
**THE
SUSQUEHANNA
REVIEW 2010**



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UPON FINDING AN ABANDONED COPY OF THE LIT MAG IN A COFFEE SHOP, DEAR READER

You skip over the Letter from the Editor and go straight for the meat. The steam from your coffee bleeds through the Styrofoam to-go cup, and you lean back into drinking it, your hair mussed in a way you know looks sexy. It's a meta-poem. You don't fancy yourself much of a poet, but you are intrigued, for it starts, "This is a story. I am writing it you/are reading it. These are the same/because the medium is the same." You do not know what that means. Medium is about the way your boyfriend plays guitar. "(Paper is the medium of communication;/we are merely participants.)" Looping your tote over your shoulder, you stick your forefinger into the journal to hold your place, sip while you trot yourself outside. You're a black coffee person, and your breath roils with it.

Outside it's a mosaic of light and dark dots while parades of students go past, some stiff, some leaning, all dressed like bones cleanly swept. You decide you want to read something true, your stomach still digesting the "HELLO MY NAME IS Kung Pao Chicken" you ate not too long ago. You'd like to lounge on a bench in a yard facing the beach, sipping some cheap wine, but there's just these concrete slabs near the fountain, and it's here you peel through the table of contents. One piece starts, "I pay attention to the things I put on and into my body," and you slouch. You feel very aware of your tailbone. You flip the pages, read, "My heart is a pendulum swinging between desire/and more desire." Another piece goes, "When you're drunk, anything can be fascinating, bewildering, invigorating. This was all of those things, but it wasn't painful. I said, 'I don't feel it,' and I sounded very far away—worlds and worlds away, a voice across infinite measures of space," and the next paragraph goes, "I didn't care about the infinite. I just wanted sleep."

You feel it too. Your eyes are still murky from feigning poetry last night, when you got stuck on the line starting, *Every aureole*. Your dorm room was suffocating you, its poetical pregnancy. Your roommate lay slayed across her

desktop, and you changed and lay in bed still stuck on the line. You read, “Perhaps, I thought, I strip the jeans off with layers and layers of skin until I was naked down to my brown, shriveled core. A numb, mute being under the bed sheets, happy like the buried dead.” Looking up you realize the page is so blinding white, the held sun glaring on rough-shined aluminum. It takes a moment before you dilate back, and for that moment you are only hearing and smelling the traffic go past, class you intend not to attend.

You read a piece about road hypnosis, “when the road turns symbolic/and improbable,” when you “let this insistent pavement mean *onward*.” It reminds you that you haven’t been driving in a long while, that you need to make some excuse like renewing your fast-acting albuterol inhaler prescription at CVS, and quick, before the road turns symbolic and improbable, like your impending long-distance relationship with your boyfriend. The wind rifles through, and you inhale in this involuntary way.

It’s been a long time since you’ve been texted, you think. Shouldn’t someone have said something to you today? You touch your phone, just to see, and there it is, the time, and there it is, the little energy bar in the corner going low. You tap your way through old messages. The best one is, “Wednesday. Six. Gauntlets.” And, “I’m moving backwards on the evolutionary scale.” The melodic way your friend from the Gap lamented, “The grief of my calves is in this silhouette.” And later, “Look, how wonderful is it that people wait in lines, talking as they pass the time so nicely. Without such lines, everyone would buy their products quickly before rushing back to their apartments, where they would double-lock their doors, switch on the TV, and die from boredom due to loneliness.”

Sliding your keycard over the door, you enter your dorm. You clomp up the stairs. For once, your roommate is not there, for once you can open the windows and be naked on your bed if you like, laying there and feeling like you’re painted on the bedroom floor. You pull out paper and pen. You’re back to remembering certain things about your boyfriend, about life. His windshield washed in the champagne of un-set sun. Your mouth full of snow. How in high school you fogged up his car windows, about how you weren’t even parked in the driveway. You were parked in the street outside your house, actually, and two cars drove by. You counted.

But what you do now is look from floor to ceiling like you’re searching for something, writing God-knows-what in your slender, black notepad. Your roommate comes hobbling in after all, the clatter of her wooden crutch

falling onto the floor. She hands you a pack of JuicyFruit, says it's a gift from your boyfriend, and you think, *A pack of gum? What the hell is that? I don't even chew gum.*

You lounge on your bed on your back. You compose to yourself, *He disappeared like a stone dropped in the water*, though this is not exactly right, because he has not, nor do you necessarily want him disappeared. The feeling you're processing is maybe a little confusing. Like the moon and sun both glowing opalescent in the sky at once.

You continue reading. What amazes you is the idea that souls have storage. What amazes you is the nerviness of superhero S&M, how afterwards, "I started to hug her on her way out, but it felt weird so I just saluted."

How you return to certain lines, again and again, "a pendulum swinging between desire/and more desire," "there seems an inherent weakness in the way/ we walk—upright," "how my father/equated *stone* and *bone*." It chimes again and again in your mind, for some reason what resonates is "a sad, winged moment," thinking, as the lawn outside the campus center is being leaf-blown, as your inbox fills with trash, as a car engine under your window revs, making you long for the soothing endlessness of blacktop: *Beautiful. It's me in this room skipping over the Editor's Letter*. You update your Facebook status. You let the journal curl itself closed.

Melissa and Dana
Our Editors-in-Chief



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*Gary Fincke's comments on the winning pieces
for the Creative Writing Prize on backcover flap*



MEDIUM

I.

This is a story. I am writing it you
are reading it. These are the same
because the medium is the same.

I will fold this into a square you
will pocket it and later reshape
its corners in its unfolding we
will read and re-read it together.

(Paper is the medium of communication;
we are merely participants.)

The story begins with participants—two—
and words and sheets—not of cotton
but of silk and the paper that later replaced it.

(The Chinese used to write on silk.
I would like to similarly texture my words.)

II.

He held her lightly between two fingers of each hand
like a crisp new bill before the transfer to wallet—delicate,
precise—as though he feared she would crease.

(The payment was not an exchange, but rather, a transfer.)

She sighed as he lay her down flatly,
careful not to fold a corner.

(Later she said he told her he could save her, smooth her edges in her unfolding, reform her as if from clay.)

You cannot make corners from clay.
She knows this and tries to explain it to him.
They were always a little too smooth,
she remembers, there was never anything in the art teacher's supply closet to satisfy her imagined edges.

*You can make anything with clay, she says—
anything but corners.*

III.

On Friday, upon finding him in violation of paper-thin promises, she tore his note into pieces (two).
I wondered aloud about transference and then about what would happen if I re-formed it—the note—from pulp, thus transposing the lover but not the beloved.

She is fingering the worn pages of my poetry,
pondering the inherent dichotomy of deep meaning and shallow medium/surface—page.
I am reading and re-reading her and reading her again.

On Saturday I drank a bottle of wine and peeled the paper from adhesive from glass, observing how its corners disappeared as it rolled into itself.
I told her I'd like to take her words down on paper, adding line breaks. (This is two kinds of intoxication.)

She is poetry.
I am not sure if this is meaning or medium.

Yesterday I watched her fold the note. I felt the creases, forming lines, longing, her origami effect in my stomach a shaping of desire. She has made from me what she will, what she can use. (This is medium.) She has hung the products as lanterns along the wall of her bedroom.

When they make love tomorrow,
these will illuminate her corners for him.

IV.

I am turning the corner, still in sight of her
bedroom if they look out the window. I think
briefly of the wood from which the medium is
derived, of fibers clinging futilely, together,
of their dissolution reconstitution.

We are participants,
but the medium is merely suggested.

Even now I am putting words to paper
that does not really exist

(until you transfer it
to something that can be folded
something with edges.)

We have been reincarnated, rewritten, and returned to pulp.

Jeanne Troy

BURN

After driving around the fringes of Nashville, unlicensed, until four in the morning, Jade found a bare lot far enough from any road that no one would take notice. That's where we slept, in Jade's Buick LeSabre. It was big enough to comfortably fit Jade and me and the puppies, and she had bought it used a month before. One window didn't close all the way, and the heater didn't work. It was the middle of March, and frigid.

In the morning, a storm dragged overhead, just a cold downpour that lacked the grandeur of thunder. For two hours, we listened to the assault on the car, on the gravel outside, and went nowhere, because Jade was scared of driving in the rain. Afterward we found an extended-stay motel, and I paid \$249 to stay for a week.

The place reeked of urine, and cigarettes, and things unwashed—the people, their clothes, the sheets in our room. We didn't go outside at night, and the curtains stayed shut. In the parking lot, sometimes people stared at us across the cracked cement. They had been living in that motel for months, maybe even years. Their bodies were thin and their faces were hard.

Then Jade's parents changed their minds. They were fickle, righteous, small-minded people, but at least they had changed their minds only a few days after kicking us out. Their house was tiny, scrunched down with closet-sized rooms, holes in the floor, three cats. I'd always been allergic to cats—but it was better than the motel.

A week was what I paid for, though, so with four days left Savanna commandeered the motel room. She wanted to use it for her birthday party.

Savanna, Jade's sister, was turning twenty-three. She didn't work, she didn't go to school. She didn't bathe. She'd once been arrested for going after their dad with a baseball bat.

Jade was younger, the pretty one—long legs and dark hair and the clearest blue eyes. She was also a little damaged, a little intimidated by the world, a little scared of making eye contact. When they stood in the same room, I knew Savanna was the reason why. Maybe it was the stench, the bad air.

The party was Jade and I, Alicia and Casey and their boyfriends, and Savanna. They were all Jade's friends, and there was an undercurrent of dislike, of not wanting Savanna there. But with her birthday money, Savanna bought six Bacardi party packs, and that was enough for everyone to put up with her. There was pot, too, but I preferred drinking. The coolers were fruity and sweet, like soda or fizzy lemonade.

After two drinks, I monopolized Guitar Hero. I played just one song, by Kansas, over and over until they were sick of it.

After three, I was kissing Jade, kissing her and kissing her, in one long suspended breath—until she pulled away, and laughed at me. She was drunk too.

I passed out between my fifth and sixth drink, in the same bed as Jade, with my arm draped over her stomach. I would've relished it if I had been sober; I was so dumbstruck in love with her.

The other bed was occupied by Alicia, who was being thoroughly fucked by her boyfriend. Savanna sat on ours.

I woke up when the mattress shifted from her weight. Then Jade said, in a voice thick with sleep, "Go away."

I opened my eyes. Savanna was very close, leaning over, staring at us. Staring at me.

Savanna hadn't been drinking. She hadn't touched the dope. She had gone through most of a pack of cigarettes that night, one immediately after another, and now she held one in her fingers. With a little gesture of that hand, Savanna asked me, "Think you can take it?" Then she put the cigarette butt against my arm, and pressed it down, and held it there.

When you're drunk, anything can be fascinating, bewildering, invigorating. This was all of those things, but it wasn't painful. I said, "I don't feel it," and I sounded very far away—worlds and worlds away, a voice across infinite measures of space.

I didn't care about the infinite; I just wanted to sleep.

When my eyes were shut, I felt it again. It was just pressure, like small footsteps along my arm. Nearby, a child giggled, light and joyous—and the child was Savanna, and she said, "I'm making the planets."

The burns all blistered, but as I slept they were rubbed against the sheets, so when I woke up they were torn open, with feeble shreds of skin hanging on. My arm throbbed. It was flushed red and hot on the surface, even where the skin was undamaged. There were ten deep, raw burns, in a crooked line, and a wayward eleventh to the side.

The first was the biggest—the sun. Then nine planets, and the earth had the moon in orbit.

...

I wore long sleeves all spring and summer. And then finally I went home.

At the start of autumn, I sat on the balcony outside my brother's kitchen. His wife, Jessie, sat with me in the sun. We drank iced tea and I answered her gentle questions, until she saw how I was holding my arm—close to my side, hand hovering over.

Jessie said in that same gentle way, "You don't have to hide them."

I never screamed at Savanna. I never said anything to her. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia eventually.

Two years later, if you look closely, you can still see the galaxy on my arm.

Mandy Gutmann-Gonzalez

HEAT LIGHTNING

Eternity, boundless—but in this train yard, railcars flake rust.
Everything that gives is falling. A white dwarf
lacks any source of energy, but radiates what it has
'til it's silent in the pitch of sky. Because the universe is too young,
there are no black dwarves, only this constant loss.
They say stellar remnants will be detectable
only by their gravitational influence. I saw a train rending the air
with its pull, a song, the night creased by heat lightning.
I saw the shadow of you behind your window
in one lightning swell. My heart is a pendulum swinging between desire
and more desire—with your hand, you could touch
the workings of this clock or press against my ribs.
These days like giant steeples send what isn't held
falling from my shelves. Friend, that I should want so much
and fail to give like a white dwarf gives, alone,
light-years of sky to the next body, giving
'til the room is dark, even if there's no one on the other side.

APIOLOGY

we started (as eggs) in hexagonal
cells made of mouthed wax, and
when we grew into our compound eyes
I saw you only as a mosaic of light and
dark dots—multiple parts
that make you

as a whole. I am the operative, figure-
eight dancing from dandelion to measuring
distance to direct you into
the slatted rack where I can
keep you for easy retrieval, waiting
to tell of sucrose seeping

from the corners of my mouth,
to tell of the locket I left
in the yard to rust, wings wearing
thin with weight of carrying you like
an anchor attached to my ankle
of knowing you don't fit into a less-than-perfect

shape, face-to-face we can
not communicate,
gesticulate with the pressing of these bodies
under pressure & even with magnified mouth
parts, these words are covered in resin &
hardened

to coat the spaces between water evaporating
out of me, precipitating into you,
to drown the syllabics of this syllogism, this
is me longing
to be the monarch
you work to (artificially) please.

Sarah Groves

YOU ARE AT MY MERCY

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

Relationships are weird in our industry. I mean, look at—and his crazy girlfriend, the bank robber, the one in the black suit, and the whip, you know? There's not a lot of room for a private life, unless you want to end up like my friend Henry who came home one day after patrol to find his girlfriend in two different refrigerators. Secret identities? Not so secret, especially in the Internet age. And any idiot can rig up a voice-recognition machine and hack a police database. I've done it on a slow night, for God's sake.

What I'm trying to say is that when you're working in our fast-paced, highly competitive and admittedly risky profession, you have to accept certain facts. One of these being that as soon as you've got him on the run, some international terrorist with a ray gun is going to kidnap your boyfriend/husband/guinea pig, and then there's gonna be a standoff. Because, ooh, the fate of everyone in the world versus Mister Snuffles, or even Bill? It's a no-brainer. But do you want to be in that situation in the first place? No, better to stay away from civilian life as much as possible, live in your uniform, and develop a taste for cleft chins and bulging biceps. And even then, I wish you luck finding one superhero, just one, who isn't a flaming ball of ego. Who can carry on a conversation about something other than himself. Whose favorite movie isn't *Rambo*.

But maybe I'm rationalizing.

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

At first it was a casual thing. I was trying to do a world domination start-up out of my garage. They make it sound like that's the best way, like there's some secret to the combination of old car fumes and poor insulation, just because the Haberdasher started in his garage and took over an entire borough for almost a year—like that was the magic ingredient or something. No, I was still trying to acquire capital. Which is how Gwen and I met, actually.

It was your usual hostage deal. I faked a bank robbery, and when the usual swarm of new recruits showed up, I grabbed the leader. I figured the higher-ups would probably be interested in ransoming her back, or at least in staging a massive rescue, and then I'd at least have the press's attention. I might even get sponsored like Cobra, that lucky bastard. Cobra Cola, I swear.

So anyway, I had her by the throat, which surprised me a little because she was this big, tough woman and to be quite honest, I'm not a strong guy. Sure, I'm tall, but I weigh like a hundred fifty. She easily matched me for weight—not saying she's fat, it's all muscle. I couldn't believe I'd overpowered her.

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

I had a bad chest cold. It turned out to be walking pneumonia.

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

Point being, I got her to the zeppelin and into the special chair I'd made for holding prisoners, right in front of the webcam, which I thought was a pretty good idea. Then I threw up a message on the big scrolling digital sign: *Shoot and she dies. www.plutoniumforemperor.com*. And then I realized something. I'd never actually caught anyone before. For the first time in my life, I had the opportunity to gloat.

So I turned around to look at her, and—well, I guess that was the first time I actually saw her. You know, really looked and registered what I was seeing. My God, she was gorgeous.

I don't know what came over me then. I never thought I'd be one of those lecherous guys who get all up in the good guy's face and start playing with her hair, but that's what happened. I was so embarrassed about it later, but right then it was like, I don't know what. I was on a roll. I was intimidating. I was tilting her chin up with my fingers and leering at her while I whispered that when I was emperor she was going to be my little pet.

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

At one point he called me a "little sex piglet." I don't know what the hell he was thinking. And he was strutting around giving me an overview of his five-year plan for humanity, but he kept getting distracted by what he called his "dark desires."

It was one of those indignities I'd never had a problem with before. I knew some girls who got this shit when they got captured, but not me.

I mean, I'd been captured before.

Once, kind of. For a few minutes.

But anyway, it was embarrassing. And he clearly didn't know what he was doing. But at the same time, I was a little flattered, I guess.

He had me held down with some kind of micro-mesh steel cables. Nothing I couldn't have broken out of. Hell, the chair didn't weigh that much; I probably could have stood up and walked out. But there were moments, even then, when he had me—I guess the right word would be captured. Or captivated. I can't decide which. I was shrinking back from him and trembling a little. I don't do trembling, but . . .

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

Well, eventually two big men in blue snuck in: those Caliber boys, who claimed to be twins for a while until that big scandal where it turned out they were gay lovers. They caused a big fuss and tore some things up, and then they wrenched her free from the chair—I swear, if I were even slightly more legal I could probably have sued—and then they were gone. About a minute after they left, I realized they had planted some kind of charge on my zeppelin. I barely made it out in the escape plane in time.

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

They had me listed for cleanup duty as soon as the fires were put out. Because it was somehow my fault that the Fabulous Fraternal blew up a blimp, my team and I had to scrape molten rubber off of the tops of buildings for the next week. My team may be young, but they're definitely more valuable in the field than on janitorial duty. As soon as we had some free shifts again, I started them on Counter-Heist Training.

All that week, while I ran them through drills on how to handle a hostage grab (drops, rolls, hand breaks, gun grabs), all I could think about were those minutes in the blimp. It had a hold on me that I didn't really understand. I went home at night and had these elaborate fantasies about being captured, being strapped down, maybe to a board, maybe to a grid over a pit full of alligators. It was different all the time and it kept getting more and more convoluted. And it started happening at work, too. I'd have one of the young guys behind me being a villain dummy, and he'd wrap an arm around my neck and suddenly I'd be back in the moment. I mean, it never interfered with my work. But I couldn't stop thinking about it.

And then I got an apology card.

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

It didn't take long to learn who she was. I picked up the newspaper the next morning and saw *Firebird's Team Fails to Prevent Heist* and *Caliber Brothers Save Firebird, Lose \$3 Million In Gold Bars*. That name made a lot of sense; it'd explain the costume, the oranges and yellows, the wings, those crazy yellow eyes.

I felt like such a heel. I'd always thought I'd be the cool evildoer. You know, the one who remains aloof and maybe trades some witty barbs with his prisoners, the one who is polite and deferential to lady captives and always maintains a sense of decorum. And instead I turn out to be this slaving creep. I thought about sending her an e-mail to her work account, because that'd be untraceable if I did it right, but that seemed kind of impersonal considering that I'd breathed all over her. So I made up a nice card, did my best not to get any DNA evidence on it, and then took it to a mailbox way

outside of my neighborhood, brushing it up against different people's hands on the way. By the time I got there it was pretty thoroughly contaminated. I hoped that it wouldn't get filtered out of her mailbox by the sorting staff.

I went home and got to work on a new invention, but the whole time all I could think was that I just wanted to be a Bad Guy, not, you know, a bad *guy*.

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

It was on pretty fancy stationery, which was how I knew something was up. I didn't report it, but I did open it with rubber gloves and a mask. I read it like, three times. And then I took it down to the toxicology lab and analyzed all of it. There was nothing. No traces of anthrax, no biochemical weapons, no compounds from my "home planet" that would "sap my powers."

I went back upstairs to my office and read it again. It didn't say much, just "I want to apologize for my behavior on the zeppelin. I don't know what came over me. I promise it won't happen again." And it was signed Plutonium.

Plutonium? I thought. Seriously? The frightening guy with the airship gave himself a lame chemical name? Were all the better names really taken? What a nerd.

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

For your information, plutonium is one of the most deadly substances known to man. It can expand up to 70% when exposed to water, flake off into a powder that may spontaneously ignite, and it's a powerful radioactive poison that accumulates in bone marrow—oh, shit. I am a nerd.

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

I managed to get some DNA off of the envelope, but none of it matched the sample they'd taken off of me during debriefing. And it wasn't like the guy had provided a return address.

I did some footwork on the other samples I'd gotten off of the envelope, but none of them seemed like likely contacts. So I put word out through a contact of mine that I was looking to meet with Plutonium to discuss some business concerns.

I was seeing someone at the time, a guy named Grassroots, a head of another team. He was okay as heroes go, but when I brought up the idea that maybe he could tie me up and strut around a little he looked at me like I was nuts. He started telling me all about how I was enacting the repression of women everywhere, how I was reinforcing negative sexist stereotypes about men *and* women, and anyway, couldn't I get out of any homemade bonds he might come up with? When I said that wasn't the point, he suggested we meditate and then have some tantric sex. I suggested he go home and meditate on his newfound lack of girlfriend.

That was Saturday, and it was Tuesday when my contact came back to me with news.

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

I was . . . breathtakingly excited. I can't even explain. It was like finding out that I'd been democratically elected as ruler of the world. And that was when I thought that she just wanted a revenge rematch, or was trying to trap me and bring me to justice. Of course I went to the contact point. Of course I went alone.

I remember we were both in civilian clothes, and we met at a coffee shop that was far away from either my base or hers. I got there first. I waited for at least ten minutes before she walked in the door.

She looked around the whole room before she spotted me, even though I'd done my best to sit in plain sight. She walked up warily and sat down in the chair across from me.

"Plutonium?" she said. "You look . . . different."

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

I didn't recognize him. Without the big black boots, the sort of Cold War Russian look, he was hard to place. He was wearing khakis, for God's sake, and these polished-up loafers.

I was suddenly really embarrassed.

"Listen," I said. "I'm not here to start a fight. I just wanted to ask you a question."

He looked really nervous, but he was also leaning way forward and nodding. He was looking at me funny too, like he was hungry.

I dipped my head forward and looked around to see if anyone was watching.

"Look," I said. "I want you to capture me."

He looked confused.

"Is this part of some kind of plan?" he asked. "I don't understand. Miss."

"No," I said. "No plan. That time you chained me up and started telling me your plans—I want to do that again."

He frowned.

"This has to be a setup," he said.

"It's not," I said. "Look, I might be wrong but you seemed to be enjoying it. We're both adults here. I want to. Do you?"

He looked around wildly.

"This *has* to be a setup," he said again.

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

I didn't believe her. I was shaking from head to toe, expecting a squad of armed goons to burst in the second I took the mark. My instinct was to run

for the door and not look back until she was far behind me. But then again, there she was, right in front of me, asking—no, imploring—that I drag her back to my secret fortress and imprison her. She was looking at me with those yellow eyes, and her hands kept flexing and clenching on the table in front of me. And then I realized that if she was here to take me down, she could probably have done it by herself.

