lives just outside of New York City, in Saginaw, Michigan. His work has appeared in *elima*, *Apastrophe Cast*, *Keyhole Magazine*, *Lamination Colony*, *Action Yes*, *Word Riot*, *Barrelhouse*, and *Dzanc's Best of the Web 2010*. And then: joshmaday [at] gmail.com and www.joshmaday.com.



Joseph Salvatore

Joseph Salvatore teaches writing and literature at The New School. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Dossier Journal*, *LIT*, *Omnivore*, *Open City*, *Pleiades Arts North*, *Post Road*, *Red Skies*, *Salt Hill*, *Sleeping Fish*, *Soundings East*, *Willow Springs*, *110 Stories: New York Writes After September 11th* (NYU Press, 2001), *Routledge's Encyclopedia of Queer Culture* (Routledge, 2003), and *The New York Times Book Review*. He lives in Queens.

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Julian Zadorozny

Julian Zadorozny writes and lives in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Currently, he is writing his second novel.



Noy Holland

Noy Holland is the author of two collections of short fiction, *What Begins With Bird* (FC2), and *The Spectacle of the Body* (Knopf). Her stories have appeared in *The Quarterly*, *Conjunctions*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Open City*, *NOON*, and others. She is an Associate Professor in the MFA program for Writers and Poets at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where she co-directs the Juniper Initiative. She is married to the writer Sam Michel; they live in a quiet hill town with their two young children.



Paul Griner

Paul Griner has published three books, the short story collection *Follow Me*, and the novels *Collectors*, and *The German Woman*. His short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bomb*, *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Playboy*, *Zoetrope*, *Tin House*, and *Narrative*. He's the Director of Creative Writing at the University of Louisville.



Atticus Lish

Atticus Lish, born 1971, is a freelance Chinese-English translator living in Brooklyn, NY, with Beth, his wife of 13 years. Tyrant Books will release a collection of Atticus' drawings in 2010.

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Sam Lipsyte

Sam Lipsyte is the author of *The Ask*, *Home Land*, *The Subject Steve* and *Venus Drive*. He lives in New York City and teaches at Columbia University's School of the Arts.



Sean Kilpatrick

Sean Kilpatrick is published in *No Colony*, *Spork*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Fence*, *LIT* and a chapbook with Magic Helicopter Press.



Bjorn Verenson

Bjorn Verenson is both the author of, and the main character in, a series of Swedish stories, novels, and roman noirs. He lives in Växjö with his dog Slajov.



“It’s not that it won’t.”