What the hell, I thought. You only live once.

I hailed us a cab and took her back to my place. I didn't really have the money for the cab—I'd spent most of my first bank heist on that zeppelin—but I wanted to impress her, or at least not make her take the cross-town bus.

When we got to my place, I offered her something to drink. She said no, and just stood in my kitchen with her arms crossed, looking around at my furniture, at the photos on the walls, at my dog. I remember at one point she asked who the different people in the family photos were, and I spent some time pointing out my mom, my cousins, my older sisters.

"Do you see them a lot?" she asked.

Sure," I said. "Three or four times a year. They live out of state but I fly out."

Do they know?" she asked.

My mom cut out the article from my first bank heist and framed it," I said. "I told her it was probably a little risky and she just waved me off."

She smiled then.

"Okay," she said. "Are you gonna tie me up now?"

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

That second time was different from the first. There was a lot more "is this okay?" and he kept asking if I was comfortable, if I needed anything loosened, if I wanted a glass of water, until I finally told him to knock it off and get on with it. After that things started to pick up speed.

"Let me go!" I remember yelling. "You'll never get away with this!"

He laughed then. He had a really good sinister laugh, I remember thinking—it sent chills down my spine. He crossed the room to stand in front of me and stroked my face roughly with one hand.

"Just you wait and see," he said. "I think you'll find I can get away with—" he paused and ran a hand down my body, "whatever I want."

He paused and pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Was that too much?" he asked.

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

Up until that point, I don't think I'd ever had a night like that one. It took us three hours to work our way through—you know, the capture—and then

she asked if she could use my shower. She came back down wrapped in the bathrobe I never used and I offered her some tea, and then we sat on my couch for a while, throwing an old tennis ball for Gilgamesh, my dog. I had to stop myself from just grinning like an idiot, but I was also freaking out a little. What did she want now? Did she want to stay over? Should I offer? Would she ask?

After a while she put her uniform back on, and her street clothes over it, and said she'd see herself home. I started to hug her on her way out, but it felt weird so I just saluted.

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

Don't ask me what I was thinking. For God's sake, I don't even know.

I asked my friend Victoria if it was possible to like someone for their ability to be two different people. She works in the same industry, but I can't tell you who she is. She's a pretty high-up figure, and she may in fact be a he, and she's definitely classified. She shook her head.

"Nah," she said. "Split personality types are bad news. Remember that business last year with Symmetry?"

"But what if it's just that he's shy and considerate most of the time, and then he's—" I did the little tiger-claw thing. "You know. When it counts."

"Oh," she said. "You're dating a guy—I mean, someone shy? No one we know. I thought you didn't go for—uh, civilians."

"Shut up," I said. "He's—nice."

"Nice," she said. "Oh, please. I have had it up to here with nice."

I got roses. Not at work, which would have probably been suspicious, but from a kid in an alley who ran up, shoved them into my hands, looked at me with big buggy insect eyes, and then ran away. Probably a servant of Septic. The flowers were a little wilted, and the card had some pretty awful city crud on it. But it said *Thank you for a lovely evening. May I see you again?*

You know something? I have never gone out with a hero who sent flowers the next day. It was an incredibly sweet gesture. Even if they were delivered by a mutant experiment created by a lord of the Undercity.

I caught the kid before he could disappear down the grate and held him by the collar while he struggled.

"I have a message for you," I said. "Your boss is allied with Plutonium, right?"

"I can't say anythiiiiing," the kid said in a droning, buzzy voice.

"Whatever," I said. "Get this message to Mister Plutonium: Wednesday. Six. Gauntlets."

I dropped him, and as soon as he hit the ground he threw the cover off of a manhole and disappeared into the sewers.

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

I had the gauntlets on when she showed up. She was exactly on time, which was good because I'd already been pacing for five minutes.

She wasn't dressed like I expected her to be. She had on a little dress that showed off the giant muscles in her legs, and her hair was down. If she had her costume on under there, I couldn't imagine where—or what—it was.

I stammered something about how great she looked and asked if she wanted to get started.

"Not right now," she said. "I was wondering if you'd eaten. Want to get dinner?"

We went to a place a few blocks away that I knew always had well-dressed people coming in and out of it. I'd changed into something less intimidating. In heels, she was as tall as me, and powerful-looking. I couldn't get over it.

It turned out that we had nothing in common. That said, we talked all night.

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

He reads a lot. I catch the movie adaptations. And I don't think he's seen the inside of a gym in the last three years. We both like martial arts movies.

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

There was something utterly remarkable about the way we talked. I'd never been able to talk to women, even when there was something to say. But with Gwen I felt at once constantly on-edge and incredibly at ease. We could banter like the best of enemies, like Xandurius and Planar Man, like James Mackie and The Yenta. For someone who's such an apparent musclehead, she's witty.

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

We kept the table long enough that the waiters were giving us dirty looks. When we left, we went back to his place.

This time, he didn't dick around. As soon as we got in the door he had an arm around my throat. For a second I thought he was for real, but then I pulled him off of me with one hand and held him up, and he started laughing.

"Okay, wise guy," I said. "Next time, give me a warning."

He nodded and dragged me down to the basement. He'd set up this new thing, a set of cuffs and supports that hung from the ceiling, and he cuffed me into it.

He pulled on the gauntlets and made them snap. I went a little weak.

"Now," he said. "Now I have you right where I want you."

He slapped me around a little, and then he pulled me down by the hair and kissed me.

We hadn't kissed yet, and it was clumsy, terribly done. But it felt electric. Of course, the cattle prod was more so.

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

Afterwards she had a bit of a blister so I wrapped it up in gauze for her and bundled her up in a blanket. She fell asleep on my couch, and after a while, I did, too.

I guess that was probably . . . eight months ago.

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

It couldn't be that long. I don't do long-term things.

Of course I got some crap at work when it first came out, and H.R. wanted to fire me. But then I reminded them of the giant mess that—had caused a few months back when his sketchy girlfriend managed to withdraw several million from a company account. That and the words “wrongful termination suit” quieted everything down. I'm not going to let this affect my work. I've got a long career ahead of me. My team just did a major crackdown on Septic, and if sentiment got in the way, then I didn't see it. We got most of his mutant homeless kids into reform programs and he's behind bars. I got offered my choice of promotions and took the one that would keep me in the field. I have no intention of becoming a desk jockey.

I guess Christmas was a few months ago because I met Andrew's family. His mom asked how we would be raising her grandchildren. I said in an alternate universe, because I was never going to have kids. His sisters took a shine to me, though. We went out for drinks and girl talk.

ANDREW, A.K.A. PLUTONIUM

It isn't exactly what I imagined. I always assumed I'd end up with a mysterious woman who had long black hair that she combed over one eye. But I couldn't be happier. Last weekend I built a new pit trap in my fortress and when I told her about it, she asked if it could have snakes in it. And she likes my dog, genuinely likes him. We go to the park sometimes.

It's hard knowing that someday we might come up against one another in our lines of work. But then again, my father's a Democrat and my mother's a Republican. Allowances have to be made.

And we love each other. And that's what matters.

GWEN, A.K.A. FIREBIRD

Wait. You did not just use that word.

Silvana Alfonso

THEN

Then

28

Silvana Alfonso

Then I was a painting
Not a person. Composed
of skin and porcelain

I skinned my teeth as I
exhaled through lips plumped from
rust colored notes, rubbing

me down to the bottom
where spoons caked with dirt and
traces of smoke caught in

wind, my fingers
shed blue from the air then
from the corrosion of

mornings spent
soldered to a window
sill slid down to concrete

then the rain
tying knots into the
sky, the sky

pouring
rust down
my forehead.

My skin
growing
leaves into

my hair,
spinning silk
then dust.

Lindsay D'Andrea

RETURNING TO THE BIRCH FOREST

When I want to, I can usually find the birch trees shedding
their skin in pages behind Tamarac Lake. From my mouth
I create a word for hello and watch them glow, bleach-clean.

They stiffen, some leaning, all dressed like bones cleanly
swept from a murder. It's easy to name them my people, shed
all plans for mercy, reach upward, bury the whims of my mouth

like roots at my feet. I must ignore the moon as it mouths
a threat for the other things I might become. (Once clean
with apology, how easily we forget the properties of shedding,

that the shed are never clean.) Before long I reclaim
my mouth and whet each old prayer like an ax.

Lauren Bailey

EVERYDAY THINGS

I pay attention to the things I put on and into my body—perfume, lotion, and two chicken fingers, in that order. I can't eat anything fried if I'm going to see you later. Not because of cholesterol or the effects it will have on my stomach, but because then I'll *smell* like it. Then you'll try to kiss my cheek and smell chicken fingers, and chicken fingers aren't sexy. So maybe I shouldn't eat chicken fingers today. Maybe I should eat a banana. And some dark chocolate. I read in a magazine once that dark chocolate eliminates bad odors, up to and including garlic, onions, and coffee.

Now I'm thinking about the sheets on my bed. They're blue, and if we're being technical, I don't have a bed; it's a futon—just a cushion—that my dad and uncle moved up to my room one day when my mom was feeling innovative. You fucked me on that cushion, and I haven't changed my sheets since. Not because I feel particularly attached to your semen, just because I'm pretty sure the only sheets that fit the futon are those blue ones. And because replacing bedclothes feels like an enormous undertaking. My high school French teacher asked this question in class once—"How often do you change your sheets?"—and one of my classmates said, "Un fois chaque mois." Once a month. And our teacher crinkled her nose and told whomever it was that that was disgusting. Once a month. Right. It's been at least six.

Apparently I'm not supposed to write essays this way, out of order, different tenses, in the middle of things, directly to you. I'm breaking so many rules here—well—I'm not thinking in timelines anymore, can't decide which scenes deserve past tense and which deserve present, am not qualified to make decisions about order. I should be grounded, I should have focus, I should not be using the second person—all these urges—tones of authority, tones of knowing, tones of—well, they weren't there. Only you were, driving me home, dead silent, your heavy music filling the car. I never knew how to listen to it properly; I felt like I was being pulled apart—but those nights, when you played songs that made me squirm, were the nights that made me want to write a memoir that began

I'M BEGINNING THIS IN THE MIDDLE, BUT I CAN SEE THE END

but I never started that memoir, so now I can be inappropriate. Now I can be indulgent. Now I can say that sheets are sheets, and semen is semen, and

not being over you is not being over you.

• • •

I spent all night trying to get you to touch me, and finally you are, one hand in my hair and the other wrapped around my torso. Why is it that every time you try to kiss me slowly I can't handle it? Why are the times you're trying to connect with me on a personal level the times when I most want to rip your clothes off? You're hesitant, and I'm trying to keep my hands in check, but they're frantic, taking handfuls of your t-shirt, wrinkling it. *I'm sorry*, I want to tell you. *I'm sorry that kissing you makes me think about being naked*. I try to go slow. I force myself to calm down, count my breaths, reach for your hair instead of into your shorts. Twenty seconds go by. I'm breathing so heavily that I can't kiss you anymore. You rest your forehead against mine and drag your fingers down to the clasp of my pants. You undo it. *Thank God*. We both look down at your hand, and my toes are twitching in anticipation, and I'm wondering what it will be like to watch you touch me, and you squeeze my hipbone, and then—

"I don't know about you," you whisper, "but I feel a little funny."

"Oh, yeah, sure," I say, even though my hips are rising and falling all by themselves. I didn't tell them to do that. They're just pulsing, for some reason, trying to get closer to your hand. "Sure, yeah. I feel funny too."

You sit up, and I quickly redo my clasp as if it had been my idea to stop. We're quiet, but on the way back to my house, you tell me that you don't want to fall into a routine, that you don't want us to be grabbing at each other all the time. And I tell you, oh, of course, no, me neither, I'm so glad you said that, because me *neither*. But I'm thinking, what kind of girl am I? Am I so unattractive that having sex with me on a regular basis is unappealing? Or do I just like it too much? What are normal girls like? What are normal *relationships* like? Did your past girlfriends sit quietly with you on your couch? Could they focus? Could they sit still for five minutes without becoming agitated about the fact that you hadn't touched them during that entire time slot? Is that what you want? Is that how I'm supposed to be?

"I'm just a passionate person," I tell you, trying to apologize, trying to make excuses, but even as I try to rationalize my behavior, I'm wishing we were in a bed somewhere. I'm wishing we could go back to an hour ago, when your hand was still hovering over the clasp of my pants and I still thought you wanted me as badly as I want you.

• • •

Venus razors should be marketed as shower vibrators—I'm in the shower, and I should have washed my hair fifteen minutes ago, but I'm toying with my Venus razor, contemplating its bell-shaped curve. *Clearly* it's crafted to hit the G-spot. Why is it that men can speak candidly about jerking off, and

it's funny and gross, but women are only featured masturbating in porn? I told my friends once that I spent an afternoon watching Six Feet Under and masturbating at medium volume. They commented on my phrasing—"Medium volume? Interesting"—but not the masturbation itself. You told me once, when you were too tired to continue and too drunk to feel embarrassed, that, if I wanted, I could "keep going by myself." Right next to you in bed. Like I needed your permission to touch myself. Would you like to watch? I wonder, because I'm almost positive it's unattractive. I'm almost positive that if you saw me in the shower right now, masturbating with a Venus razor, you'd be horrified. Especially because I'm thinking of you. Especially because I'm leaning against the wall of my shower—which hasn't been cleaned in weeks, by the way—and picturing you here with me. I'm not sure if that means you're weird, or I'm weird, or both. I'm not sure if society is as okay with women masturbating as the *Your Body, Your Self* book I read when I was younger implied. I'm not sure you'd be comfortable with the fact that I'm getting off to you, not for you.

...

You're bending me over your kitchen table, and our clothes are still on, and I'm crying—how pathetic—and how indulgent to include in a narrative—but this isn't a narrative, not ordered, not bookended. I'm not supposed to victimize myself, but forgive me—the crying is crucial. I'm crying, and you're thinking real hard, I can tell—your mind's going, *Drunk I'm so drunk my house mates are right upstairs will they walk in on us I'm just drunk I just want to fuck my ex-girlfriend backwards on the table just drunk*, and you're using one hand to fumble with your belt buckle and the other to angle me properly—just a little further—and because your mind is only going in three directions (*Drunk, house mates, fuck my ex-girlfriend*) you have no idea that the whimpers I'm making are out of anguish, not ecstasy. And I don't want to tell you I'm crying, because I can't decide if I'd rather talk to you about how I feel, or get fucked on your kitchen table. It's a tough decision—and I'm just going to let it happen, because you have no idea I'm upset—but then you stop cold, sit down, pull me into your lap. We have a conversation. But all the time now, I'm back in this moment—all the time I'm wondering, what if you hadn't realized? I would've stopped crying, eventually. I would have been calmed—cheered—satisfied—by my cheek pressed against the tabletop, by my sweatpants bunched at our feet, by the sounds of the table's legs scratching against the tile floor.

...

Sometimes it feels like I'm betraying myself, like I belong to something other than my own body. Like instead of owning myself, I'm letting someone else's

fingers own me, someone else's mouth, someone else's body. And you're smiling up at me, proud, because you've accomplished something, but I haven't. I've given up, haven't I? I've let you win.

...

After we broke up, you came to my room to fuck me. You didn't say you were there to fuck me, but I knew. You followed me upstairs and pulled me to your chest, but it wasn't to greet me. It wasn't to say hello. Moments later you were tugging at my hair to tilt back my head, and then your hands slid under my waistband, gripping my hips and flattening over my stomach. We climbed into my bed and you buried your face in my neck, muttering things in my ear, incoherent things, until I realized you were asking me the same question over and over again. *What do you want me to do*, you were whispering. *What do you want*. Your tongue in my ear, your teeth at my throat. *What do you want*.

I knew what you wanted me to say. It was on the tip of my tongue: *I want you to fuck me*. But it's just a word, and I was angry and sad and turned on and annoyed all at once—*What is so exciting about a word? Why do you need to hear it out loud when I'm clearly asking you with my body, when my stomach's heaving up and down? I can't breathe anyway, can't make words, not even just that one. I think you want that word more than you want me*.

"I want . . ." I was frustrated, my teeth clenched, my nerves fizzing. I never finished my sentence. You understood. But if you had hovered—if you had pretended not to know what I meant until I said it—then I would have said it. How sad. Do I even have principles? We stopped to rest. You fell back against my pillows, and I leaned against your shoulder. *What now*, you said, running your fingers up and down my stomach. *What do you want now?*

"I don't know." I wanted to play with your hair.

Do you want me to go down on you?

"No." Pull at the ends of it, tangle it around my wrists.

Do you want to fuck some more?

"Yes."

Yeah? You leaned toward me, pushed me backwards, towered over me. *That's what you want?*

It wasn't, but it was something.

...

There's also the time I wasn't going to talk about—the unnecessary scene—the problem with nonfiction is, no one wants to hear about anything happy. So, let's say that the first time we were alone in my house you *didn't* undress me slowly, that you *didn't* look at me the whole time, that you *didn't* hold

my hair in your hands, that we *didn't* giggle about it, that we *didn't* leave a light on, that you *didn't* interrupt me to say, "It's like I forgot how good you felt, or something . . ."—minus those things, extract them, write an essay without them—there's an essay, no bullshit, no fluff, no sentiment. Nothing that made—or worse, makes—me happy. Nothing I look back on and smile about. Nothing that will stay with me even when I have moved on properly, even when I have pulled myself together, even when I've forgotten you. No good feelings, only negative ones; only carefully constructed scenes that ended with a moody last line or months and months without contact.

Likewise—in your hot tub—I could say things like, "I felt like I was floating," or, "Your hair was sticking to me and I thought it was my own" or any amount of dumb normal-life shit that everyone feels and therefore has no interest in reading about—but how boring, how everyday. I think they'd rather hear about what came after, about how we fogged up your car windows, about how you weren't even parked in my driveway. You were parked in the street outside my house, actually, and two cars drove by. I counted.

• • •

Here we are again. Were again? There we were again. We're not supposed to see each other anymore; we decided this in the daytime. Or you did, anyway, totally sober, totally rational, totally serious. Space. Yes. That's logical. But I left my underwear in your room, and you brought them back in a plastic bag, and we tried to pretend you were returning something normal. You weren't, though, and I don't know what *you* were thinking about when you handed me that bag, but I was thinking about the night you peeled them off and threw them on your floor, not considering that maybe I'd need to put them back on later, because that's not what mattered. And then I pictured you washing them—what was that like, at the Laundromat, knowing my blue lace panties were spinning around with your t-shirts and jeans? Was that weird for you? It would have been weird for me, to know something so closed-lipped, so unspeakable, was whirling around with my everyday things. Maybe you didn't think about it, maybe I'm just full of myself; that's what I'm thinking as I walk toward your house, looking at street signs, so caught up in fantasies about my own underwear that I forget to pay attention to where I'm going. I hear you slam out your front door, coming to get me. I'm so high maintenance, right? I can't even find my way down the sidewalk, god damn it, but I run up to you, grab you by your flannel shirt even though it's too warm for flannel, and you kiss me, because we have nothing to say to each other.

ELUSION

1. She stands barefoot at the white curled gate of the garden at the edge of the Indian Ocean, a fetus blossoming beneath her flesh. She has come a great distance to here; the balls and heels of her feet are caked with soil. Just inside the gate, the heads of a hibiscus hang heavy over the rim of the basket in which they are encased. She floats through the gate and along the brick path, listening for the light click of the latch behind her.
2. A man climbs onto the windowsill of the twenty-seventh floor of the apartment building where he was born, in the city where he will be razed. Because he was born here, and because the super was anxiously awaiting supper when he rang the downstairs bell, he gave him the key without asking too many questions. He lives in Seattle now, in another time zone, where his wife is just waking, brushing her teeth. He leans into the air, so thick with cloying heat it pushes back. He does not count. The air's resistance recedes, and he falls, spreading his wings for take-off.
3. On the shelf above the microwave, a clock blinks 12:19. When she returned home, she didn't plug in the refrigerator for three days. In that time, the apples in their drawer began to soften, and the quiet became an electric buzz which later divided into pockets she could crawl into whenever the sunlight forced its way through the kitchen windowpanes.
4. In the garden, beneath a tree that overshadows the brick path, a statue of an angel carved from white marble stands poised. She bends low to read the plaque half-covered with veins of ivy at its base. This time last week, she was packing her suitcase and boarding an airplane to Athens, Georgia. It was one of those unromantic red canvas bags on wheels; she doesn't miss it much, although it did contain her collection of sensible shoes.
5. In the air above the fire, papery flakes of ash float and tumble like seagulls. If you were to toss the dried crusts of our sandwiches onto the sand, the birds would spin toward the ground like kamikazes, only to pull out at the last second, bread clutched in their cuticle beaks.

6. Turning from the statue, she catches the skin of her wrist on the thorn of a rose. She puts her arm in her mouth and sucks at the pearl of blood. The fetus beneath her ribs kicks. He knows she is hungry, exhausted from the weight of growing him. She leans into his pulling, pressing her curled fist into the swollen flesh. Behind her, the sun is rising, and it is just beginning to rain, or the rain is just ending.
7. The woman making scrambled eggs in Seattle hears the hiss of steam as the first drops of coffee hit the bottom of the curved pot. Upstairs, her daughter is waking to the sound of an alarm clock ringing. At 7:17, she drops the spatula onto the kitchen tile, and has to bend to retrieve it, being careful not to strike her forehead against the handle of the skillet sticking out from the stove.
8. Yesterday, she landed in her second airport of the week. The TCBY counters have all begun to flow together in a string of frozen pearls. She opted for apple slices instead and walked outside to watch the planes take off. She was having trouble maintaining a level head; all of the flying between the boundaries of coasts had hastened her unraveling. She peeled the layer of a fingernail off and dropped it onto the tile floor.
9. What will she do with the baby when he is no longer a fetus? She avoids thinking about the fact of the pregnancy in order to keep pretending she is caring for the garden. If she thinks about the pregnancy, she may lie down in the swirling tide of the Indian Ocean and wait for the water to fill her lungs.

Staci Eckenroth

A DIME A DOZEN

one.
she is having trouble speaking,
fluttering scratches her throat, and
makes her nauseous for answers.
she coughs up wings, antennae, legs;
pieces of swallowtails, monarchs, buckeyes.
they are dying to get out.

two.
he's careful cutting corners, not wanting
to chip or ruin his marble face with scratches.
he took too much time to chisel
the cheekbones at perfect angles,
but as he moves he shaves off one layer
at a time, leaving pebbles behind him.

three.
years on the balance beam gave her
the ability to hold this pose
for so long. her biceps ache as she
crawls through days, watching
people on the ceiling. muscles in her
back are starting to numb. if he doesn't
enjoy this show, she'll be
falling into handstands next.

four.
he walks with a blizzard
trapped inside his jacket when her
voice flows towards him, and
the ice forms across his collar bone
thick as football pads.
his blades always get colder
when she's around.

five.
she's tried staples, tape,
glue, but now all her shirts are ruined;
so she chose thirteen stitches to
cross the hole above her left breast,
and seven more stitch to her
sleeve stained with honesty, and
a red that won't bleach out.
no one called her smart;
this is sure to kill her.

six.
he is a medical miracle,
standing straight when everything
in him says he can't. his ribs
float around his torso with nothing to
hook to or guard. she bets he can
win limbo championships.

seven.
she'll cut through her left bicep
and a little above her right thigh.
confining herself to a wheelchair
and dependency for more.
she'll have to learn to write with
her left hand because she didn't
think this through. anything,
anything at all.

eight.
winter seeps through three layers
of wool socks, and even inches
from fire, icicles cling to
the space between his toes.
His teeth chatter even when
there is no snow, even when
it's summer.

nine.
her jaw is clenched, tied
tightly on purpose, releasing
nothing but air. tastes of

copper pennies linger
from what has spilled. she smells
the rust, and shows her blood-stained
teeth he mistakes for lipstick. a few more
days of this, she'll bite it off entirely.

ten.
his hip can pop in and out
of its socket from the necessity to guard
his mouth from unfortunate words.
the dead weight of his leg
makes his arms quiver; he thought
he was strong enough to hold
a conversation while nibbling on a toe.

eleven.
she likes the view
from the top corner, climbing the
fifteen rungs to the ceiling where
the only thing that can get her
are the spiders; even with his persuading,
she won't come down.
he drove her there in the first place.

twelve.
he is on a waiting list to cut
through his chest plate, and his mother
cries because the operation is risky.
but his is off beat, playing a rhythm
that doesn't keep time.
once he's sewn back up, he'll ask the doctor
to carve her name there.

Rob Rotell

A COUPLE OF PROBLEMS

He woke up to Nikki's crying. She sounded as if she was hiccupping. Her sobs were soft. They had a quick tempo. Simon slowly opened his eyes and glanced at Nikki, sitting on her side of the bed, her back to him. For a moment, Simon considered going back to sleep, or at least ignoring her for a couple hours, as he had done before. But this time, he reached over and touched her left arm.

The moonlight reflected off the teardrop trails smeared down her cheek. She sniffed. "I didn't want to wake you up."

Simon didn't respond. As Nikki raised her hand to wipe away the tears, he could see the dark red smear of blood on her palm.

"You've been scratching."

Nikki turned away. "I should've gone to the kitchen."

Simon pushed himself up and squeezed her shoulder. "Let me get some Vicodin."

"No, it's just itchy."

"The doctor told you not to scratch."

Nikki shook her shoulder free of Simon's grasp. He sighed and slowly pulled her back against his chest. She didn't protest. In front of her lay her right leg, ending in a stump two inches below the knee. Her gauze cap was off, somewhere in the dark or under the bed, and the stump was oozing blood onto the carpet in small translucent droplets. Simon stared at the stump for a moment before reaching out and gently pulling her leg towards him.

The metal stitches gleamed a bright blue in the moonlight from the window. Beneath the stitches, she had scratched off half of the thick scab along the closure. With the new angle Simon made by pulling the leg toward him, a tendril of blood trailed down her thigh.

"Aw, Nikki."

"Just get the lotion."

Simon sat there staring at the stump, and Nikki leaned against his chest, both of them still for a minute before Simon sighed and got up.

He walked into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. He read the labels, finding the anti-itch tube right next to the toothpaste. Both were half-full and curled up. Simon stared at the anti-itch, making sure he got the right tube this time.

He walked back into the bedroom, crawled onto the bed, tossing the tube into Nikki's lap. He sighed, his head dropping onto his pillow. He said, "It's going to be a shit day today." Before he realized what he said, Nikki started crying again. She tried to hide it, but she couldn't. Simon was quiet, biting down on his lips. He stared at the clock, sighed once more, and got out of bed to go take a shower.

...

After showering and getting dressed, Simon walked into the garage, the keys spinning around his index finger. He spared a glance at the two bikes in the corner, and the lawnmower, as he did every day.

Three months ago, Simon and Nikki had an argument over money. Their budget was tight, and the company that Simon worked for was on the edge of bankruptcy. Simon, exasperated, said, "I'm going out for a lap." Cross-armed, Nikki watched Simon hop onto his bike and pedal away. She blew some hair out of her face. She was too frustrated to work. The day was warm and the sky was bright and clear, a refreshing tinge after a rainy morning. She saw how long the grass was getting and she thought, *Well, I could do that.*

The lawnmower stopped when she reached the backyard. Nikki shook the mower up and down, trying to release the wet clumped grass clippings. She pulled the cord, but the engine didn't ignite. She flipped the mower over to its side and squatted to inspect it. The clippings, meshed together, clung to the stem of the blade going into the machine. She reached inside to clear it away and the blade resumed spinning. She shrieked, wrenching her hand out in time, but the lawnmower kicked back down and landed on top of her foot. She tried to free it, but with the direction of blade's rotation, and the *force*, the blade was pulling her in.

She managed to get her foot out. She managed to get up, hop over to the porch, open the screen door, and call for an ambulance. The emergency operator could barely decipher her through the sobs.

Simon came home from his laps, the lawnmower in the backyard overturned, a thick trail of blood leading into the house.

...

He staggered into the small office building on the fringe of the city. The first person to approach him was Thompson, a dumpy, bespectacled man with wide and bloodshot eyes. "It's done," he said.

Simon frowned. "What's done?"

"I heard Jack speaking with Parsons and Bob Bolton in accounting, and Jack said they were talking about a WFR and severance packages."

Simon bit his lower lip. "Did you talk to Copperman?"

Thompson turned white. "No, should I? About reassignment?"

Simon rubbed his eyes and Thompson speed-walked to the next person

who would be willing to talk to him. Simon walked down the hall to the lobby and pressed the call button for the elevator. He saw a few people walking up the stairs with carefully balanced coffees and gloomy looks. Simon hummed to himself. Been three months since he stopped taking the stairs.

Until noon, Simon sat in his cubicle taking calls, replying to emails, reading over blueprints. Then Copperman waddled into the room and announced, "Conference room."

The employees exchanged glances and then shuffled out of their cubicles. With the exception of Simon, their heads tucked down. Copperman, his boss, and Bob Bolton from accounting were there. After the statement, the people who weren't shell-shocked were calling out at Copperman or staggering out of the room, whispering into their cell phones. Thompson and Simon followed Copperman as he toddled out of the conference room and towards his office.

"How about Roanoke?" Thompson asked. "Could you transfer me to that branch?"

Copperman didn't stop. "Doubt that would do you much good."

"I'll go anyway," Thompson pleaded.

Their boss glanced over his shoulder and said, "Wanna work in *Meh-he-co*?" When Thompson didn't answer, Copperman looked forward and kept walking. "Talk to Bolton about your severance."

Simon came to a halt in the hallway as Thompson continued to follow Copperman. He took a deep breath, rubbed his eyes, and felt every muscle in his body go sore, as if he had just finished a 10K, uphill. He couldn't think of a reason to stay, so he walked to the elevator. As he was about to press the button, behind him spoke Bob Bolton: "Biedal. Come here, please."

Simon turned around and Bolton stepped toward him. He was a wiry, frowning man with thick glasses and wore a full suit, wherever he went. Bolton pulled out a sheet of paper from a pile in his arms and, tilting his face downward, stared at him from over the rims of his glasses. He said, "Your wife was covered under the insurance. Very good timing." Simon glanced fleetingly at Bolton.

There was no consideration, only action. Simon smashed him.

Bolton's nose compressed into his skull with a quick *squak*. As Bolton's head whipped back, the two halves of his glasses twirled in the air.

His papers fell to the floor, and a moment later, Bolton dropped to his knees. He sneezed, a red mist exploded across Simon's khakis. Simon tried to speak. He stood there with his mouth open, holding his blood-soaked severance form in his hand. People's heads were poking out of their offices to see what was going on.

Simon stared at Bolton, his eyes wide. The office was silent, except for Bolton's heavy breathing and coughs. Simon clasped his stomach, dropped the paper, and walked out.

...

Around one, Simon arrived home. He found Nikki at her computer in her home office. Simon didn't enter the room. As indifferently as he could muster, he said, "I got laid off today."

Nikki turned around, her eyes wide. "What?"

Simon leaned over the industrial printer, shooting out flyers right beside her desk. "We are now dependent on *your* salary."

"Oh," she said.

Simon walked into the bedroom, plopped into bed, and pressed his face into his pillow. He heard Nikki hobbling in after him and the clatter of the wooden crutch falling onto the floor.

"I'm so sorry," she said, her voice trembling. "Did you see about getting reassigned or something?"

He chuckled. A dry, humorless chuckle. "What do you think about *Me-he-co*?"

The bed tilted as Nikki gingerly propped herself up. She tussled his hair and said, very motherly, very soothingly, "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay." Simon shrugged. "I just don't know what I want to do."

She rubbed his arm and whispered in his ear, "Can I make you feel better?" Her hand travelled down his back and around his leg. She turned over, kissed him, and shifted to get a better position. His body warmed. She unzipped his pants and began pulling them down. For the slightest fraction of a second, he felt the metal suture from Nikki's stump, the metallic, electric, warm touch, through his pant legs bunched at his knees, and thought, frowning, *Well, it's not going to happen this time.*

...

Simon had one arm wrapped around Nikki, rubbing the back of her neck. He stared at the ceiling, faintly illuminated by the moonlight.

He asked, "You still awake?"

"Mmm . . ."

"What am I going to do?" Simon said, quietly. "Now that I've lost my job."

Nikki stirred, but she didn't wake up. She rotated her head in Simon's one-armed embrace and then flipped to her other side, freeing his arm.

Simon brought both arms to his side and went to sleep.

...

The next morning, Simon woke at his usual time. For a few minutes, he lay there, staring at the ceiling, thinking, turning over, drifting back into dreamless sleep. When Nikki roused, Simon awoke and immediately pressed down on the sheets atop of him, feeling his erection pressing against his lower abdomen.

He looked at Nikki, then up at the ceiling. "Just don't think about it," he

said to himself. He rolled over to her side and cupped her breast. Then he scooted his pelvis forward.

She didn't respond at first so Simon pressed harder against her. She opened her eyes, staring up at the ceiling, frowning. "What are you doing?"

"Um." She looked over at Simon. He said, "I'm up."

"Okay," she said.

"Yesterday, I wasn't in the mood because of the job, but now, you know . . ."

Her face was still. "I didn't go to sleep until two last night. I was in my office finishing those flyers."

"Why were you—?"

"Since you don't have a job anymore—"

"But yesterday you were . . ."

"*That* was when I was trying to comfort you. Then I thought about it. I took a forty percent pay reduction by making the switch to work at home."

Simon plopped on his side of the bed and stared at the ceiling. "You didn't need to do that."

Nikki turned away. "I couldn't take them staring at me all of the time. They pretended that nothing had happened. They kept smiling."

Simon sighed. He scooted over and started massaging her back. "I really need your support."

She turned over and glanced at Simon. He formed his best attempt at a sincere, reassuring smile. She was quiet for a moment, then she slowly smiled and said, "In that case, it's time for you to take a shower and go find a new job."

. . .

Simon showed up at the local coffee shop with the classifieds section under his arm. Thompson was inside, waiting for him. When he saw Simon, he beamed and said, "Thanks for meeting me. I know we don't really hang, but this is cool."

Simon sat across from him and asked, "How's Bolton?"

"He's patched up," Thompson said. "He's making a big deal about it, complaining to everyone."

Simon opened the classifieds across his lap. "Oh, the prick."

"He wants to take your severance away."

Simon frowned.

"What did he do?" Thompson asked, leaning forward.

Simon shrugged, saying, "He was being a dick."

Thompson rapped his fingers on the tabletop. "So I talked with Copperman. He said he can get me the position of plant manager in Tijuana."

Simon blinked. "You're going to Mexico?"

"Yeah," Thompson said, smiling. "And I was thinking that *you* could be my assistant manager."

"I'm not going to Mexico."

"But . . ."

"Nikki and I are going through a rough time right now."

"But I spoke to Copperman . . ."

"What is it, fifty percent of children with divorced parents also get divorced? And then fifty percent of regular marriages end in divorce? My parents divorced when I was sixteen. So I have a *seventy-five* percent chance." Simon's face drooped.

Thompson looked away, silent.

Simon closed the classifieds and leaned over. "I thought I would be stressed out when I lost this job. It's happening so fast. I don't have somewhere to go anymore. Now I *have* to be home."

Thompson was still silent.

Simon sighed and tried to smile. Instead, he produced a grotesque clown smirk. "Guess I should start transferring what meager amounts I have to the Caymans."

Thompson's face lit up. "You don't have to pay alimony in Mexico."

Simon resumed browsing through the classifieds.

. . .

"Did you know there was blood on your pants?"

Simon had barely gotten the front door closed when Nikki had called out to him.

Nikki's head popped out from around the corner. "Is it yours?"

He shook his head. "It's not mine. I'm fine. Are you . . . are you doing the laundry?"

"Yeah," she said, her head disappearing.

"But *I* do the laundry," Simon said, walking toward her.

"Well." She shrugged. Simon appeared behind her, and she turned toward him. "I'm trying to help around the house."

Simon looked down her right leg, seeing the stump and the empty air beneath it. "Are you trying to get around without your crutches?"

"I'm trying." Then she crossed her arms. "How'd things go at the office?"

Simon leaned against the wall. "I talked to my boss and got my severance. But no *Me-he-co*."

He walked into the kitchen and sat by the table. Nikki hopped after him. Before she sat down, she took out her cell phone and put it on the table. Then she cautiously lowered herself into the chair.

Simon pointed to the cell phone. "Who were you calling? God, about giving me a second chance?"

Nikki's face was blank for a moment, until she snapped out of her reverie. "No, I called Doctor Glorioso."

Simon's eyebrows went up. "Something wrong with your leg?"

She hesitated, rubbing her elbows. "It's a nice day. I want to take a walk."

Simon was silent.

“Wait for me while I get changed?”

“Sure.”

She hopped up and hobbled to the bedroom. Simon was quiet and shifted his attention to the living room. Little clumps of dust and dirt had accumulated in corners of the room. Pillows and blankets were folded, stacked, unused, on the couch. Framed pictures on the mantle above the fireplace and on the side tables were coated in dust. On the far wall hung collections of Nikki’s work for the advertising firm. Flyers, business cards, miniaturized movie posters that once upon a time Simon felt so proud of. Nothing was recent. All of them were from years ago, none of them reflecting what she did now. The glass plates were covered in dry, very fine dust.

Simon got up and walked to the wall. He ran his fingertips across the glass plate of one of the frames. It was one of Nikki’s oldest and favorite pieces. A silhouetted cyclist, outlined by a saturated red sun, riding on a bridge toward the outline of a bulbous foreign building, from far, far away. An H.G. Wells quote hung above the cyclist in the sky: “Every time I see an adult on a bicycle, I no longer despair for the future of the human race.”

• • •

He drove to Costa Verde Park and helped Nikki out of the car. She wore olive green Capri pants. When she got out, Simon handed her the crutches, and they started walking the path that circled around the park. Bordering the maze of playgrounds, basketball courts, and baseball fields was a cement path. They used to race each other on bicycles here. Whoever won the best out of eight laps received no-complaints oral sex. That was months ago.

They walked a quarter of a mile before Nikki said through heavy breaths, “Hold on. Let’s take a break.” They sat down at a nearby bench. She reached underneath her shirt and rubbed her armpits. She said, “I don’t have any endurance. It’s all gone.”

Simon rubbed her back, then her neck. She rotated her head around and stopped when she faced him. Simon smiled at her.

Nikki smiled back. “Okay.”

They continued walking.

A woman in a pink spandex suit ran on the path towards them. She was holding a leash with a panting black Labrador on the other end. The black lab stopped and looked up at Simon. He smiled, said, “Hey buddy,” and bent down to rub the dog’s head. “What’s its name?”

The woman was staring at Nikki. Her eyes travelled down Nikki’s body, before she stopped at the edge of Nikki’s right leg. Simon looked up at Nikki, and without warning, scooped up the dog and brought it to her. “Hey buddy, here’s Nikki.”

Nikki, eyes wide, hesitated before scratching the dog’s head.

“Hey,” Nikki said stoically. The dog panted, closing its eyes.

Simon brought the dog back to the ground and smiled at the frowning woman. She immediately resumed jogging away.

They continued walking, his hands in his pockets, her grunting as the armrests of her crutches dug into her underarms. They walked for another quarter mile before Nikki blurted, "Why did you do that?"

"I don't know," Simon said. "She was looking at you."

"Yeah, people do that when they realize you don't have a foot," Nikki said through clenched teeth. They walked for another lap in silence. Kids raced by them on their bikes, popping wheelies, pedaling without hands. A couple pedaled around them, the guy on Simon's side and the woman on Nikki's side. They were dressed in green and purple Under Armour, respectively, donning fingerless gloves, pointed helmets, everything, pushing at the fastest gear.

They circled back to the parking lot, got into the car, and drove off.

...

"How do you like working at home?" Simon asked Nikki. They were both spread on the couch, Nikki's head in Simon's lap. Outspread in front of Simon was the classifieds.

"It pays the bills," she said.

Simon sighed. "I've been working at that company for six years. I'll have to look for an entry-level position. Six years down the drain." His shoulders slumped.

"Fuck those fuckers," Nikki said.

Simon looked away from the paper and at her. She was smiling. It was one of her devious smiles, her delicious smiles. Lower lip tucked in underneath her upper teeth, eyes big and demure.

"Say it," Nikki said. "*Fuck . . . those fuckers.*"

Simon smiled back. "Fuck those fuckers."

"There you go." Nikki snuggled into his lap. Then she said, "Couldn't you use your experience to get a better job? The same position somewhere else?"

"They won't let me reference them."

"Why not?"

"It's something I did."

Nikki pushed herself up. "What did you do?"

Simon hesitated. He shrugged and said, "It's just some guy made a crack about you."

Nikki's eyes narrowed. "Okay . . . ?"

"And I . . . hit him in the face."

Nikki rubbed her forehead. "*Simon.*"

"Well, I was shocked at what he said and I—"

"Simon, you have *no job*. And my job won't pay enough to support the both of us."

Simon crumpled the newspaper. "I was defending you!"

“I wasn’t there!” she blurted. “What were you thinking? *Hitting* him?”

Simon gritted his teeth and looked away. “I’m going for a bike ride.” Nikki’s eyes and mouth widened. Then she pursed her lips and hobbled out of the room.

Simon got up and walked into the garage. He went into the corner of the garage, past Nikki’s dust-covered Corolla, past the motorcycle, and unshackled his bike from hers.

He carried his bike outside, a red-framed Shimano road bike, and placed it on the ground. He pressed down on the wheels. The tires eased out. He went back into the garage, looking for the air pump, but it was dark and he didn’t have the patience to search for it. He walked his bike to the street and then glanced back at the house, half-expecting Nikki to be there on the porch, staring at him, trying to make him feel even guiltier, but she didn’t.

He hadn’t put on his helmet or changed out of his casual clothes. He hopped on and tried to cycle. In less than a minute, his legs burned and he sweated through the fabric of his pants. He felt like he was pedaling through wet sand. He kept cycling until he reached the top of the hill on his street and turned into the next development. It was a large residential circle that Nikki and he used to race on as well. He pedaled by a fenced-up, deep ditch that the river ran through. The two of them used to climb over the fence after eight laps and the winner would get their sex there, in the shadows. They used whatever was left in their water bottles to rinse the sweat off before going down on each other.

Simon didn’t even finish a full lap when the front tire blew out. He ran into a curb and tumbled head-first into the grass. His right shin dragged against the sidewalk. What sweat-soaked fabric didn’t tear soon became saturated with blood.

He lay there on his stomach, feeling the sting, the pain like a strip of bent, rusted nails pressed hard into the thick flesh covering his shin. Someone drove up, slowed to a halt, and hollered, “You okay?”

Simon pushed himself up and brushed the grass from his work shirt. He said through gritted teeth, “Yeah. Taking a rest.”

The driver stared at him, stared at his leg, and then drove off.

Simon stood there, pulling the flap of cloth from his shin and watched blood seep out of the sponge-like muscle covering his tibia. He thought, Nikki wouldn’t have felt this. Simon sat down and watched the meager traffic go by.

• • •

The bike was outside, off the driveway, flat on the grass. Simon was limping when he closed the front door. The tongue and top of his shoe were a dark crimson.

As he walked to the bathroom, he saw Nikki in her office working. Without turning, she said tonelessly, “Good laps?”

“It stung,” Simon replied, and shut the bathroom door.

• • •

Cleaned up, Simon read in bed for a few hours, then turned off his nightstand lamp. He went to sleep.

He awoke a few hours later at midnight, turned over, felt Nikki’s empty, cold side of the bed, and then held his breath. He could hear, very faintly, the hum of her printer.

He got out of bed, blinking rapidly, clearing the fog from his vision. He walked through the dark into the hallway. He peeked into Nikki’s office. She wasn’t there, but her computer monitor was still on and the printer was spitting out copies. Simon walked farther down the corridor and stopped when he heard a faint splash. He walked to the bathroom and peeked in to see Nikki attempting to get into the tub. Simon had installed leverage bars to the walls for when she wanted to take showers, not baths, but that was a month after the incident.

For that month, Simon had bathed Nikki.

He would rub a soap bar across her back and run his fingers through her foamy, silky brown hair. Nikki could have bathed herself, insisted upon it, but she never resisted when Simon would grab the bar of soap and start rubbing her back. He would sit on the edge, feeling the water, making sure it was the right temperature, and then he would get up and slowly lower her naked body into the tub. He would get on his knees, open the shampoo bottle, and say to her, “Let me know if this gets in your eyes.” Sometimes she would cry and sometimes she would lean down, over her straight legs, silent and staring forward. Sometimes, he would wrap one of his arms around her neck to her cradle her breast as Simon used to other arm to wash her.

Now Nikki bathed herself. Here, Simon watched Nikki, and here he realized how unerotic the times had been when he bathed her. Now, Simon watched as her small breasts jiggled as she tried to steady herself into the tub. He gazed down the lengths of her curvy legs. They were not as toned as they were three months ago, but they were still shapely. She had love handles now, and her stomach wasn’t as flat as it once was, but he could feel an erection stirring. When he bathed her, he felt how a mother might, when bathing her child. A feeling of possession, of protection, of unfiltered love, compared to the voyeuristic eroticism he felt as he stood out in the hallway looking in.

Nikki settled herself in the tub. She reached over the edge and seized a pink cylindrical bottle. She squeezed some of it into her hands, put them underwater, and she placed her head back against the wall as she closed

her eyes. Simon's eyes widened. He pressed his back against the far wall, enshrouded by the shadows. *What is she doing?*

She moaned softly. Periodically. She opened her eyes, and brought her right leg out of the water. She stared at the stump with a quizzical stare. An analytical stare. She looked as though she forgot that this was in fact her leg. Then she submerged it again and resumed.

Simon's chest tightened. His insides began to fade away, leaving behind a growing cavity. His skin tingled with warmth and his erection died down. *Why is she doing this?*

Nikki continued to moan and Simon walked down the hallway. He silently crept underneath the sheets and stared at the ceiling.

...

The sun flared through the blinds and awoke Simon. He opened his eyes and saw Nikki lying next to him, smiling. "How'd you sleep?" she asked softly.

"Peaceful," he said, staring up. "I was flying. Air was whipping past me. Maybe I was falling."

She giggled. "That doesn't *sound* peaceful." She slid on top of him and kissed him. She was wearing a red lace bra and black panties, her cute little *foreplay-later* outfit. She reached down and loosened his pajama bottoms.

Simon was still for a moment. His hands were at his side, unsure of where to go. "Did you have a nice sleep?" he asked.

She whispered into his ear. "It was peaceful too."

Nikki guided his hands to her back and he unfastened her bra.

In the middle of it, Nikki got off and sat at the edge of the bed, massaging her legs. Then she stood up, but instead of placing her weight on her left leg, her good leg, she spread it equally onto both. She tumbled to the floor.

Simon lay there in bed, covering his erection. "Uh, are you okay?"

She climbed onto the bed. Then she tried standing up again, and she fell over once more. She had a puzzled look on her face. Her brow was arched, and she bit her tongue. "I thought it was nothing, but it's not nothing; I can feel it."

"You what?"

"I can feel my foot."

"You *what?*"

"I feel it," Nikki said, looking at him. "I can feel my fucking foot."

Simon wasn't sure if he should be laughing or springing up to help her walk. He and she were both naked, sweaty, skin flushed, Simon's hands were on his dick and his wife was telling him that she could feel her absent foot.

Nikki swung her leg around. "I can feel it."

"The foot that's not there?"

For a moment, Simon feared that somewhere in bed, Nikki's dismembered right foot lurked underneath the sheets. A little bump crawling across the

bed, tunneling towards him. He and Nikki were making love and the foot would be rubbing its big toe against Simon's side, the sunlight reflecting off the polished red toenail.

"When did you start feeling your foot?" Simon asked.

"When we were doing it. A few weeks ago, when we were having sex, I felt it then, but it wasn't as strong as today, and then last night—" She didn't continue.

"Like phantom limb . . ."

She looked at Simon for a moment, then looked away. "I don't know what it is."

He hesitated, trying to think. "So when we're doing it . . ." How would he word something like this?

"I have that appointment with Glorioso today. I was going to ask about it. I thought it was only a phase or something, a lost-your-foot phase or something, but it's only when we're having sex that I can feel it." She looked at her stump, feeling it, the sutures, making sure she was sure that it was gone. She looked at him and blurted, "Simon, I don't understand what's going on."

Simon climbed out of bed and started getting dressed. "As if *I* know what's happening? Does it hurt?"

"No," she said. Then she shrugged. "It actually feels . . . *good*."

"Good? Like how?"

"I don't know how to explain it." She paused, thinking. "After a long bike ride, the endorphins, how it makes everything feel cloudy and lighter? That's kind of like it."

"Then it feels good, then?"

"Yeah," she said, staring absently away, a bewildered look on her face.

"So what do you want to do?"

"My appointment's at ten."

"I don't have anything else to do today . . ."

"Since you're unemployed."

". . . since I'm unemployed, so . . . do you want me to come with you?"

She nodded, her eyes narrowing. "I think I would like some support when I explain to the doctor that my missing foot suddenly comes to life when I'm fucking my husband."

. . .

Doctor Glorioso had his hand to his chin and stared through his thick glasses at Nikki sitting on the patient bed. He rubbed his thinning white hair before saying, "*Boyyyy*, this is something, huh?"

He glanced at Simon, who was standing right beside her, holding her hand. His cheeks were a slight pink. Glorioso said, "Usually the people I get here are complaining about their sex lives. It's about how boring or plain it

is, but that's not the problem with you two, huh?"

"We were just wondering," Nikki said, "what's going on . . . you know, down there."

Doctor Glorioso stroked his chin. He directed them down the hallway, consulted with a nurse, and entered a double-room separated by a glass window, with a huge white machine humming in the opposite room.

Glorioso told them, "If what I think is happening is actually happening, we should run an MRI. One of my colleagues, Doctor Szymanowski, she's a neuro-oncologist, she'll be coming—"

"Wait," Simon said. "An oncologist? Does Nikki have *cancer*?"

Glorioso made some rotating hand gestures. "She's a brain specialist. And she knows about cancer."

• • •

Doctor Szymanowski was a short, stocky woman, wider than she was tall. She glanced at Glorioso and then at the couple. "Okay, let's take a look in her head."

Nikki took off her wedding ring, her belt, and her earrings. Doctor Glorioso removed the sutures from the wound, reinserting plastic ones. After Szymanowski fitted Nikki into the machine, the two doctors and Simon entered the observation room.

Szymanowski operated the computer terminals, and the MRI buzzed to life. She turned to Simon and said, "If it's what I think it is, then it's phantom limb syndrome. When she lost her foot, she still had those foot nerves in the brain, but nothing stimulated them. Those nerves became supersensitive and, now, when surrounding nerves are stimulated, the foot nerves get some of that stimulation. And the brain nerves to the genitals, they happen to be pretty close to the foot nerves." The two doctors were nodding.

"So," Simon said, arms crossed, "every time I touch her, uh, vagina, she feels her foot?"

"Well." Szymanowski leaned back in her chair. "It's probably the clitoris, the more encompassing nerve reaction." The computer buzzed behind her. "And we have a control picture . . . now we need to get her aroused . . ."

The two doctors looked at Simon.

His eyebrows shot up. "You want us *fucking* in the MRI machine?"

"Just touch her," Glorioso said. "Stimulate her."

Simon took off his wedding band and his belt. He was shaking his head as he entered the MRI room. He repeated, "I need to get a new job."

Nikki saw him coming in her peripheral vision. She asked, "What are you doing?"

"They want me to 'stimulate' you," Simon said. He stood by Nikki and pulled loose the string to her pants. "This is the most bizarre doctor's visit I've ever had."

“Well, at least it’s not centering on you,” Nikki said.

Simon slid his fingers underneath her pants and beneath her cotton panties. He chuckled.

“What?”

“You know, shaving is going to be a real wild thing,” Simon said, smiling. Nikki smiled back. “Shut up.”

Over the loudspeaker, Szymanowski said, “Okay, please stay still, Nikki.”

Simon was silent, standing there with his hand down his wife’s pants. Then he smiled. “You know, we don’t have our wedding rings on. Remember what we used to do before we were married?”

“Shut up.”

“Remember the Washington marathon? After the thirteenth mile, you dragged me off to the Potomac River and we did it in the bushes.”

“Shut up.”

“And then that girl came running down and she pissed into the river. We were so scared that she would see us.” Simon leaned forward. “Just you on top of me, both of us sweat-soaked and fucked.”

“Shut up,” she said, staring at him. She was wet.

Over the loudspeaker, the doctor said, “We’re seeing some movement. Try not to move, Ms. Biedal, please.”

• • •

As they drove west on Interstate 64, Simon and Nikki were both quiet. The window was down and her hair fluttered back in the breeze. Her right leg was up on the window sill, her stump a few inches from the side view mirror. Cars drove by in the right lane, seeing Nikki for a second, then double-taking. Finally, she said, “Do you mind getting in the other lane?”

Simon signaled, then shifted over. He glanced at her a few times. He said, “You know, we should do what the doctor said. Prosthetics would help you get over the syndrome, and you’ll be able to walk again.”

“I know,” she said, rubbing her leg. “But Glorioso wants to wait it’s completely healed.”

“So what do we do in the meantime?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Deal with it, I guess.”

“I don’t think this is such a big deal—”

“Says the guy without a missing foot. Simon, sometimes I wish you could just try being in my spot. See what it’s like with a missing foot. People *stare* at me. I can’t drive a car, I can’t ride a bike, I can’t take stairs, I can’t walk across the room carrying *both* a coffee and the newspaper. And now when we have sex, one of the few pleasures I have left, I feel my foot. My *nonexistent* foot.”

Simon shrugged. “It hasn’t been easy on me either.”

“*What.*”

“I’ve been doing groceries for the past three months. Sometimes your lists are *indecipherable*.” Simon looked at Nikki and smiled.

Nikki was still for a moment, but then the corners of her lips formed a faint smile. She reached over and ran her hands through his hair, across his chest, and then punched him lightly in the shoulder. With Nikki’s touch, Simon felt an erection growing.

He shifted in his seat and then said, “You know that in the Hebrew Bible, in ancient Israel, the foot represented *penis*?”

“Is that right?” She chuckled. “I’m having a glass of wine when we get home.”

“It’s only noon.”

“I’m still having a glass of wine. I think the situation justifies it.”

As Simon pulled off the exit on the highway, he said, “We could always buy one of those mopeds.”

“Great,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to explore the Italian side of me.”

• • •

The first thing she did was open the refrigerator and pull out a bottle of wine. She set two glasses on the counter, filled both and gave one to Simon. They stood there, her on one foot, staring at each other from above the rim of their glasses, drinking long sips.

When they were done, Nikki said, “I’m going to work a little bit.” She hopped out of the kitchen. Simon leaned against the corner, quiet, thinking. Then he stood up and walked into her office. He turned her around and kissed her, forcing her against her desk, then wrapped his arms around her as he crouched down and fell back against the floor.

• • •

Simon played with the curled toes on Nikki’s left foot. He was on his stomach, his fingertip running across the smooth toenail. He looked back at Nikki, seeing her chest rise and lower with each breath. Simon got up, kissed her on the forehead and said, “I’ll be right back.”

He got on his pants and his shirt and walked into the garage. He carried Nikki’s bike out the side door and hopped on without putting on a helmet or checking the pressure of the tire. He rode up the hill, pedaling as hard as he could. His shin burned every time his tibialis anterior contracted. Sweat accumulated between his shoulder blades and dripped down his back. He panted hard but he continued pushing until he was at the top.

He looked down the slope of the hill. The black concrete sided by immaculate white houses. A car drove by and Simon waved to the driver, whoever he was. The car sped up and zipped down the hill. Simon turned the bike around and pedaled hard. He was zooming, his hair pushed back in the wind. His cheeks deflated and he narrowed his eyes. His arms shook, trying to control the handlebars and keep balance.

When Simon was twelve, he rode a hill like this one. He fell over and skidded across the gravel road twelve feet. He ripped open his left elbow, his left knee, and the left side of his face, on his forehead, his cheek, and his chin. He was on the ground for a few seconds, until enough surprise had dissipated from him to feel like he could stand up. He hobbled down to his house and opened the door. His mother saw him, but instead of running to her, he ran to the bathroom and stared at himself in the mirror. “Wow,” he said.

• • •

Simon walked back into Nikki’s office. She was still naked, spinning around in her chair. She stopped when she saw Simon enter.

Simon was silent. Then he said, “It’s bewildering. Losing my job. This. It’s all my fault.”

Nikki reached out with open arms. Simon walked forward, got onto his knees, and they hugged. “Nothing can be changed now,” Nikki said.

Simon carried her out of her office and onto the bed. They were both quiet and they stared at the ceiling. Then Nikki said, “When I was a child, I asked my father about dying. I had this intense fear of my own mortality. I must have been eight years old. He told me that our family was very lucky, and because we were lucky, nothing would ever happen to us.” She sighed. “We are lucky.”

Simon said, “I’m living with you, and I can’t imagine life without a right foot.”

“At least you can park in handicap spots now.”

“A week ago, we hardly talked.”

Nikki moved to her side. “If you continue to ride your bike, we’ll continue to not talk.”

“How do I stay in shape?”

“We can do sit-ups together.”

“Sit-ups?”

“Yep.”

“Huh.”

Nikki placed her arm on Simon’s chest and he clasped her hand. He said, “We can do sit-ups until they invent the one-legged friendly bike.”

And then he turned around in the bed and stroked her stump, running his fingertip up and down the scar. Then he used his other hand to trace back and forth between her legs. He asked, “What does that feel like?”

Nikki was staring at the ceiling. She smiled, and closed her eyes.

CONDUCTED BY Dana Diehl and Melissa Goodrich
TRANSCRIBED BY Dylan Roth

A CONVERSATION WITH BERNARD COOPER

Award-winning memoirist, novelist, and short story writer, Bernard Cooper speaks with us about riding the wild horse, needing more green, and the schism between the representation and the real thing. He is the author of a book-length memoir *The Bill From My Father*, two collections of memoirs, *Maps to Anywhere* and *Truth Serum*, as well as a novel, *A Year of Rhymes*, and a collection of short stories, *Guess Again*. The recipient of numerous awards and honors, Cooper shares his thoughts on “sabotaging the power,” and making a student cry.

MELISSA GOODRICH: When did you first start writing? How old were you when you decided you wanted to be a writer?

BERNARD COOPER: I actually studied architecture in my freshman year of college. Then I moved into the visual arts. I got my master’s degree in the Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, which is Walt Disney’s school in Valencia. Oddly, though, it had one of the most experimental art programs in the country, and I really gained an appreciation for lots of forms of contemporary art, some of which, conceptual art in particular, use text. I spent a lot of time making what they called “text-based work.” Then I started wondering, “Why would anybody want to stand in a gallery and read something when they could read it in a book?”

I started writing, not with line breaks, but with prose. I was really able to accept the hit-or-miss nature of what I was doing. If something didn’t work I would throw it away and not feel bad and just start something else. It was just a joy to write something every day and see where it went. Sometimes to think I didn’t have an idea in my head and then discover there actually was something I could write about. It was a very exciting, very productive period for me and that was the work that eventually went into my first book.

DANA DIEHL: In our current workshop class, we talk a lot about our “literary families”—the authors that influence our writing. Who would you say is in your literary family?

BERNARD: Certainly a lot of poets. One of the books that really changed my life was an anthology called *The American Poets*, a high school teacher brought in. It was the first time I had read Sylvia Plath and Allen Ginsberg. My eyes were really opened to the possibility of literature. I had thought that poetry was kind of rusty and stagnant and not really about things that would be interesting, but here was this whole universe of poetry about things that were funny and relevant and mysterious and surprising, and that whole collection was really an eye-opener for me.

Strangely, the people I admire most are often writers who write very, very different from me, because I feel like, “I can’t do it. And I can’t believe they can do it,” because nothing I write ever comes out being as absolutely simple and elegant and economic. That would be writers like Tobias Wolff, the essayist John Gideon. I admire them precisely because their prose and sensibilities are so different from my own.

MELISSA: What attracts you to fiction versus nonfiction, and vice versa? Are you attracted to strict divisions of genre or do you believe they bleed into each other, inform one another?

BERNARD: I do think that genres inform each other, including poetry. From poetry, I really learned a lot about how every word counts, and about how things are connected indirectly, or how a poem or a story or an essay can end both with a sense of inclusion and a certain degree of ambiguity, so they’re both wrapped up on one hand and open-ended on the other, and leave you thinking about it.

I think all the arts inform each other, too. I’ve learned a lot from my experience with visual art. I am incredibly interested, i.e. obsessed, with new forms of music. Some of it is popular-ish, but there’s a way in which a lot of experimental music from the 50s, 60s and 70s has really informed all kinds of hip-hop artists and people who write ambient music or use vocals. There is so much going on that is so incredible to me, and especially when I was writing the book *The Bill From My Father*, I was listening to this music and there were so many rules that would be broken. For example, there could be a song where the voice was so chopped up, you thought you could make out the words, but it was just a little too abstract, so it was just sort of words on the verge. Or the song would start off so slowly that you thought, “This is ambient music,” and then the last two minutes would be just raucous drums and just loud and would be very different. It gave me a sense of permission to be listening to stuff that was so much about just seeing what a piece of music could be, and it’s not that I emulated those techniques so much, but they really gave me some freedom about playing with the material and just seeing what became of it. Sometimes that sense of play is hard to come by.

DANA: How do you know where to start a short story or a memoir?

BERNARD: I think it really varies. Remarkably, it does not have to be much. A lot of people who don't write think that a writer comes to the page and that the whole story is right there, or that the whole novel is completely planned out and what they do is just sit and type, and just transcribe this thing they have in their head. I wish! I would have taken a typing class.

DANA: What is the first thing that inspires you to write a story?

BERNARD: It really can be an image that is haunting or something you overhear. With *The Bill From My Father*, I'd written about my father before and was always fascinated by him because I could never quite understand him or predict his behavior. We were talking, some friends and I, about what parents think their children owe them, and conversely, what children think they owe their parents. And in this conversation I remembered my father sending me this bill, and it suddenly struck me as the most peculiar thing in the world. I mean, I think having grown up with him I was sort of used to a lot of inexplicable behavior, and so some of it just seemed par for the course. I remembered being very upset and hurt and angry when I got the bill in my early twenties. It seemed like he was trying to tell me something that wasn't very nice. [Laughs] And so, I just couldn't stop thinking about it after the dinner thing. In a way, writing that book was not writing what I thought was the answer, but that book is asking the question about why that might have happened, what might have led him to that. I often think that books are about asking questions, not answering them.

DANA: I'm always interested in how writers do nonfiction. It's a tricky genre, because you are dealing with memory—memory that is fallible and can change over the years. How much would you say you invent when writing memoir?

BERNARD: When I'm writing, I'm recreating not so much the event as the memory of the event, and I love that. I love the idea that memory is fallible that memories are informed by one's wishes, or one's mistakes. That's what I like about memoir. It's not that you're getting some sort of court record of what happened, but you're getting someone's memory and with all the kind of uncertainty that memory involves. So, really, if I have a policy I suppose it's to accept that when I'm writing. I think it's really important for a writer of memoir or nonfiction to make—I think everything that is written is an act of the imagination, including journalism, including nonfiction, including a history book. You have to organize and eliminate, edit; it's an art form. But I think it's important for a memoirist to aim for the truth. Sometimes getting

to the truth involves speculation, filling in details the best you can. I also think it's really fun in memoirs that I read and in my own writing to sort of admit that the memory might be a wish fulfilled, or that, "I'm not certain but . . ." That aspect of memoir can be thrilling, if used well.

DANA: It sounds like when you write, you aim for more of an emotional truth than a literal truth. Would you say that's true?

BERNARD: I would. You know, it's funny, I think that my concern is really most that the reader feels whatever I remember feeling, and in order to do that it requires setting up scenes or interactions or descriptions that not only hopefully go some way to capture what I felt but that will spark that feeling in someone who wasn't there, a reader. And oddly, what happens in the process of doing that is that I can come to the page feeling like, "Wow, this is really fraught with emotion," but what happens is once you sit down and try to make the first sentence, it starts to not be such an emotional thing anymore, it's really a matter of craft, and part of that craft is not only conveying your emotion, but making something that will stir a reader's emotions.

MELISSA: Patricia Hampl, in *I Could Tell You Stories*, laments how, "The material I was determined to elude has claimed me, while the subjects I wished to enlist in my liberation have spurned me." How much control does a memoirist have over her own life and her own creative urge? Or the material, for that matter?

BERNARD: Well, in some ways my experience of writing anything is that during the writing of it. There are little moments where I think, "Oh, good, that's the word" or "All right, that's the right way to end the paragraph," so there are little tiny satisfactions, but basically I feel like I am riding a wild horse. There's a sense for me of really trying to contend with being out of control, with not knowing where it's going, and what causes the most anxiety for me is the question of, "Is it going to work?" If I have three pages that seem to work, am I going to blow it on the next page? Am I gonna take a wrong turn? There's always a suspense about whether you can control the material.

DANA: I was reading this essay by Vivian Gornick in which she was talking about a reading that she did, and someone in the audience said, "I want to take a walk with your mother," and she replied, "You don't want to take a walk with my mother, you want to take a walk with the version of my mother from the book." And so, I was wondering how well you feel you represented your father in *The Bill from My Father*, because you really can't put a person on the page, just a piece of that person. How well do you think you did with that?

BERNARD: Well, first, I want to say that I absolutely agree with Vivian Gornick. People, for whatever reason I don't understand, got very upset with this remark that it's not her mother. But, you know, I just don't think it takes rocket science to realize that when you're looking at a painting of a person, it's not a person. And I think of that famous René Magritte painting of a pipe that says underneath it, "This is not a pipe." You can't mistake the representation for the thing. And in a sense, they're always going to be separate, and there's going to be some schism between the representation and the real thing. Honestly, I think that's a tribute to the human being, because human beings are so complex and so changeable and so paradoxical that one can only try the best they can to sort of capture them.

I think my representation of my father is the best I could have done. I still worry, though. I remember after the book came out, I asked one of my sister-in-laws, who he had sued after one of my brothers died. I asked her, "Do you think I was fair in my representation of how he was, in regards to the lawsuit? Was I being unfair or mean?" And she said, "Not nearly mean enough." [Laughs] So, I guess maybe I wasn't.

It was also strange, because, in the U.S., *The Bill from My Father* tended to be treated like a book about a mean, abusive father, and that's not really what I had in mind. Yeah, he did cruel things, but everybody does, I think. I was really trying to balance it with the way I thought he was really funny and sort of actually right about a lot of things that I didn't realize until I was growing older myself. And yet, when the book came out in Great Britain, every single review talked about how funny it was. It was so strange that there was much more of a tendency to look at it as an abuse narrative, because that's what we know from Oprah, and in England it was like a "romping hilarious comedy!" It was so weird.

DANA: In our fiction workshops, we often talk about the use of details and how they all ought to "point" to something, all the details working in one direction, like a river current. Do you believe this? How do you keep all your imagery and metaphors aligned?

BERNARD: This is not to avoid the question, because I think that continuity and fluidity are of absolute importance in narrative, but I don't know how I do it. I do it because I set off to make a narrative that I hope will never lose the reader too much. I want to make it all as engaging as I can, and I look for a certain kind of connectivity or echoes down the line of what came before, or a sort of premonition of what's coming next, so that everything is of a piece, of a continuum. My ways of achieving that really are hard to name. A

friend of mine who is a painter was once asked a really elaborate question by an art historian about how she made her work seem all of a piece, and her answer was, “I don’t know, I just look at it and think: ‘Needs more green over here.’”

MELISSA: Janet Burroway believes, “We need to know soon, preferably in the first paragraph, the character’s gender, age, race/nationality. We need to know something of his or her class, period, and region. A profession and marital status.” How do you ‘craftily’ get all this information into the beginning of a story without losing naturalness?

BERNARD: It’s funny, I’m not sure that I agree with that statement. I mean, I think you have to have some orienting details in the beginning, but actually I think you can overcrowd the beginning of the story, you can sort of frontload it with too much exposition or too many facts. There’s a way to dole out the appropriate exposition in such a way that the reader is not bombarded by it and therefore can absorb it. So, I’m not sure . . . maybe you have to have that in your head as a writer, the kind of crucial information, but there’s a way to get that in early and keep a reader aware of all those important facts.

Though there are also pieces of writing that postpone certain really essential facts or questions. I mean, you read *The Metamorphosis*, for example, by Franz Kafka, by thinking, “Wait a minute, this guy’s a bug? How did this happen? How big is he?” You’re just asking these questions all the time, and in a funny way, how it happens is never answered, and that’s what makes the book really good. I think there’s also something to be said about postponing information to reveal it at the right time, so that’s another take on that whole idea. But it is really hard—you don’t want it to sound like, “Jane was a 14-year-old woman with blonde hair who lives in the Montreal province 20 miles from . . .” It’s just so clunky. And I think that stuff, that kind of embedding the necessary information in a text is, for us, a trial and error. I mean, you read something for the tenth time and you think—oh, a reader wouldn’t know how old this person is, and he’ll need to know in the first two pages because on the third page their elementary school teacher shows up, so the reader should know what details can be added, and sometimes they’re oblique details. You don’t have to mention the name, but you can say her hair is in pigtails, and the chances are that she’s a little girl or wearing a certain kind of clothes, or whatever the details are that can help define who the character is.

DANA: How much of your fiction is autobiographical? I couldn’t help but hear echoes of your memoir in “Bit-O-Honey,” where the father is a dead-ringer

for your father, where the narrator gets thrown out in the same way, and has dad-sightings, and can't figure out how such a little dispute can isolate them for what feels like an eternity.

BERNARD: Yeah, that's the autobiographical story. During one of my periods of estrangement with my father, I was driving back from some place on Halloween, and I just had this impulse to make a turn and just drive by the house, which I hadn't seen at the point in a year or two. At this point, I was in my late forties, but I saw my father handing out candies, and I almost slammed on the breaks and started weeping like a child, just, "Oh, Daddy's giving other kids candy but not me!" It was so pathetic, but it was astonishing to feel something at that age that was so primal and so like a child would feel. So, the story really emerged from those really conflicted feelings, not only over his generosity to strangers compared to his estrangement from me, but about the fact that these really kind of difficult child-like emotions had welled up in me suddenly and unavoidably, and it was embarrassing to be that age and still feel that desire to have love from a parent. Although, I'm sure that never goes away.

That's the most autobiographical story in that book, and the rest of them have much less autobiographical origins. They're incidents I overheard, for instance, the first story in the book where the woman is wearing the ankle-bracelet and can't travel throughout her yard, that was actually something somebody told me. And I'd never really thought about that before, I mean, your movement is completely restricted. I had gotten my blood drawn to be tested for AIDS, I knew someone who as a result of taking drugs that made him very hyperactive had actually painted a neighbor's wall. Those are like springboards.

MELISSA: In reading your short story collection, it hit me (the way a skillet might) how little exposure we've had to fiction featuring gay characters. I know writers resist writing what they are unfamiliar with, and I feel we undergraduates in particular feel limited by our personal experiences (you have no idea how many stories feature young twenty-somethings in central PA). But there is a heck of a lot of white, middle-class, American fiction out there. Do you have any advice for writers who want to broaden their writing, diversify the ground it covers?

BERNARD: I gotta tell you, I think that position, that you're gonna misrepresent someone, is not just ridiculous, it's insane, because that's what especially fiction is. That's somebody taking on someone else's experience, or a character's experience. And if you can't do that, then you're going to end

up writing autobiography. It also presumes, and this is also very offensive to me, that there is a correct representation. I don't know how that would be. Furthermore, I think the history of literature is filled with black writers writing about white characters, women writing about men, men certainly writing about women. Some of the best gay stories I know were written by straight women. I think the idea of writing only your own demographic is absolutely tyrannical and I think that people to whom that is said should absolutely ignore it.

MELISSA: What's a good way to start writing outside their experience? I think people don't know how to begin. Do you think we should research?

BERNARD: I think maybe you could research, I think maybe you could ask—I talked to a friend who had been pregnant with twins about some stuff, but here's the thing: I think what you have to do is think, "Okay, I'm really scared, but I'm gonna do it!" It's hard to get to that point, because then you think, "What if I misrepresent?" Well, then change it, or throw it away. The thing is, I think that what is incredible about art is that people are doing things out of their comfort zone, they're trying things. Fiction contains the possibility of empathy with another person because you're sort of taking on the viewpoint of a character who might be nothing like you. That's fantastic. That's what it's all about, and I hate the idea that there are people who think there are these restrictions. It's just so weird. I'm deeply opposed to it.

MELISSA: What's the worst thing you've ever written and turned in to somebody?

BERNARD: When I was writing poetry, a friend of mine knew the writer Christopher Ikowitz, who lived by the beach in Los Angeles, and I do not remember how it happened, but he got some of my poems. He very kindly invited me over, we talked about them, he was unbelievably gracious and enthusiastic, and I was really surprised because they weren't as good as I wanted them to be, even with his praise. He said, "Send me stuff, if you want, in the future." So, I wrote what was my first attempt to write about the miracle chicken, that case of my father's. I'll never forget, he called me up and I asked him if he'd read it and he said, "I have, and no, no, no, no, no, no." I was so heartbroken and embarrassed that I honestly did not hear another word he said. I was deaf for about three hours after that. And he was right. It took a while to let that sink in, but he was right.

DANA: What are your writerly pet peeves, in other peoples' writing or in your own?

BERNARD: There are a lot of ticks in my own writing that I have to go back and, you know sort of rules, and quantifiers like “so.” Like, “It was *so* large,” or, “It was *so* sunny.” How about, “It was sunny?” Or any time stuff isn’t specific or tangible in a story, I feel like I’m in a fog. I read to make the world crystal-clear, and to have everything kind of murky and confusing is really annoying. One of the things that really annoys me in a piece of writing is a kind of habit where the writer tells you what’s going to happen or how you should feel the sentence before it happens. They’ll say, “She yelled at me really loud,” and then they’ll have a piece of dialogue with an exclamation point, and then you’ll think, “Wow, that would have been way better just by itself.” It would have been more abrupt, it’s clear she’s angry, there’s an exclamation point, you know? A lot of times that can sabotage the power. Just that little thing. So, that’s a pet peeve.

MELISSA: Is there a kind of tact or technique you employ when a student’s work is particularly horrible? How do you work with a piece that’s not going anywhere? What kind of tact to you employ even if it seems hopeless?

BERNARD: Well, I do think it is important to qualify bad news with something positive. I also have to say that I make it clear that if somebody brings something into workshop, and I may or may not like it, that does not mean I don’t like them and their entire body of work and everything they will do from this point until the end of time. It’s just, “I’m looking at this, that’s what this is about.” Here’s the thing. I don’t want to pull my punches. I’m not the friend. If they want flattery, they can send it to their mother. Or if they want to be disowned, they can send it to their mother. I really feel like that’s something I can give. Just, “Look, this absolutely does not work from beginning to end. It’s the wrong point of view. The tone is just totally embarrassing, or you think this is funny, but it’s tragic, but it’s funny, or you think that it’s tragic, but it’s hilarious.” Those are really difficult things to hear and say, but there is absolutely no reason to not say what I think and I think that everybody else in a workshop, whether they’re wrong or right just has to go on a limb and say, “This is my reaction.”

DANA: Have you ever make a student cry?

BERNARD: It wasn’t in response to my criticism, but I had an Australian student who came to this program from Australia and was probably 60. She wrote really good book reviews for an Australian newspaper, but she couldn’t write creative stuff, she just couldn’t, it just wasn’t happening. So she was struggling with that, and I wasn’t the only person who was having a hard time with her work. But one day she came into my office for a conference,

and she sat down and her nostrils started dialating and her eyes were getting red and I was thinking, “Oh, no, here we go,” and she started crying, “I’ll never be a writer, I’ll never be a writer,” with that Australian accent, and I was strangely unmoved, and I said to her, “Well, I suppose that’s true.” And at that moment, it seemed like, “Big deal.” I don’t mean to be cavalier, but I said, “What if you become a better reviewer? What if you become a more astute reader? What if you do something with your love of books that really does work for you? Writing is not a career that is so filled with rewards and money and glamour that I’m really going to insist that anybody who wants to should pursue it to the ends of the earth.” It sounds like a strange thing to say, but at that moment I really thought that there’s lots of things that are more tragic than that.

DANA: Does it affect your relationship with people if they know you’re a memoirist? Do people ever say something to you and then follow that with, “Don’t put that in your memoir?”

BERNARD: I think it does, and they have, but not much. What happens actually more often is: there’s a friend of mine, an absolutely incredible and excellent poet. She has a little notebook she takes with her, and she’s always whipping it out and writing things down, like phrases that interest her and stuff. A lot of times what happens, especially when I’m with a group of writers, is either that somebody will articulate something really beautifully or unusually or someone will tell a story and there’s this silence, and everyone’s thinking, “I need to use that, you can’t use that, I have to use this!”

MELISSA: How do you end a story, or a memoir? How do you know you’ve reached the end?

BERNARD: Endings are really difficult. I feel like the story has to fall in a certain way, there has to be a certain sense both of closure and of mystery, and to reach that balance is difficult. It really depends on the story. My favorite thing, and this does not happen very often, but especially with shorter pieces of writing, is when you think you have maybe five more pages before the story comes to an end, and you’re writing and suddenly, BANG, it’s there, and you think, “Wait, this happened too quickly! Do I need 5 more pages?” That’s just a gift from the gods. More often than not, it’s just trial and error, and really for me, refining the last paragraph so it’s stirring and resonant in the way I hope it will be.

Ryan Gil

AFTER ALEXANDER CALDER'S *POMEGRANATE*, 1949

There seems an inherent weakness in the way
we walk—upright, weight localized within
the smallest possible area; linear distribution
from heels to the base of the spine.

Outside, the world hangs in an impossible, perfect
balance, wherever you go. January Sunday starts to recline
across the horizon at Loch Raven Reservoir,
fifteen miles north the edge of Charm City,

silhouettes of conifers blurred across
the icy face of the lake. Will we step
out together, test our concentrated masses and gravity,
our vacillating wills on the gleaming surface?

Just beyond reach, a bare hand of persimmon tree
grips perilously a cluster of unripe fruit,
somehow four months too late, yellow knobs
expired at the bends of a thin, spindled finger.

The tangent of the fruit and branch is impeccable,
dark absolute against the buttered grain of sunset devolving
to the deep blue of night. Something inside us
loses all equilibrium in this atmosphere—

Katherine Henrichs

THE DOG MAN

I. There is a man who comes in at least three times a week, always just before close, to buy carrots and broccoli and tomatoes for his dogs. He has five of them and he walks them two and three at a time around downtown. “Nothing for those dogs,” he says to me as I ring him up, “Nothing for those dogs.” He repeats it over and over, with emphasis on the Nothing. It’s supposed to be an inside joke. Today I am sitting on the Diag with my back against yours while you play chess and he walks through with two dogs in tow. He stops in the middle of the large brick area in front of the Graduate Library, drops one of the leashes, and walks away. The dog stays, turning on the spot every few moments to watch her master’s progress around the square of concrete benches enclosing the brick pavement. Soon he returns, picks up the leash, and carries on. I wonder if he is performing a test or an exercise in obedience or loyalty, or if maybe his arm was just tired from walking all those dogs every day, twos and threes, from carrying those heavy bags of vegetables home to them every night.

II. On a bench separated from you by square planks and nails of table like blades separated by a spine, I feel the burden of what I have tamed on my back like wings. I know more than I used to about the limits of your loyalty. I am master here, I have accepted that, I am suspended above. As you bend over the table your ass crack shows above your unbelted jeans. Doesn’t he ever wear underwear? she asks. I am above such petty physical indiscretions. The blades of the wings cut into my spine like meaning thrown around. He is an animal, she says, that’s just what he is to me. An animal. She’s drunk, but she’s right. Isn’t that the same thing? I ask: as floating like lily pads do above their stems, as dead leaves congealing in the shape of a puddle after the water has dried up.

William Hoffacker

THE WHOLE TRUTH

When I awoke one morning and found three agents from the FBI wandering around my parents' house, at first I figured that I hadn't really woken up at all. Surely this was just a dream, because nobody wakes up to their normal life in their suburban home and finds FBI agents walking through each room, looking from floor to ceiling like they're searching for something, writing God-knows-what in their slender, black notepads.

I didn't wake up to the sound of my alarm clock but to the flick of the ceiling lamp and a hand on my back. My mother quietly called my name until I turned over and faced her, my eyes flirting with the light as my heavy lids opened and shut again.

"William, there are some people here in the house," she told me. "They're from the FBI. Just cooperate with them. Everything will be fine." She sounded so calm, and I think she was holding back panic for my sake, so I wouldn't be afraid.

"Wait, what? Why?" I asked, slowly fighting my way into the waking world.

"It's something your father did, but he's not here. He already left for work," she said. "I have to stay here, so I can't drive you to the bus stop." She did that every morning during my junior year. I took the express bus to get to my high school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. "Get ready for school, and they won't get in your way. But try to be helpful if they ask you anything."

She left the room and shut the door behind her so that I could change out of my pajamas with some privacy. From inside my bedroom I could hear pairs of footsteps moving around downstairs, the creak of the old floorboards underneath them, and the wild yelps of Speedy, my family's Chihuahua, whom my mother had locked in the basement because the first sign of strangers made him go wild.

I moved quickly as I pulled on a collared shirt and dressy slacks, which my mother left out for me each morning before school—an old habit from my childhood that she never stopped doing even when I entered high school. Normally I'd move much slower this early in the day, and it might take a few more visits from my mom to get me out of bed. Today I felt eager to leave my

cozy bedroom. I had to see what was going on out there. More than fear, I felt confusion, wondering what could've caused this.

Walking to the kitchen downstairs, I passed by one agent in the dining room, a woman with short, dark hair and the letters FBI written across her chest in big, yellow print. *Gotta be a dream*, I thought. *No way they wear vests like that. That's how the letters look in every TV show, so it must be my imagination.*

In the kitchen, I tried to stay calm as I ate my chocolate frosted Pop Tarts for breakfast. I didn't bother to sit down at the table. I leaned against the counter where the kitchen meets the dining room. Mostly I kept my eyes down on the toaster pastry in my hand, but every now and then I glanced over at the strange houseguest.

She never looked back at me as her eyes surveyed the room. I wondered what she could be looking for. What was this all about? Something my dad had done? What did that mean? This FBI woman wasn't giving me any clues, silently writing little notes to herself, maybe about my mother's small collection of knick-knacks. Or about the suspicious kid who wouldn't stop staring her way.

Climbing back up the stairs, a second agent passed by me, carrying a large, black and grey tower in his arms. I recognized it as our desktop computer, the Dell that had been with our family for a couple of years now. At the top of the stairs I stepped into the bathroom in order to brush my teeth. The third agent, a tall man dressed exactly like the others, stood in the hallway between my bedroom and the room that had previously held our computer.

"Hi," he said. "Feel free to go about your business, but I'd like to ask you a few questions."

He already had his notepad open and his pen held up to it. I could tell this wasn't a request. I thought about shutting the bathroom door. I'd never been interrogated before. This guy must've been professionally trained to get information out of people. I was nervous to say the least, but I remembered what my mom said about cooperating with them. "Okay," I said.

"What would you say your father does for a living?" he asked.

This should be an easy question to answer, but all my life I've never known what to say. When I was a kid, if somebody asked I'd say, "He works with computers," and that was enough of an answer. By now I'd learned that that's not a job description, though.

I didn't know a job title for my father. I couldn't even tell you what company employed him. Based on his dinnertime anecdotes about work, I'd gleaned that when anyone had a problem with a computer, he was the guy expected to fix it. "He works in IT," I told the FBI guy. Really that's just the same as my little kid answer, only it sounds more official.

“The computer from the room behind me—is that your father’s?” he asked.

“That’s the family computer,” I said as I squeezed some toothpaste onto my brush. “My dad uses it, and so do my mom and I.”

“Are there any more computers in the house?”

“I have my own laptop. It’s downstairs in the living room.” I remembered the man walking down the stairs, his face hidden by the tower in his hands. “Are you going to take that, too?” I asked. *Is there anything saved on there that I’ll regret later?* I thought to myself.

“We’ll have a look at it,” he said. “But if it’s your personal computer then it won’t be necessary to take it with us. You’re the only one who uses it?”

I nodded as I brought the toothbrush up to my mouth.

“One last question,” he said. “Have you noticed your dad showing signs of any strange or suspicious behavior?”

I shook my head as I jerked the toothbrush from side to side, and I thought to myself, here I am communicating with a man from the FBI like I would with my dentist who asks me questions even as he works on my teeth, except instead of asking me how I like school this guy wants to know about computers and my dad, and I still don’t know why. The whole time I kept thinking about suspects on television who yell, “I know my rights,” when they’re taken down to the station for questioning, and to my dismay I realized that I didn’t know my rights. Could I plead the fifth when talking to this FBI guy, or was I under some legal obligation to answer his questions with the truth?

As I grabbed my backpack, my mother stood in the living room clutching Speedy to her chest because one of the agents went to search the basement. Before I left, my mother told me, “Everything will be fine. Have a nice day at school.” I had so much I wanted to ask her—perhaps she knew why this was going on—but I’d be late for school if I missed the next bus, so I didn’t have time to give her the third degree.

“Thanks, Mom,” I said as I walked out the front door. I put headphones in my ears as I searched my iPod for some music lighthearted enough to take my mind off this weird morning and thoughts of how grave the situation may be. My fingers turned the wheel to Regina Spektor. Her song, “Ghost of Corporate Future,” is one that I often sang to myself whenever I needed to clear my head. All throughout freshman year I could be heard reciting the lyrics under my breath in the locker room before gym class, afraid that I’d make a fool of myself playing flag football or soccer. Now I needed to hear Regina Spektor sing those words, “People are just people like you,” because I’d woken up to FBI agents and a mystery about my father.

My iPod wasn’t enough, though, because I couldn’t deny my confused feelings. As I walked the four long blocks to the bus stop, I had to ask myself what my dad’s morning was like. Did he know that this day was coming?

Now that it had come, did he know it was here? Did he make it to work already, or was he still on his way? Did my mother have time to call him? Was he blissfully ignorant? Were there FBI agents at his office now waiting to arrest him? Had he been arrested already? What had he done to deserve this?

These were difficult questions to ask, and I wasn't in a position to answer any of them just yet. After I got to school, I didn't tell anyone that the FBI had been in my house that morning. All my friends would inevitably have the same questions I did, and I didn't want to be reminded of my ignorance. I tried to force the strange morning out of my mind. Denial would be more comfortable, I thought, but being silent about it couldn't make me forget.

• • •

My father is a man who likes computers, games, and history, especially the era of World War II. In hindsight I realize that some of my earliest memories of him involve all three. The computer was an old desktop PC running Windows 95, one that family owned long before the tower taken away by the FBI agent. The game was called Wolfenstein, and the objective was killing Nazis.

I was too young to play this game by myself, only about five years old. Wolfenstein was an early first-person shooter, in other words the type of game where you see through the eyes of the person you're controlling, who is always holding a weapon. This was an early nineties video game with crummy, two-dimensional graphics, and my father loved to play it with me. Although there wasn't any blood or graphic violence, there was shooting and killing, so I'm sure the game wasn't made for kids in my age group. My dad wasn't the type to care about that, as long as we were having fun.

The premise was that you played an American soldier invading Castle Wolfenstein, a German military base. The castle was filled with winding, labyrinthine passageways lined by grey stone walls and identical metal doors. My father sat in the computer chair holding the mouse while I sat on his lap at the keyboard, eyes focused on the bright, flickering screen. He did all the moving around and shooting, and I had one simple job. Whenever he approached a door, I was supposed to open it by pressing the space bar. "Ready?" he'd ask.

I was never ready, because I knew what could be waiting on the other side of each bluish, steel door. Okay, it could be just a safe, empty room, maybe containing some spare cartridges of ammo lying around and waiting to be picked up. More often than not, though, a German soldier with beady eyes and gritted teeth would stare daggers at me through the screen and hold up his gun, pointing it at my chest. "Oom-pa-pa!" the Nazi would yell upon sighting us, or at least that's what the line sounded like to me.

That sound—those three meaningless syllables—would startle me every time, not in the way that something truly frightening might give me nightmares, but in such a way that makes little kids laugh because they like to be spooked. Whenever I hit the space bar and a Nazi appeared, my father would spring into action and shoot him dead with a few clicks. “Meine lieben!” the soldier would shout as he fell to the ground and magically disappeared. It would be years before I found out that means, “My life!”

As a child I never had the courage to play that game without him. After school I’d wait for him to get home from work. I knew if I ventured into Castle Wolfenstein by myself I’d be paralyzed whenever I came to a door, because the cartoon Nazis were as frightening as they were funny. I felt certain that I couldn’t do what my father did, taking down our enemies with a few mouse clicks.

Sometimes when I was sitting alone in the living room, my father would come around a corner suddenly and shout, “Oom-pa-pa!” in his best German accent. I’d jump out of my seat and put up my little finger guns, yelling “bang, bang” as I fired them at his towering frame. “Meine lieben!” he’d whimper, clutching his heart as he backed out of the room, and I’d fall onto the couch in a fit of giggles.

I have my father to thank, in part, for my sense of humor. It was my father’s idea that we make it a family tradition to listen to Arlo Guthrie’s “Alice’s Restaurant” every Thanksgiving, because, as the singer states, the events described “happened two Thanksgivings ago—that’s two years ago on Thanksgiving.” If you’ve never heard it, it’s less of a song and more of a comedy track with Guthrie playing guitar and telling a story that lasts almost twenty minutes. Guthrie describes a time when he dumped a load of garbage by the side of a road, got arrested the next morning, had to go to trial, and years later had his morals questioned when he was drafted, all because he was a litterbug.

“Alice’s Restaurant trivia,” my dad said to me last Thanksgiving when all eighteen minutes of the song were over. “What is the color of the VW microbus?” My father loves to do this; whenever we’ve watched or heard something over and over like this, he quizzes me on little details to see how closely I’ve been paying attention.

“Red,” I answered, because I’ve been listening carefully for years now. When I was younger, I didn’t get “Alice’s Restaurant.” I wondered what was so entertaining about this man rambling on about his run-in with the law, and I didn’t understand what a draft was. As I got older, some time in my teen years, I started to see the humor in it, laughing at the ridiculous proportions to which Guthrie’s small littering crime gets blown up.

“I want to tell you about the town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts,” Guthrie sings, describing the scene of his crime, “where this happened here, they got

three stop signs, two police officers, and one police car, but when we got to the *scene of the crime* there was five police officers and three police cars, being the biggest crime of the last fifty years, and everybody wanted to get in the newspaper story about it.”

Now it reminds me of my family’s own story of the FBI coming into our house, the chain reaction of events caused by one thoughtless mistake. When you first hear Arlo Guthrie tell the story of leaving behind that pile of garbage, it sounds like the sort of offense that would warrant a mere slap on the wrist from Johnny Law, and instead he tells the tale of getting bailed out of jail, going to court, etc. Once I learned what my father did to attract the FBI, I felt that the consequences of his action were similar in their unexpected gravity.

• • •

I don’t know whether anyone picked up or arrested my father that morning, but I did learn from my mom later that same day what he did to warrant a visit from the FBI. While I waited for the bus to take me home to Queens, she explained the situation to me over the phone. She started by saying, “He got into some trouble at work.”

From what I know, in my dad’s line of work, there’s not a lot of job stability, and that was a fact we’d all gotten used to. Every couple of years he’d lose his job, usually because of budget cutbacks, or maybe this time the company he worked for was bought up by a larger company which was bringing in their own people.

But he’d always land on his feet and find a new job in no time. As expendable as IT personnel may seem sometimes, there’s also a lot of demand for people who understand computers and know how to fix their kinks and failures. Now, my dad worked for one company, which we’ll call Nottingham, for a few years, until they started making major cutbacks. They laid him off, and he left with some resentment for his former employers. “His bosses were very rude to their employees,” my mom said. “They didn’t care about the people they fired.”

He carried that grudge to his next job at another company. There he used a username and password which he still knew from Nottingham in order to access his old boss’s emails. “He read through them and found out who’d be fired next,” my mom said. “It was a friend of his, so your father warned him.” I imagine that he called the guy and passed on the secret, but I don’t know any details like that for sure. I wouldn’t even feel comfortable asking my dad to clarify such things, because in our house we rarely talk about this part of our history.

We prefer to pretend like this never even happened. It’s one of those classic family secrets that can only be labeled a secret because no one ever

speaks of it, but really everybody knows so some secret that is. It's not that my mother and I feel ashamed of what he did. We're not comfortable bringing it up because it must make my father feel awful.

So as much as we can, we keep all discussion about it locked up inside ourselves. As time went by it became easier to avoid the subject. Each one of us has been trying to keep on a mask, so heavy that it slips sometimes, because nothing can go unsaid all the time. The longer we held it up, the stronger we got. This is not: "One day we'll look back on this and laugh about it." This is: "Someday we'll never look back on this at all."

Of course his old boss at Nottingham got wind of my dad's crime, probably by tracking his IP address, but I'm not sure of that either. Opening someone else's mail is a federal offense, and the same goes for tampering with someone else's emails, hence the arrival of the FBI. "They say he was hacking, even though he got in with a password," my mom told me.

He lost his new job. He had to get a lawyer. The case had to go to trial, and that took forever to happen. My head filled with unspoken questions about whether my dad would have to serve jail time. We ate dinner in front of the television every night, watching Stephen Colbert and not speaking to each other. The three of us chewed our food and laughed at a few punch lines. I kept my plate in my lap and stuffed another bite in my mouth whenever I thought of a question for my dad. We never acknowledged the tension that pervaded the house.

I'd love to hear this story from my dad's perspective, but I understand why we keep up the masks. He doesn't know I've seen it, but my father feels ashamed that he lost his job and let down his family over one stupid mistake, and I don't want to bring that back to the forefront of his mind. I'm not sure what I'd see if he threw down the mask, but one event from that time gave me a glimpse.

...

The dentist put up my x-rays on the little, lit up screen—white molars, bicuspid, and other chompers lit up against a black background of nothing—and pointed to a few nubs sitting cheek to cheek, each one a little smaller than its neighbor like a Russian nesting doll all laid out on my mother's knick-knack shelf. "These ones are your wisdom teeth," he said. "You have seven in total."

When my mother scheduled this appointment, she didn't know my father would lose his job due to a federal offense. The visit from the FBI happened only a few weeks before this day when I found out my wisdom teeth outnumbered the average person's by three, as if I was moving backwards on an evolutionary scale, like a boy born with two appendixes.

"You must be lucky, I guess," the dentist told me with an exemplary smile. *That's the kind of luck that's been running through this family, I*

thought. I didn't dare to ask how things could get any worse. Then the three of us—me, my mother, and this bearer of strange news—had to decide what would be done about removing these teeth. Option one: remove four teeth from the left side on one day and three teeth from the right side on a second day. My mother preferred option two, the single procedure in which I'd be put under anesthetic and all seven teeth would come out. One operation, I figured, must be cheaper than two, and we no longer had my dad's income. It'd be another month before my mother went back to work for the first time in six years, returning to the advertising firm she'd left to become a full-time homemaker.

I must've gotten a healthy dose of that anesthetic because I hardly remember anything from the operation. I was sitting in the long, plastic chair, staring out the window at the leafless trees outside the dentist's office, and then next thing my location has changed to the passenger seat of the family Nissan as my mother drove me home, and even that's a little fuzzy. I had to lie down as soon as I walked in the front door. My head was still woozy from going under, a feeling that would persist as I took Vicoden for the pain. My mother brought me to the long part of the sectional couch, laid the white woolen blanket over my fragile frame, and left me to slip back into sleep.

When I awoke, my father and mother were sitting at the other end of the couch, only a few feet away from me, and I heard noises that rooted me to the spot. If I didn't stir, not a muscle out of place, then maybe they'd believe I was still asleep. *Maybe I am still asleep*, I thought, because I swore I could hear a grown man crying.

My brain was still swimming in my skull from the anesthetic, and I was already taking Vicoden for the pain in my mouth. I didn't know what kind of side-effects that combination could lead to, and I thought that this could very well be a dream, either because I was still asleep or this was a sort of waking dream, a kind I'd never had before.

But if this was real, then I lay there with my eyes shut, flat on my back, thinking "stiff as a board" under my blanket, my feet hanging over the armrest, and my dad was crying in the same room. I didn't see tears, of course, because I was supposed to be fast asleep in my doped up dream land, but I could hear him sobbing. I've heard that almost hysterical noise out of my own mouth before, when the world overwhelms me and I have to let it all out.

In between his quick, choking breaths he apologized to my mother because, in his mind, his crime was something he'd done not to his old boss or to himself, but to us, his family. We were all paying the price for his mistake, and that put him to shame, brought him to tears. My mother did her best to console him, telling him, "Everything will be alright. We'll get through this together. You'll find a new job after this has blown over. Of

course we forgive you. It was a simple mistake, one that we can all forget about once this is over. You can't change what's already happened."

I dared to turn my head and peek out through one eyelid, and really I was in no danger of being noticed because I was out like a broken string of Christmas lights as far as they knew. The two were holding each other, my father's head on my mother's shoulder. Such a peculiar sight, because my parents are rarely intimate, at least when I'm around. I've hardly ever seen them kiss, and the same is true for saying "I love you." I guess all kinds of openness are usually verboten in my family. We should be closer to each other than to anyone else, but normally we don't like to get too personal.

But even stranger was the sight and sounds of my father crying. I'd never witnessed it before, and it hasn't happened since. This would be a monumental moment in any father-son relationship. For a son, the father is the very first role model, a paragon of strength and stability, a hero in the child's eyes. My father has never been the macho type, preferring golf over football, but I'd never seen him show weakness like this. Was this the same man who could wipe out the Nazi soldiers who struck fear in my heart?

For me, this experience was like watching Superman falling out of the sky. In some part of me, the sight evokes pity, sadness, and sympathy, like I long to reach out and help the poor guy. At the same time, though, the tragedy is confusing, and I grow angry with what I can't understand, demanding, "Fly, fly. goddamn it, you're supposed to be able to fly." And the hero worship dies a little.

As my father fell further with each second of sobbing, I just lay there, not only pretending to sleep but praying that I would drift off again. My father wasn't opening up to me; he cried in order to get it off his chest and so that my mother would console him. I was never meant to see that, hear it, or even know about it. The same man who gave me the responsibility of opening all those doors in Castle Wolfenstein would never willingly let me open the door to his mind and see his true feelings.

And now that it's over, still it could've been a dream. I've never said a word about it to either of my parents, and I haven't heard them mention either. Maybe the cocktail of anesthetic, Vicoden, and pain conjured up a hallucination of my father without the mask, teaching me a lesson about why it's best to let this subject go ignored. But I have to believe that this moment was real, because it explains so much about why my parents so rarely spoke about this ordeal, even while it was still going on.

It would be months before my father's case went to trial, and I'm sure the legal fees piled up during that time. My mother got back her old desk job so that our family would have a steady income again. While she went to work and I went to school, my father stayed at home and took to preparing our dinners, a true role reversal between husband and wife.

With the silence about it at home, it's easy to feel like the truth is kept behind a curtain, where it's hidden from my view. Once in a while the curtain blows in the breeze, and I catch a small glimpse of that which we don't normally talk about, like when my mother had to tell me what he'd done or when she'd mention his court dates. She only made quick, vague references to such matters. "Dad has to take the car tomorrow because he's going to court," she might say. I waited in silence for the day when she'd sit me down and tell me the verdict.

When the case did go to trial, I wish I'd been there in the courtroom. I'd like to see my father get up on the stand and explain himself to a judge and jury. Better yet, I imagine myself as the defense attorney, inquiring about my father's motives, teasing out every little detail I've been afraid to ask him about because this is the great shame that made him cry.

And he'd have to answer all my questions, with no more denial and no more silence, because the bailiff would ask him, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" And with a hand on the Bible, he'd say, "Yes, I do."

...

The house arrest period was a strange, awkward time full of dinners that my dad would cook with the groceries that my mom picked up on weekends—pasta and chicken dishes that tasted mediocre compared with my mom's cooking. Every weekday I'd come home from school and he'd be in front of the television in the living room, so I spent a lot of time in my bedroom in those days.

The judge had sentenced him to six months of house arrest, but his seclusion lasted much longer. My aunt and uncle would host family get-togethers during the weekend, and relatives would ask me where my father was and why he never came out anymore. Through explanations from my mother, they knew about the crime, the trial, and the house arrest gone by. They didn't understand why he still kept to himself. I tend to think that he was worried they'd talk about it with him around, and I bet some of my uncles who think they're so funny would make jokes about it. And maybe it would be even worse, more awkward and uncomfortable, if they avoided the subject, like we always did at home despite the tension it created.

Now he had a steady job at the Bronx Borough President's office, where he worked with computers again, and for months it seemed like he was either there or at home. On some days he did get out of the house, though, and the two of us were riding in the car when he came the closest he's ever come to saying something to me about the whole mess.

It was the summer after I graduated high school, and he was driving me to Target to buy some supplies from my dorm room—a lamp, a bookshelf,

some hangers, we had a list written by my mom. The car was filled with classic rock tunes from Q104.3 and anticipation for the end of summer and my departure to Susquehanna University in rural Pennsylvania.

“You excited about school starting soon?” my father asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m ready for a change.”

“Well, you couldn’t ask for a bigger change,” he said, “going from New York to Selinsgrove. It won’t be like living here. You think you’re ready?”

“I’m not worried about the small town thing,” I said. “If I’m nervous about anything, it’s just being on my own.”

“You’ll get used to it,” he said. “It can be hard, making every decision for yourself. Just remember, whatever you do, try not to do anything wrong. When it comes to following the rules, don’t take any unnecessary risks, because you will get caught. Trust me on this. It’s in the Hoffacker bloodline. It’s just our luck. We can’t get away with anything, so remember that if you think about doing something wrong.” He spoke casually as he passed this advice down to me. These words were a warning, but not a stern one. This was a friendly warning, the kind you share with a loved one because you’re looking out for their safety.

And right there, underneath the surface, between the lines and you don’t even have to look hard, not spoken of yet unhidden like the proverbial elephant in the room, was the story of the firing, the new job, the old password, the email, the friend, the caught-in-the-act, the FBI, the trial, the ankle bracelet, and the shame.

And why should any of that have to be said? I know the basic narrative, even if I don’t know all the details. What does it matter if I go to my grave not knowing if my dad was arrested that morning or not? If I asked him, what purpose would that serve except to bring up a painful memory for him? When it never gets talked about in my house, my first instinct is to think that we’re a family of fakes and ignoring the truth must be wrong. In reality, the situation is far more complex than that.

For my own sake, my curiosity might be sated if he one day tells me all about how and why committed his crime and started this bizarre chain reaction. But for my father’s sake, he may need the silence from his wife and son. Our feigned ignorance, the deliberate denial, may protect his feelings and help him move on. It is said that time heals all wounds, and maybe after some more years we’ll look back on these events together and laugh about them the way we find humor in Arlo Guthrie’s story of littering and punishment. But when you can’t see the wounds, it’s hard to tell how well they’ve healed. I ought to be sure my dad has fully recovered before we really talk, because I don’t want to reopen those wounds.

Chelsea Henderson

FIVE STONES

1 Samuel 17:40

In the full swell of mid-morning,
when the cheese had softened and soured
in the tents and the men had nearly fainted
in a heat that blistered like rope burn,
I stole off to the pebbled streambed
for a makeshift armor that could fit
into a shepherd's bag, fishing up five stones:
one for the dark and glossy tint
of a defiant girl's eyes, for its edges
as sharp, as cutting—one for fitting
in the crook of my sling,
one for the plum-print
of a bruise it would make
on my brother's arm later, one
for remembering how my father
equated *stone* and *bone*—both
return to dust—and one for the force
of a name in a mouth, for the visceral
palm-weight of a word, its pelting power.

Jessi Holler

THE SQUARE

after George Caleb Bingham

Where are the men like this, in far-gone jackets,
 bending with flat backs around the stump
 of the news. Where is the man who holds his neighbor
 fainting, big hands caught in the middle while the eyes
 roll up to the hat-lifters on the platform. Where is the light
 that catches in the break of a straw hat, the broken brim
 that shouts about the weaving. And where are the steps
 that host us, the man below looking just like
 the man above, with a sloppier haircut. Where are the vests,
 striped-in-front and silk-in-the-back. And the dogs
 of the country, edging up to politics as another way to court
 the down-hand scraggle. And where are the hands that sit
 on knees, the head caressing forward, the hand that points
 while the buttons covet slouch, the man who leans, belly
 tied up in teal pants, bow-sawing on a rose-stem cane. And
 the early light
 of old Missouri. In our country, it is always
 the beginning of the day.

In our country, it is always the beginning of the day.
*I put the hyacinth in the pantry, purple morning—
 and I ain't dyin' !*
 Behind the men who gather, other men ride furiously
 off, horses bucking before the news, hands white as river
 stones, and new. *You think that it'll spin while my hat's this broken;
 Court, I think we have this chance—a river.*
 Carried downstream, there is nothing you would make of it—pull
 you under anywhere, a boot or a log in your hand. Carried
 downtown, you want to go somewhere, and quickly now: bolted,
 blindfolded in a chair, while the other men read leather

sheets, and laugh. Blindfolded, you move like the river now, babbling
while the boys make signs in straw, slumped
with your own conscience like a goat that refuses. Not going
to the circle made of branches in the forest. Not going
to the spot where the island juts out into the water, like walking
downtown through the hooded buildings, and never saying
Take me.

Louie Land

COAL TOWN BLUES

It was the summer of '75 and I was sixteen and living in the mining town of Trevorton, Pennsylvania. It was the year after Nixon left office. It was the year Saigon fell and we left Vietnam and my brother Colin came home. At the end of the summer, Bruce Springsteen sang about how “the amusement park rises bold and stark” and that “kids are huddled on the beach in a mist.” For us, the amusement park was piles of culm, the coal leftovers, the dead, fine grain rock that couldn't be used. We would ride sleds down the culm banks, which looked just like the mountains when they were covered in snow, fearful of losing control and tumbling the rest of the way, because those banks were steep. For us, the misted beach was spots where water collected, where strip mining had cleared the land and left behind huge gouges, eyesores in the ground where they'd found coal.

They were called strip pits. They looked like little black beaches. You had to wade out a little bit, into the shallow water, before the ground suddenly dropped off and you were treading water over what seemed like endless nothing. Some of those pits were 200, 300 feet deep. Maybe deeper, we didn't know. We heard stories about what happened if a bit of cold wrapped around your ankles. Your legs cramped up in a second and you drifted to the bottom. There was nothing to grab onto.

The prospect of death never scared us.

I rode a school bus for sixty minutes each weekday, thirty minutes to school and thirty minutes back. My dad and my mom had both gone to Trevorton High School, eight blocks down the lane from where we lived now, back in the days when there was still a little bit of coal to mine in this town, but since then, all of the business had moved out. Somehow, the families went on. Trevorton had merged with another school, Mahoney Joint, to make Line Mountain, so I went there. The bus ride took us from our dirty coal town, where there were culm banks and where the mountains were empty because of the strip mining, and then out into the country, away from the mining, where the trees were still green and the mountains were real and dust was brown instead of black.

Home was a beat-up half of a double on one of the back alleys. The neighbors didn't talk. We had a back yard, with a rusted chain-link fence, but we didn't use it. I spent most of my little time at the house up in my room, listening to

rock records I picked up at yard sales. I had a scratchy old gramophone I'd taken from my brother when he'd left for the war, and would fall asleep at night listening to the Stones. When Colin came back, he didn't ask for it, and I kept it. The music made my time at home bearable.

When I got home from school, I walked the half mile to my uncle's garage, Troy's Autos, just outside of town. Uncle Troy was a grease monkey. He'd served in Korea and had a great eagle and an American flag tattooed to his right bicep, with *E Pluribus Unum* stenciled on the scroll clutched in the eagle's talons. When Colin'd gotten his draft notice two years ago, he'd thought of worming his way out of it, but Uncle Troy had said he would shoot Colin himself if he dodged the draft. "If you don't give enough of a fuck to fight for your country, then fuck you," he'd said. "There are men I served with who were more family than you could ever be."

Colin had gone, without another word to Uncle Troy.

I did my schoolwork in the garage. I wasn't smart and neither was Uncle Troy, but we got through my homework all right. Then I helped him fix up cars. When I was ten, I was just a go-for. I'd hand him the 5/8th inch ratchet head or the clamp for twisting out and removing oil filters. By fourteen, I was helping him to rebuild engines, service parts, and replace valves and head gaskets, but only after my homework was done. We worked until 6:00 and then he drove me back to the house. I earned two-fifty for two hours of honest work, which was below minimum wage but Troy said I wasn't old enough to be paid full-time yet.

Business was good for Uncle Troy. He wasn't rich but he took care of me. The garage was more home than my own bedroom. Chests full of tools, calendars of bikini-clad girls, the constant smell of grease and sweat and exhaust and cigarettes, the scratchy music that came out of the boxy old radio, tuned to rock AM 1400. In the summer, I worked full days and my uncle paid me ten dollars a day. We worked six days a week. It was always off-the-record.

I opened up a socket set and tried fitting a socket to the nut on a battery terminal clamp. From the radio crackled The Eagles's "Tequila Sunrise." Uncle Troy was situated underneath the car, which was jacked up about a foot from the ground, draining black, soupy oil into a pan. I cleaned the acid from the battery terminals, and only his boots and the bottom of his jeans were visible.

Uncle Troy's clothes were so stained with grease that they were as indistinguishable from each other as when they'd been new. He owned ten sets, but he might as well have worn the same once-white t-shirt and blue jeans to work every day. He smoked Menthol Kools, and his back pocket bore the faded outline of a pack of cigarettes like a logo. Whenever he ran out, he grabbed another pack from the carton on the back of his work-bench. He was one of those people whose hands never seemed to be clean, even after they were washed for several minutes. The water in the sink would be black but

his hands remained the same. His hair was still short, military-style, starting to frost gray at the temples. He was ten years older than my dad, whose moustache and hair remained dark.

I tucked the socket into my back pocket and jumped down from the small footstool and walked back to grab a metal brush.

“Easy how much you’re hopping around, kid,” Uncle Troy said from beneath the Pinto. I looked over my shoulder at him. “If this thing falls and I get crushed . . . that would make a terrible story. I got out of Korea to be crushed by a fucking Pinto.”

I laughed and turned back to the tools. When I was little, eight or nine, I used to stand far away from Uncle Troy when he went underneath a car and stay stock-still, afraid that any movement would drop the car on top of him. When I told him this, he laughed for a good few minutes, and then showed me how the jack worked to reassure me.

I went back to work. The corrosion on the terminals, green and foam-like, wouldn’t cause problems just yet, but it might until the next servicing. I took the brush to the terminals and scrubbed the acid away. Uncle Troy slipped out from beneath the car with the pan of oil and dumped it down the throat of a funnel into a large drum in the corner of the garage. He wiped his hands and pulled out his pack of cigarettes.

“Smoke?” he asked me, nodding outside. I followed him out. Smoking was something I’d done since Colin’d left for the war in ‘72. I’d been thirteen and I’d taken one of Uncle Troy’s cigarettes when he’d left the package sitting on the tool bench. Instead of telling me off, Uncle Troy smoked with me.

He handed me a Kool and his Zippo, the American crest on the front, faded because he’d owned the lighter for so long. I clicked it open, lit, drew and inhaled. He took the Zippo back and pocketed it.

“How’s your brother doing?” he asked me. I was surprised. Since coming back from Vietnam, Colin and Troy hadn’t talked much, but they hadn’t talked much before Colin’d left, either. He’d never wanted anything to do with Uncle Troy and his business. Right now, Colin was living off of pay he’d saved up from the military.

“He goes into town looking for work, or at least that’s what he says. Aside from that, he stays locked up in his room. Well, or he goes out with his old school buddies. Doesn’t come back until late at night. It’s like he’s not even back.”

“Huh. Were they in the war, too?”

“Most of them, yeah.”

Uncle Troy inhaled on his cigarette. “What does your dad think?”

“I don’t know. You know, Dad works, comes home, watches TV. Colin goes out. I think he and mom fight a lot, but fuck, I’m here.”

I didn’t tell him Colin would go out swimming at the strip pits. Uncle

Troy didn't like the strip pits. He'd lost a friend there when he'd been my age, maybe even younger. She'd cramped up and just kept going down. They never got to her body. Those pits were too deep to dredge.

I didn't tell Uncle Troy what I was afraid of, about the fights between Colin and Mom. Sometimes, it seemed like Colin didn't even know where he was. No matter the time of day, he would come home exhausted. I could hear in the patterns of his voice that his breath was short. I'd heard stories about the things the soldiers did to get through Vietnam, and when I heard Mom and Colin fighting downstairs, I turned my music up louder to shut it out.

"Huh." Uncle Troy flicked ashes from his cigarette. "How old are you?"

I raised my eyebrows. "Sixteen."

"You're too fucking young to say fuck."

I smiled. "Fuck you, Uncle Troy."

• • •

My family had a small black-and-white TV in the living room that my dad watched when he got home from work. He worked as an electrician and handyman and ran his own business. After work, the shirt came off, and he would drink beer, eat dinner and watch the television. He fought with Colin a few times but within the first month he pretty much let Colin do whatever he wanted. It wasn't like Colin was really there to fight with. Mom just did laundry and cooked and smoked cigarettes on the porch and went back to the bedroom and didn't come out. I didn't talk to either of my parents. Dad was always driving around for work, so I just spent my time with Uncle Troy, because I was useful there. He could keep me around.

Uncle Troy came to eat dinner with us every night anyway. He said that family unity was important, which is what his father taught him, which his grandfather had taught him, and so on, and so we all came together, the five of us, every night for whatever Mom decided to make. At least, it was supposed to be the five of us. Colin was rarely ever there. As a family, at dinner, we didn't talk. Dad sat at the table and read the newspaper. He didn't even look at his food anymore, he ate and read. Nobody spoke. The silence was normal.

On the rare occasion I actually saw Colin, he was flushed and sweaty. We never spoke. I passed him only once in a while at the top landing of the stairs, but we said nothing. I wasn't even sure if he heard me. My eyes followed his back until he closed his bedroom door behind him, my voice caught in my throat. Colin's door was always closed.

Except once. The first Friday in June, the sun shone bright like it did on cold winter days, though the temperature climbed towards ninety and Colin's door was wide open. I peeked inside. There was a fan on his windowsill. Colin must have left the door cracked to allow for a breeze. I guessed the draft had tugged it open.

“Hey,” I said, rapping my knuckles against the door frame. Colin was lying on his bed. His hair was long and filthy, his skin sweaty and grimy, and his eyes were closed. He was wearing his green army jacket, unzipped, with long sleeves despite how hot it was, but no shirt underneath.

“You all right?”

Colin grunted. “Yeah, I’m fine,” he said. “I’m just really tired. I was trying to sleep.”

I hung in the doorway. “What were you dreaming about? The war?”

“No. Would you just get out of here?”

I quietly backed out of the room, closing the door as I went. Colin’s door was always shut after that. I watched it, hoping it might open up again, but it didn’t. I never had the nerve to knock.

By the middle of June that summer, I was living in the apartment above Uncle Troy’s garage. The apartment was modest, just a bedroom, a small living room, kitchen and bathroom. I didn’t have much, but it was a place of my own and I was right on top of my work now. Uncle Troy didn’t charge me rent, but he did make me work harder.

“Do you know how to take an engine apart?” Uncle Troy asked. It was a sticky day, the kind of day where you didn’t get as greasy at work because when you wiped off the sweat, some of the grease came with. We’d set up two industrial-sized black fans in the corners of the garage and Miss June was fluttering in the breeze, not at all cold in her cream bikini. The hood of a red ’65 F250 was up and Uncle Troy and I were standing on wooden apple crates, peering down at 200 horsepower and six cylinders. The engine looked well-maintained, despite its age. I loved this kind of truck. It was just like the truck my dad took to work, except his was brown and rusted.

“I’ve seen you take them apart before,” I replied.

Uncle Troy shook his head and climbed down. “That’s not what I asked you, shithead.”

I turned around on the apple crate as he walked over to the work bench, pulled a new pack of Kools from the carton and stuck them in his back pocket. He threw me a pack of my own.

“You need to stop bumming off of me one cig at a time,” he said. “So have your own pack, from me. Free. Merry Christmas.”

“I buy my own cigs.” I tossed the Kools back. He caught them in one hand and threw them back to me again.

“You’re not hearing me. They’re free.”

I raised my eyebrows but tucked the cigarettes into my back pocket, like he did.

“So, can you take an engine apart?” he asked.

“Yeah. Of course I can.”

“Good, because there’s a lot of shit coming in here, and I want you helping

me. It's about time you stop living off of me and start working honestly for your living." He nodded to the F250. "First project."

Even though he gave me hell for it, he gave me a pack of cigarettes every time I needed one. I stopped buying my own, because Uncle Troy wouldn't take no for an answer.

For the rest of June and all of July, I worked in the garage and slept above it. I didn't have much in that room. There were some apples crates of records and comic books but I didn't really own anything of value. Uncle Troy bought a newer record player at a yard sale one Saturday and gave it to me, and my records no longer sounded scratchy and old but clean, almost surreal. When I lived with Uncle Troy, I could play my music louder, and it enveloped me. Now that I was away from home, I could feel the release it gave me. I loved working with Uncle Troy, but when I was working I had to *think*. Music didn't need any of that. I could just switch off and escape the coal and the grease, and even though the songs were the same every time, there was something new every time, too.

I started to fantasize about music. It took me over. I would close my eyes sometimes while working and listen to the guitars of the Rolling Stones in my head. Uncle Troy would laugh at me and punch me in the shoulder.

"Troy to Space Command. Please reenter the fucking atmosphere."

On a Saturday at the end of July when I wasn't working, I walked three blocks up the street to a little shop I'd never been in before called K&S Music. I'd walked by it on my way to work every day, but never gone in, because I could never have afforded anything inside, working for two-fifty a day. I opened the door. A bell jingled above me.

All along the walls of the store were guitars, hanging from clamps. There were slim, bone-white guitars with tan necks, and black guitars with shiny, polished black necks. My eyes drifted and then fell on a cherry-red guitar, with soft curves on the sides, around the neck. It was a fat-looking guitar, almost like a cello, and there were grooves cut into the front. Of the hundreds of guitars along the walls, that one jumped right out at me. I loved the grooves and edges, like a fine car model, a brand-new Camaro, a little bit bulky, but impressive. I didn't know what kind of guitar it was, and I didn't know how to play it. I didn't know what kind of guitar the guitarist in the Rolling Stones had. All I knew was that I wanted that guitar.

I looked at the man behind the counter, who was smiling at me.

"Do you play guitar, son?" he asked, stepping out from behind the counter and walking over. I shook my head negative.

"I'd like that one, though," I said, pointing.

"Mmm. That's a Gibson ES-335, the kind B.B. King has. Do you listen to B.B. King?"

I shook no, again. The man said, "It has a great, bluesy sound."

“Oh.” Playing the guitar was the farthest thing from my mind. *Owning* that guitar was all that mattered, like it would be the miraculous key to my release *all* of the time.

“Now, what kind of music are you looking to play?”

I didn’t have an answer for him.

“I have no idea,” I said eventually. “I . . . I like rock.” His smile grew broader. He took the guitar down from the rack and handed it to me. I felt like I was holding Excalibur.

“Put that on,” he said. “Let me grab one of the amps and a cord for you and we’ll go over to one of the pianos and tune, huh? I’ll show you a few things.”

He showed me how to properly wrap my hand around the neck and how to change the notes I was playing. I bought the guitar, the cord, an amplifier, a soft case, a pitch pipe that I could use to tune the guitar, and a stiff book of chord diagrams. He said if I could pay with cash he could cut me a deal, six hundred dollars. I had to go back to my room above the garage and dig out the fat wad of cash I’d been saving. The purchase cleaned me out. As I paid the man, he slipped a *How-To-Learn-the-Blues* guitar book into my bag as well. He said I needed it. I didn’t know if that was a good price. I felt like I had come out on the better side of the bargain.

I played as soon as I got home. Around five-thirty, I heard Uncle Troy coming up the stairs and I stopped.

“Holy shit,” he said as he opened the door and saw the red guitar around my neck, the amp plugged into the kitchen outlet. “I always thought you’d go out and blow your money on a car. But Jesus Christ, this is an investment.” Uncle Troy smiled. “I’ll buy you some more records. What are you playing?”

I showed him the book of blues. He smiled. “B.B. King? Huh. Maybe you’ll do better than the rest of us and make something of yourself after all.”

When I wasn’t at work, or on weekends, I closed the door to my little apartment above Uncle Troy’s garage, plugged my guitar into the amp, and practiced the whole day. I listened to records over and over again, and though I had bought the book of blues music, which had pictures showing me how to wrap my hand around the neck, how to place my fingers on the fretboard, how to follow the rhythm of the song and follow the form, I learned mostly by ear, listening to B.B. King. King took his guitar and transformed it into something else, something more than just an instrument in his hands. Every solo King played sounded unique. He would bend the strings to change his notes, tugging the pitch upward. He would add a shimmering sound to his notes so they quivered in the air. Whenever he soared from one high note to another I would feel something hot and slippery soaring in my gut. It was something I could not imitate but desperately tried to. King made his guitar sound like a second voice, as if the instrument were joining him for a duet. I tried to play along, but my fingers were slow and sluggish. I practiced so much,

sliding up and down the wound metal strings, that my fingertips cut and bled and swelled. I would soak them in ice and then play twice as hard once they'd healed. While I sat with my fingers in ice, I just listened to the music and followed along in my head, where I could keep up. Sometimes, as the music played, I just closed my eyes and could see the town for what it was.

I kept practicing for the rest of the summer. The man at K&S would give me lessons for two dollars per lesson. He taught me the blues. He showed me how to read music and play it on the guitar. He wanted me to pick up the acoustic, but I wasn't interested in anything but my Gibson.

• • •

Uncle Troy and I found out when we came to the house for dinner and there was no food on the table. Colin and his Vietnam buddies had gone swimming, out to the strip pits, out to those gaping maws filled with water. They'd all done heroin before swimming, Colin and his friends had been too buzzed up to know how to help. While Colin had disappeared into the black, two of his friends had jumped in after him and had nearly drowned themselves. None of them had thought to tie their shirts together and throw him a line.

Mom was crying in the bedroom. Dad was sitting at the kitchen table, just looking out the screen door. He had a bottle of beer in his hand, but it looked as though he'd barely drank any. Uncle Troy and I left, because we didn't know what to do. We went out to eat.

The waitress at the diner looked surprised to see us. We came for lunch all the time, but never dinner. She led us to our usual table by the window and asked for our order. We didn't get menus and always knew exactly what we were getting, but I stumbled with my order, and Uncle Troy's voice was quiet when he asked for a cheese steak with extra onions. The waitress walked away and Uncle Troy looked over at me.

"Are you all right?" he asked. I looked down at the table and didn't say anything.

I felt like my brother had never really come back from Vietnam.

"I knew those strip pits were trouble," Uncle Troy said. "I just knew it."

"I know," I said. My voice was flat.

"Hey," Uncle Troy said. I glanced up. Uncle Troy looked me in the eye.

"It's going to be all right." He pulled his pack of Kools out of his pocket. He took one from the pack and reached across the table to give it to me.

"That's ok," I said, shaking my head.

"Come on," he said. "Take it."

I brushed his hand away. "I'm ok," I said.

I didn't want a cigarette. I didn't want to eat. I wanted to go back to my apartment, turn up my record player and listen to B.B. King. I looked over my shoulder. There was no radio in the restaurant. When our food came out, we

ate and there was silence, but it wasn't the sort of silence I was used to. Uncle Troy glanced up at me every few bites but didn't say anything. I sat and poked at my food and thought about Colin. He hadn't wanted to go, but he had and he'd done nothing since coming back from Vietnam, but now he really was gone, dragged down to the bottom of the strip pits because of the cold and the heroin. He'd gotten away from the black coal dust, but he didn't escape to anything better.

Caroline Kessler

I OPEN MY MOUTH TO THE STORM

after Mary Ann Samyn's "I Whispered Oh into His Ear"

You dig your fingers, thick with car grease,
into me. I shivered toward you.

Now you're the one leaving
a path, crooked as ants. You push open

my legs with your hand. Then you stop,

breathe *question question question*

into my shoulder. My answer:

a mouth full of snow.

Skye Shirley

THE PAPER CALLED THEM BLACK FISH

but it was a school of pilot whales
we saw from our breakfast nook,

my brother Samuel and I.
Still in woolen socks we ran

through sand toward the stranded
blackening the beach with broken

fins. No one had seen them, though
they'd soon lie on postcards, their blubber

parceled onto doorsteps to power Mother's
sewing machine, Father's oil-lamp clock.

But for that first hour we kissed
their tarred masses, soaked our own clothes

in saltwater to slow their hides' drying.
I touched the violet eye of a mother,

lay on seaweed beside her starless calf.
For that small hour I was swallowed

in sand shards, my skin slick as tar paint
too thin to patch our leaking.

Sam Mitchell

MACHIAS

Machias is a tiny lobstering town nestled on the downeast coast of Maine with a total population of 2,353—except in the summer months when my family and a handful of other “flatlanders” bump that number up by about forty. In the whole of Washington County, of which Machias is the seat, there is only one stoplight, at the intersection of Route One and Main Street, just next to Machias’s two restaurants, the Blue Bird and Helen’s. Over a hundred miles upcoast from Bar Harbor, the town is mercifully lacking in tourists year round, so it still brims with a rugged New England charm: carved wooden signs creaking over shops; a tidy town square and gazebo near a gurgling freshwater stream; weathered, clapboard cottages with fishing nets slung over chipped picket fences. The beaches around Machias are beautiful in a drop-to-your-knees-and-gasp kind of way, particularly at Roque Bluffs—a series of windswept sandy curves, bordered by lines of regal pines on one side and the moody, pounding Atlantic on the other. Closer to Nova Scotia than to the nearest Wal-Mart, Machias is about as far from America as you can get in the United States.

In Washington County, land is cheap (the main attraction to my father) and the waters are crawling with large, lazy lobsters (a major draw for my mother, my sister, and me). The locals survive on the lobster industry; almost every house in Machias has a boat and stacks of lobster pots standing in its sideyard. In late summer, blueberry season arrives, and since 85% of the world’s commercial blueberries are plucked out of Washington County’s blueberry barrens, it’s the most important time of year in Machias. Hundreds of visitors (or at least a hundred visitors) descend on the town for the annual Blueberry Festival, the centerpiece of which is the hallowed Blueberry Pie-Eating Contest. I have never stayed long enough into the season to attend, but I have heard stories and seen pictures. Contestants line up along a table for an endless supply of pie, their hands tied behind their backs and foolish bibs looped around their necks. Helpers stand behind them to assist in occasionally wiping their mouths, giving sips of water, and primarily holding their faces down to the plates at moments when their ambition seems to wane. To see the pictures out of context might lead you to think you’d stumbled across some kind of torture ritual.

In May, we make the long drive north to this little town, always a bit ahead of the traditional June tourist flock. Our house is on the beach at Roque Bluffs, about eight miles from the center of Machias. To reach it, you don't drive so much as bounce in and out of car-sized potholes down a snow-split track of old bits of pavement that M-DOT cheekily calls a road. The house is a tall but narrow Cape Cod shake with a whale weather vane up top. About an acre of square green yard surrounds it, and to one side a rocky cliff drops down to the restless surf. The sides of the house are pocked with many large windows that let in the cleanest air imaginable—a mix of forest pine and saltwater. The property sits on a string of land between the ocean and Englishman bay, perfect for fresh and saltwater fishing. It's nothing more than a windy little knoll surrounded by water, and on stormy nights we can sit at the dining table in the glass sunroom with views of the lightning dancing across the sea.

My favorite feature of the house is the old-fashioned crank window in the upstairs shower. It's something you don't see often. High enough to be discreet, wide enough to let in loads of fresh air, it is a feature that makes any other shower feel incomplete. There's nothing like taking a steamy shower with a brisk sea breeze and the prospect of a day filled with coastal hiking that can make me into more of a morning person. Sometimes I actually whistle.

The house could not be more convenient for hiking. Indeed, the Bold Coast hiking trail virtually goes through the backyard. Head east on it, and you'll get views of the coastline that make eleven miles of panting hike seem a trivial inconvenience. Head west and you'll spend an afternoon walking through the most luscious woods imaginable—mossy, spongy forest floors, petrified logs, multi-colored toadstools. The landscape is gallant; it takes me over, proving a long held suspicion that there's no good reason to return to civilization. The ocean, the woods, the trail, it's all quite enough.

But I do return, of course, usually to a steamy kitchen filled with the faint sound of lobster claws clicking against the insides of a large stainless steel pot, with my mom slightly lit by several gin and tonics standing over them. As long as she nips on the sauce, she says she can deal with killing the "big bugs." But now and then Mom gets tired of cooking lobster and grilling fish every night, so we go into town to eat. The options are limited. One choice is the Blue Bird Restaurant, a family-run place, all brown booths and macramé flower holders. Option number two is Helen's, another family-run spot with a more laconic style. At one point, it may have been going for a 1950's diner, but the swivel stools have holes in their red leatherette seats and the jukebox doesn't run anymore. Both places offer the usual downeast fare: seafood, club sandwiches, grilled cheese, and a revolving pie case up front. Limited

as it may be, the food is divine. The lobsters are always plump, sweeter than anything we cook at home, and the blueberry and apple pies are eye-rollingly good. Better yet, the prices are unbelievable. My father in particular relishes the fact that he can get endless trips to the salad bar, a two-pound lobster, corn-on-the-cob, French fries, and a slice of pie for \$7.99.

One summer, there was a third restaurant called The Panda Pad, which advertised “exotic cuisine” from China. Rumor has it that it was actually run by Russians, but one night we decided to give it a try. To say it was tacky lacks a certain zing when speaking of the level of chintz we found in the place—paper maché dragons were dangled from the ceiling, Hello Kitty posters clung to the walls, and the food labels on the buffet were written on those greeting stickers you see people wearing at conferences and nursing home parties. Something about stepping up to the steaming buffet and reading “HELLO MY NAME IS Kung Pao Chicken” was patently unappetizing.

So other than The Panda Pad’s brief stab at bringing a little piece of hell to Machias, the dining options have remained limited to two. But that is fine with us. Getting into town and eating at the same two places allows us to catch up with familiar locals. Mainers are not known for their outgoing congeniality, and when we first began summering in Machias, our mere presence seemed ineffably disturbing to them. The rumors that a Virginia license plate had been spotted in the Post Office parking lot created a rankled stir. A woman at the Rite Aid once looked at my mother as if she had let out a sonorous raised-leg fart when she’d just asked if they stocked any iced-tea mix. But gradually, over the summers, we’ve amassed a group of acquaintances who have accepted and even embraced the fact that we spend most of the year south of Bangor. I believe we may be the only likeable flatlanders around, long perceived as more than just silly “summer people.” This may be because my great-aunt lived in Machias off and on throughout her life—indeed had her ashes scattered on the beach at Roque Bluffs—and thus we have a marginal familial claim to the area. But I like to think that there’s just something inherently “Mainer” about us.

At times, we’re treated as complete equals. Bernice at the Hannaford deli often asks Mom whether she thinks a certain storm will actually dump as much rain along the coast as she’s heard on TV. Since Machias depends heavily on lobstering, the weather is a very serious subject, so this trust in my mother’s opinion is quite astounding. One particularly memorable night, the fellows at the Blue Bird bar invited my dad into a discussion of politics surrounding the presidential race.

In the early years of summering in Machias, we’d have conversations with the locals that went like this:

“Excuse me, can you tell us if there are any movie theatres around here?”

“Ayuh.”

A long pause. We’d wait for further information, but nothing would come. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“There is one around here, you say?”

“ ’S not what yuh asked.”

We’d put on a polite but ruffled smile. “Well, is there one around here, then?”

“Not unless yuh don’t mine drivin’ halfway tuh N’Hampshah.”

And so it went. To extract any information was a lot like digging meat out of a tough lobster claw, such was the monumental reticence and pragmatism of the local dialogue. Even close friends and neighbors carried on in this particular manner, regardless of the topic:

“Looks like fog in the morning.”

“Ayuh.”

“Yuh gonna wait to go trappin’ till the sun burns ’er off?”

“O’ cawse.”

“Heard Betty died last night, Pete.”

“Ayuh.”

“Sorry, ’bout that.”

“Yup.”

“Funeral’s Friday?”

It took a while for us to get used to this terseness and to not take it as an offense. With time, we realized it was nothing personal. Some people live in Machias all their lives and less is known about them than what the locals now know about us.

Of course, as with any town, there are a few exceptions to the rules. Roberta Daniels, the owner of Machias’s premier thrift store, is perhaps the most talkative person I have ever met. Unfortunately, her ramblings surround her re-birth as a Christian, her conspiracy theories that somehow connect Richard Nixon and the Holocaust (I’m still fuzzy on the details), and her certitude that Jimmy Hoffa is entombed under the Episcopal Church’s basement floor.

Roberta’s jabbering can get tiring, and she often follows me around the store when I go in for a look, but the merchandise is so singularly strange and garish that it’s worth listening to every paranoid mutter. The store holds the most curious jumble of goods: old fashioned vacuum cleaners and sewing equipment; dollhouse kitchen appliances, discount socks, ALF memorabilia, office supplies left over from the ‘70s; several shelves of disturbingly banged-up Cabbage Patch dolls; bulk boxes of random things like rubber bands and turkey basters; the sort of costume jewelry that would make three-year-old

girls laugh. Best of all is the “Novelty Section” on aisle seven, the true heart of the store where Roberta puts most of her effort and pride. Unfortunately, most visitors run away from the section screaming or shaking their heads over the sheer vulgarity of it. As a sucker for anything weird and tacky, I revel in aisle seven.

The aisle is lined with two long glass cases containing the most delightfully hideous collection of religious and local paraphernalia: lobster claw crucifixes, Virgin Marys made of dried seaweed, plastic sculptures of Paul Bunyan lumberjacks holding severed Indian heads, mystic paintings of glowing-eyed wolves howling at a greenish moon, childish painted commemorative plates showing a gargantuan bald eagle flying past the Twin Towers on its way to the Statue of Liberty. Two summers ago, I found a large electric wall clock in the display case that still holds a tender spot in my heart. It has a psychedelic glow-in-the-dark background of swirling colors. On top of this is a life-like painting of an elegant moose, whose antlers rotate and serve as the minute and hour hands. On the hour, it chimes with what the packaging deems “natural moose calls” but which sound more like choirboys being shoved through a wood chipper. When I saw it, I immediately grabbed two. I believe it was the biggest sale Roberta has had in the past twenty years.

New this summer was a display of cardboard boxes at the end of the aisle under bright track lighting, obviously positioned to catch attention. Each box showed an illustration of a tortured Jesus figurine on a crucifix. The item was part of a line called “Appreciate the Pain.” In lurid red letters, the display sign read: “CRUCIFX MADE OF GENUINE WOOD” (You don’t say), “COMPLETE WITH ROLLING EYES” (Beg pardon?), “LIFE-LIKE MOANING SOUND EFFECTS” (Goodness!), “FIBER-OPTIC DRIPPING WOUNDS” (Really?). Even for me, this item crossed some boundaries. Who buys these things? They were manufactured in Illinois, and the packaging looked professional enough. There must be a sufficient market for such items, I realized, and I shuffled out of the thrift store a little disappointed that Roberta would stoop quite so low. Of course, I also had to get out of the shop because Roberta was about to close up. It was nearly 2:00 PM, after all.

Northern New Englanders are known for being early risers, but the citizens of Machias put all other Yankees to shame. Washington County is nicknamed the “Sunrise County” because it is the easternmost land in the United States. Every morning, groups of tourists flock to Lubec, the most oriental tip of the county, to see the sun come up over the Bay of Fundy. The residents of Machias seem to feel it is their duty to take advantage of their unique temporal positioning. I do not exaggerate when I say that a barber my dad sees in Machias operates his business from 5:00 AM to 9:00 AM before closing (probably with a lavish yawn) for the day. Our neighbors lunch on

their picnic table at ten in the morning, and the two restaurants in town both close at 8:00 PM. Hannaford's grocery closes at 8:30, although hardly anyone dares to go out at such a sinful hour. All windows are dark in town by 9:00 PM. My sister thinks it's creepy, but I find Machias' schedule to be rather innocent and charming.

It's a truly quiet life. There aren't many people my age left in the town, and those that do stick around tend to embrace hobbies like skeet shooting and bottling deer urine. Yet, when I go up to visit in the summer, I enjoy every moment. My time there is what I imagine retirement will be like. I have freedom to do things that I usually never have time to do. I can wash clothes according to color. I can adjust my shoelaces with exacting, level perfection. I can sort through my wallet and day planner, clean out and organize my backpack. I often complete entire crossword books and get through three or four novels a week. I may turn off my cell phone and hike for hours in the woods.

There is no Internet access at the house, so I am cut off from responsibility and worry. We try not to watch the news or keep up with the world outside of Machias; our time there is just a long, blissful indulgence. Every night, I leave my bedroom window open. The white noise of the lulling waves slips me into a gentle sleep, and the fresh salt air is there to ease me into the morning. If not hiking or reading, I may choose to take the kayak out to some of the little islands a mile or so off the coast, or just walk the banks of the Englishman river looking for shells. In the evenings as the sun goes down, I like to sit on a bench in the yard facing the beach, sipping some cheap wine, letting the wind tease through my hair, and listen to the gulls. Even in July, it's usually cool enough for a light jacket. As dusk settles, I watch a parade of transatlantic jets blink their way across the horizon, bound southwest for cities like Boston and Washington, places that seem like mere rumor after days there on the coast. Millions of stars sneak out of every corner of the sky, with so little artificial lights to scare them away. On nights like that, the bliss of nature seems eternal and unavoidable.

Outside the town, I may be the only person in the world quite so fond of this little area of the Earth. As towns go, it may seem plain and unremarkable, poor and rather outdated. There are no boutique shops or souvenir stands, and even the surrounding coastline, though achingly beautiful, is not particularly unusual apart from its untainted, abandoned feel. No one famous has ever come from Machias, and likely no one will. It has no definitive feature, no central landmark or meeting spot. There's only one grocery store, a meager post office, and the only food options outside Helen's and the Blue Bird is McDonald's. If you want a book, you either drive two hours to Bangor or wait for Saturday morning when Jim's Used Book

Barn opens in his garage just off Main Street. In a sizeable state whose total population is considerably less than Manhattan, Machias is desolate even by Maine standards. But it's a perfect place to me, familiar and strange all at once, cut off from the world without being utterly backward and foreboding. Visiting gives rhythm and balance to my year. Each summer, I inevitably get anxious to abandon it all and return to a place where a dead moose on Route One doesn't constitute an exciting diversion. But the moment I get back to the land of congested traffic and twenty-dollar lobster, I find myself wishing I could turn back for Machias and never leave.

CONDUCTED BY Dana Diehl

A CONVERSATION WITH ANDREW PORTER

Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate Andrew Porter teaches us about starter dough for stories, the theme of absence, fluidity of memory, and how to handle lots of rejections. He is the author of the short story collection, *The Theory of Light and Matter*, which won the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. His fiction has appeared in *One Story*, *Epoch*, *The Ontario Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Antioch Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Others Voices*, *Story* and *The Pushcart Prize Anthology*, among others. Porter currently lives in San Antonio, where he is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Trinity University.

DANA DIEHL: Have you always been interested in writing fiction? How and when did the writing bug first bite?

ANDREW PORTER: I didn't really become interested in writing fiction until my sophomore year of college, when I took my first creative writing class. Before that, I had always thought I would end up going to film school and studying filmmaking. To be honest, film had always been my first love, but this was before I discovered Raymond Carver, and Richard Ford, and all of the other contemporary writers I was exposed to in that first creative writing class. As for when I caught the bug, it was almost immediate. By the time I'd finished those first few stories, I was pretty sure I knew what I wanted to do with my life.

DANA: We all seem to have that really bad first story that we wrote for a class project or on construction paper with crayons . . . Tell us about the first story you ever wrote and how you feel about it now.

ANDREW: It's funny. I still remember that story very clearly. It was set in Amsterdam, and it was basically a rip off of James Joyce's "Araby." A very derivative coming-of-age piece. I no longer have a copy of the story in my files, but I wish I did. I'm sure it would be pretty embarrassing to read now.

DANA: Where does a story start for you? I find that I usually begin with an image or a single scene, while there are others who are inspired by an idea for plot. Do you fall into one of these groups or one of your own?

ANDREW: I'm like you. I always start my stories with an image—usually a memory of a place I once lived or a person I once knew, or something like that—an image that has stayed with me over the years. Alice Munro once described these little piece of reality, these memories, as the “starter dough” for her stories, the thing that linked her to them, but also the material out of which the story grew, and I would agree with that. And I also think a lot can be suggested by an image, particularly a strong image—a tone, a mood, a setting, even a conflict. In other words, all the stuff you really need to write a story.

DANA: What process does one of your stories go through from start to finish? What does each draft look like, and when do you know when it's finished (by finished, I mean ready to submit. It seems that a story is never truly done!)

ANDREW: For me, the first draft is all about generating content, as much content as I can. I'm not thinking about plot or structure at this point. I'm just trying to explore the characters' lives, trying to figure out who they are and what they want. And so, my first drafts tend to be fairly long—sometimes as long as sixty or seventy pages by the time I'm through—and they're also not organized in a particularly logical way. To be honest, they're pretty messy. But I guess my theory is that if you write enough pages about a certain group of characters, there's bound to be a story in there somewhere. And that's what the second draft is about: finding the story in what I've written. Usually, I'll end up cutting about fifty percent of the content by the time I've come to the end of my second draft, removing anything that doesn't seem necessary or relevant, and I'll also be thinking a lot about how I want to structure the story at that point. After that, it's just a matter of compressing and condensing what I've written, making the story as tight and as clear as possible.

DANA: Many of your stories are from the point of view of adult narrators looking back on their childhood or young adulthood. Why do you think you find yourself drawn to this type of perspective?

ANDREW: Well, in some ways, I think I've always been interested in the relationship between the past and present and, more specifically, in the way the past can affect the present. And when you think about childhood—in particular, the traumatic or significant events of your childhood—these are the moments that tend to define you as a person. And so I guess that's one of the reasons I tend to use that type of perspective a lot. I've always been interested in characters who are in some way stuck in the past, unable to move past certain events or incidents that have affected them.

DANA: Your collection, *The Theory of Light and Matter*, starts with the story “Hole.” I felt that this was the perfect way to open the collection, because so many of the proceeding stories have just that . . . holes. In “The Theory of Light

and Matter,” the narrator speaks of a hole that Robert opened up in her life. In “Connecticut,” there is a mother burdened by her husband’s absence. Is this an intentional theme in your writing? What is it about absence that appeals to you as a writer?

ANDREW: I don’t know that this was an intentional theme, but as I was organizing the collection, I certainly noticed it. I suppose that when you’re writing about memory, and about characters who are in some way stuck in the past, then there will inevitably be a sense of absence in the stories. After all, if the characters were completely happy, if they didn’t feel that something was missing in their lives, they probably wouldn’t be turning to the past for answers. And so I guess that’s probably one of the main reasons that this theme is so prevalent.

DANA: Are there any obsessions you have as a writer? What—if any—images, themes, and stories do you find yourself repeating and retelling again and again?

ANDREW: Well, if I look back on what I’ve written so far, I can certainly see a lot of recurring images and themes: the focus on memory, childhood, family relationships, and so forth. Also, there are certain recurring settings—like Houston, for example, or Pennsylvania—places I’ve lived. There are also a lot of doctors in my stories, a lot of college professors and teachers. I could keep going, but the truth is, I don’t know that I’d call any of these things “obsessions.” They’re simply things that interest me, things that seem to reappear again and again in my work. Maybe when I’m older and looking back on a larger body of work, I’ll be able to pinpoint the things that really obsessed me, but right now it’s probably a little too early to say.

DANA: Something I find fascinating in many of your stories is the way in which the characters force you to question the accuracy of memories. At the end of “Hole,” the narrator offers alternatives on how exactly his friend died. In “River Dog,” the main character lies in bed, trying to “construct in (his) mind” what actually happened with his brother. The narrator in “Coyotes” says of Chau, “I knew that most of his stories were flat-out lies, but he had told them so many times and in such vivid detail that half the time I found myself believing them.” In some ways, your stories seem to function like memoirs. They examine memory and its fallacies and call attention to the fact that the characters might be wrong. Can you speak to this use of memory in your writing?

ANDREW: Well, one of the things that’s interesting about memory—at least to me—is the fact that most memories are somewhat fluid. They’re imprecise, in other words, and they’re always changing. You might remember a particular

event one way when you're fifteen, and then remember that exact same event a completely different way when you're twenty-five. And so, in terms of fiction, incorporating memory and drawing attention to the somewhat imprecise nature of memory allows you to create certain ambiguities in the story, certain complexities and questions. I've always enjoyed stories that leave the reader with questions at the end, and so that's something I try to aim for in my own work.

DANA: A few of your stories feature professors or people familiar with the writing life. Being a writer and an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing yourself, these must be topics you are familiar with. How much of your writing would you consider to be autobiographical or inspired by happenings in your own life?

ANDREW: I wouldn't describe any of my stories as "autobiographical," but they've certainly been inspired by various things I've observed or experienced. For example, I may set a story in a place where I once lived; or I may use certain qualities of a person I once knew as the starting point for a particular character. Generally, though, the autobiographical elements of my stories are superficial things, small details that I sprinkle in here and there. The stories themselves are, by and large, purely fiction.

DANA: Who would you consider to be in your literary family? Which authors did you enjoy reading during your childhood, and who influences your writing today?

ANDREW: It's sometimes hard for me to differentiate between authors I love and authors who have influenced my work. For example, I love Zadie Smith's writing, but I don't write anything like her, and I wouldn't really describe her as an influence. At the same time, there are certain writers whose work I return to again and again for guidance: Stuart Dybek, John Cheever, Dan Chaon. These are writers who I not only love, but who I also try to learn from, writers who I feel a certain kinship with or whose interests seem similar to my own, at least in terms of style and subject matter.

DANA: As an undergraduate writing student, the writing process seems to involve a lot of trial and error. What are the most common mistakes you see from your students?

ANDREW: On the first day of class, I always talk about the importance of trusting your instincts and allowing the story to grow organically out of the character, but I think that's something they still struggle with. They're much more comfortable starting with an idea or a plot, with figuring out what the story is going to be about, or what is going to happen in the story, before they

actually write it. This is a fine approach to take, of course, but it seems to me that when you organize a story around an idea, or around a clever plot, you often end up sacrificing the characters. That is to say, the characters end up taking a sort of secondary role in the story. And so what you end up with is an interesting idea but no real depth, no character development, and that's something I see them struggling with a lot.

DANA: Tell us a little bit about publishing. Many of my peers have just recently become interested in submitting their work to literary magazines. When did you start sending out your stories for publication, and what have you learned from this process of collecting rejections and acceptances? Do you have advice to offer to new writers entering the publishing world?

ANDREW: Well, I guess the first thing I'd say is that you need to become comfortable with the fact that it might take you a while to publish that very first story. But you also need to remember that every writer you admire, every writer you look up to, went through this exact process themselves. They all collected their fair share of rejection slips at one time or another. And so it's really just about being persistent and having a healthy attitude about the whole thing, not allowing the rejections to discourage you. You have no control over what might happen to your work once it leaves your desk, so it's best not to waste too much time thinking about it or reading into it. Just keep sending out the work, and eventually—probably when you're least expecting it—the door will open.

DANA: Ending a story seems to be a problem for young writers. Are there any tricks you have for writing endings? What should an ending accomplish?

ANDREW: I've always felt that a good ending should feel both surprising and inevitable. And it should also resonate emotionally. As for whether I know of any good tricks for writing endings, I'd have to say no. The main thing, I guess, is that the ending grows organically out of the story. You don't want to impose an ending on a story; you don't want the ending to feel like a trick. And it's also important, I think, to allow the character's destiny to remain open at the end, especially when you're writing a short story. I've personally always been resistant to endings in which the character's fate is somehow sealed at the end, endings in which the character ends up killing themselves, or going to jail, or being put in an insane asylum. These types of endings—where the ending itself is so final—tend to diminish the potential complexity of both the character and the story. In the end, though, I think an ending just has to feel right to both the author and the reader. I know this might sound a little vague, but I honestly think that endings have more to do with instinct than anything else—with delivering that perfect line at the perfect moment. And, as a writer, you just have to keep searching until you eventually discover that line.

Karissa Morton

SEAFARER'S SEMANTICS

a glyph or moth or the holy water of the sea,
all drifting the same

*(—objects in motion staying in motion
until acted upon by outside force or internal clock—)*

leaving tally marks in the cement,
the way blades of grass break sutures
and the radiator burns
rorschach spots into our backs
as we pull the wings from monarchs.

“the fallen ones,” you say.

—the nephilim
as leviathan as lovemaking

- I. *your lips, sweet doilies stained with wine*
- II. *riverbank curves as gentle as nakedness*
- III. *pallid starlight struggling like captured kiss*

while votives,
puffing smoke like crematorium chutes,
flicker in tribute
to the creation of a language
too beautiful for comfort.

Shannon Azzato Stephens

NO LETTERS

One: 1989

In the first minutes of my life, my mother was under, dreaming of me with her eyes shut tight and her belly sewn. Cut out of her, I was jagged-edged with sharpened cries.

My father looked at me:
I was his but he wasn't mine.

Two: 1992

Old enough to cut my own pancakes with a bread knife, I slapped peanut butter and jam on with a spoon. My mother was part of the stove, pouring batter in pools. My father, still jetlagged, his pine-tree scent in my mother's house, drizzled thin lines across the plains of his pancakes.

Three: 2000

I shouldn't lie. My father lied to my mother, and my mother hates him.

I have my father's mouth.

Four: 2009

Scuffed photographs out of a box:
my father the mountain man, hair
overgrown and curling at the tips,
my scalp on his palm, peach fuzz on
callous as he points my face
at the camera, his eyes hidden
behind flip-down sunglasses even
though we're inside. Him standing
in the foundation of a house I've never
seen, a tool belt slung around his hips,

leaning on a shovel, those same
sunglasses shielding him again.
A closer look: my name and birthday
carved into the cement foundation.

Caitlin Moran

ALL HER NUMBERED BONES

Our flight arrived in Dublin at eight in the morning. Katie, who could sleep anywhere, like a cat, had had almost a full night's rest, and she wandered around the baggage claim wide-eyed, pretending she could read the Gaelic on all the signs. She offered to wait in the line at tourist information while I bought our bus tickets into the city. When I came back inside, she was out of line. She hadn't asked the location of our hostel, or picked up a city map like I had told her to, but she had a handful of pamphlets about castle tours and pub crawls. I didn't have the energy to yell at her. I had heard there wasn't anywhere in the UK to get good coffee, so I was holding out for tea, but until then I was worthless.

It was Katie's idea to come to Dublin, one of the many stupid ideas she'd had since Mom's death. Dublin was the most outrageous, and most expensive, of these ideas. It wasn't practical, I told her, when we were still paying the hospital, and Hospice, and arguing with the lawyer, and at twenty-eight, I was too old to go gallivanting around Europe on a whim. But she had just finished grad school and had a whole summer without a job before her, and she was just as scared as I was, I suppose, about what we would do now that there wasn't anything to anticipate, anything to dread. So I agreed to come to Dublin with her.

Our hostel—I had insisted on a hostel even though I hated them, to save money—was clean, all gleaming wood and white sheets, but since it was teeming with people I didn't want to see or know, speaking languages I didn't understand, I resented being there. I should have been at home in my bed, warm, buried beneath the sheets, encased. It had begun to rain on the way to the hostel, and I didn't know when I would be warm again.

Breakfast was a terror. The dining room was packed full of unwashed bodies, everyone in pajamas and slippers with their hair hanging loose and snarly over the food. I stayed outside in the lobby while Katie ventured in to scrounge for us. She did better here than she had at tourist information—she returned with a stack of toast, butter, jam, and two bowls of cornflakes. We sat down and attacked. We were both starving.

"We have to wait until one for the National Library to open," Katie said after a few minutes of loud chewing from both of us. "I thought we could go to the National Museum of Archaeology to kill time."

I uncapped my bottle of aspirin. Katie never took aspirin. She only subscribed to holistic medicines, chewing weeds and boiling roots to relieve headaches and things like that, so I didn't offer her any. It had been hard for her, at first, to understand chemo.

"You know I don't like rocks and that stuff," I said. I had a vision of a warehouse, stocked with rows and rows of fossilized ferns.

"There aren't rocks there," Katie answered. "I want to see the bog people."

I didn't want to see the bog people, but we went anyway.

The sun came out as we walked, making the sidewalks glimmer. Katie stopped occasionally to take pictures: the statue of Molly Malone, Trinity College, the bright green mailboxes. We drifted, rather than toured. I hadn't expected Dublin to have so many cars. I had envisioned a quaint old-fashioned little place, with green and brown-fronted pubs and men in heavy overcoats and sensible caps driving geese through the streets. I must have seen the geese on a postcard once. Where would the men be taking them? The market? The fields? Even Katie would have probably laughed at me.

She had chosen Dublin as a place to return to our roots, to get in touch with our ancestors, after Mom was gone. I had tried to explain to her that we were only vaguely Irish, that Mom's great-great-grandmother was "O'Malley" or "O'Neil" or something and that was it. We were mostly Scottish and French, neither of which were exciting in small doses. But for some reason Katie had latched onto Ireland as the keeper of our identity. She wanted to go to the National Library to look up our ancestors, whoever they were, and see when they came to America, what county they were from, the name of the ship they came on. She had a feeling that our family was driven out by the Black and Tans.

There was no need to come to Ireland for this, of course. The National Library archives were all online, so we could very well have researched our forbears in Massachusetts. Katie and I had always had different senses of family identity. In fifth grade, everyone in our homogenous little school had to give a report about how their ancestors had arrived in America. The administration seemed to assume we were all products of the Ellis Island crowd, prudent Western Europeans buying into the American dream. One boy's grandparents had moved from Korea in the 50's, but other than that we all more or less had the same story. I had given a plodding report about bakers from Edinburgh settling in Boston in the mid-1800's. Practical people, sick of Scottish weather, who wore boots with heavy soles and sweaters the color of oatmeal. When Katie took the same class four years later, she invented a dramatic tale that somehow made our ancestors exiles of the French Revolution, who had fled Paris with only the clothes on their backs and sought refuge in the newly created United States. This didn't make any more sense than her Ireland fantasies, but the teacher still gave her an A.

* * *

The National Museum of Archaeology was a strange building. The walls and staircases were built mostly of rose-colored marble, and the heavy oak doors were inlaid with carvings of mischievous suns and angry clouds blowing havoc onto humanity. But the hallways leading into the special exhibits were Roman tile mosaics, and the glass ceiling was supported with sculpted wrought-iron buttresses. It was a building trying to be everything at once and failing to be anything. Katie thought it was charming.

I picked up a museum map and pointed the way to the gallery. I had never heard Katie mention the bog people before, never knew she had any interest in them. But now she was babbling on about the properties of the bog that preserved human bodies—and most remarkably, hair and teeth—and the dates of the discoveries. She went on at length about the Tollund Man, apparently the most famous of all the bog people. There were only three climates on earth that could preserve the human body in such a way, she said. The extreme cold, the extreme heat, and the bog. It was as if this was a grand miracle, an anomaly to be sought out and applauded, not a jealous earth unable to let tired remains fade away. Why did they talk about it in such a way? *Preserved*, as if the dead were saved from something. I didn't want to think about bodies, about hair and skin and sinews. Once a life ended, it seemed only fair that the body should be allowed to disappear, to descend into the ground with the worms, and molder, unseen, and that people should stop talking about it.

The exhibit of the bog people—called, euphemistically, “Kingship and Sacrifice”—was long and dark. The bog people were encircled by concrete cylinders that we had to walk through, in a circle, to get to the remains. I didn't want to stay long. There were a couple of bored-looking teenagers, evidently on school break, and a few older couples, but the exhibit was mostly empty. We were all in pairs, shuffling dutifully from one poster to another, whispering, pointing, pretending that we would remember this information to tell over dinner in a few months. Most, if not all, of the bog people in the museum seemed to have been murdered, either strangled or bashed on the back of the head, and then dragged into the bog to sink and disappear. Most of them were powerful, heirs to kings and chieftains, which was apparently evident through modern forensic tests on their hair gel.

A guide was giving a tour at the first body we saw. This was one of the heirs. He had been decapitated, the guide explained, and his nipples cut off, which had something to do with being king, or rather, not being king, since sucking the nipples was a sign of obeisance to the king. It was a slight, the guide said, adding insult to injury, to be sent into death without nipples, though I couldn't imagine nipples would mean that much when you were already at the bottom of the bog.

The next body had been sliced in half above the belly button by a peat-cutter. The guide, who had followed us in, began describing the admirable condition of the inner organs, even after the peat-cutter. I left and sat down on a bench in the hallway. I had been staring at Mom's body, dug up in another thousand years after being ripped in half by some kind of construction equipment.

"This particular specimen," the archaeologist would say, touching Mom's desiccated abdomen with a pointer, "appears to have been suffering from a very severe cancer at the time of her death. Here, along the skull, we can see signs of chemotherapy, an ancient medical ritual that was thought to cure cancer. And here, we can see that the inner organs remain largely intact..."

Katie came out of the exhibit into the hall.

"Where did you go?" she asked. "I was talking to you for about five minutes before I realized you weren't there anymore."

"These bog people. They freak me out. I don't like them."

Katie sat down next to me. "They're just artifacts. They're just—stuff. I don't know why they bother you so much."

"They're not just stuff," I said. "They were people, at some point. I don't like wandering around, looking at people's bodies like this, in glass cases. Like they're pottery or ancient swords, or something. Why don't they just put them back, let them rest? What are we supposed to get out of staring at them, anyway?"

"It's science, Sarah," Katie said. "It's the history of Ireland. The burial rituals of these ancient cultures matter to us."

"How?"

Katie didn't answer. She was angry at me for ruining her fun. We were supposed to be bonding, knitting ourselves back together without Mom. It was impossible. We didn't even speak the same language, and we never had.

"I'm trying," Katie said, after a moment. "You know I'm *trying*."

"Yes," I said, because I couldn't think of anything else to say, and I didn't want her to start crying in the middle of the museum. "Let's go. The Library should be open by now." Anything to get her moving, anything to move myself away from the bog people, their shrunken legs ribboned with browned sinew, their improbable facial hair, their teeth.

As we walked outside, it began to rain again.

We got lost on the way to the Library. When I looked at the map afterwards, I realized that we were only a few doors down, if we had turned right out of the Museum. But I had gotten my direction confused inside the exhibit and thought we had to turn left, and Katie was still in a snit and wouldn't talk to me, so if she knew she wouldn't say. We ended up in St. Stephen's Green. It would have been a nice spot, if the weather had been better. There was a large pond with a bridge and a pavilion, and statues of

famous Irish writers scattered amid bush sculptures and fountains. There were a few pigeons, gray and wet, huddled by the trash can like crumpled paper bags, but other than that the park was mostly empty.

Katie walked onto the bridge and stood in the middle, watching the pond. She hadn't brought a coat with a hood, or an umbrella.

"Why are we here?" she asked suddenly, turning to me. Her lower lip trembled.

"Where? Ireland? I don't know, it was your idea. You wanted to come here."

"No, not here. Just *here*. On this earth, on the actual earth, the dirt. On solid ground. Instead of—"

She didn't say what we were both thinking. *Instead of under it.*

"Let's go," she said. "Let's go back, I don't want to be out here in the rain."

I didn't say anything about the National Library, and she didn't mention it again. We started back towards the museum, to retrace our steps to the hostel. It was raining even harder now, and people began to disappear into doorways and cabs. Katie walked forward stubbornly, her fair hair soaked through and hanging limply against the collar of her coat. I cinched my hood tightly; I was determined not to get sick. We got lost again somehow, and wandered through a seedier part of Dublin than we had seen before. There were small apartment buildings, painted a dirty white, with children's pajamas and t-shirts strung out to dry in-between porches under the overhang, and liquor stores with upended trash cans in front. We walked all the way to the canal before we realized that we had to turn around. The streets were deserted. It felt like we were the only people in the city, in the entire world.

"There's a nice view along the river," Katie suggested softly. "If we follow the water, we should be able to find our way back." It was the most sensible thing she had said all day, so I nodded and followed her. She wandered a bit ahead of me, her hands in her pockets. When she turned back to look at me, I thought for a moment that she was crying, but I decided to blame it on the rain.

"Wouldn't it be nice to go into the country instead?" she said. She waved her hand to the river, the flat gray buildings next to us, the buses, the graffiti. "We shouldn't have come here. Our people didn't come from the city. We could stay in a bed and breakfast on the coast, meet locals, walk along the cliffs."

I could have acquiesced, or just not answered. Either would have made her happy, and she was right, it was probably a lot nicer in the countryside. But I didn't have the energy, I couldn't think about it anymore. What she had said to me earlier was true. She was trying, but I didn't have her spirit, her

vigor. She wanted to be brave. I wanted to close my eyes and lie back into oblivion. I wanted to sink into the bog and never be found.

“No, Katie,” I said. “I’m not doing this anymore. We should just go home.”

She pulled at the ends of her hair but didn’t answer. By now we were both soaked to the bone. I would need to find a dryer, I had only brought one pair of jeans. Perhaps, I thought, I could lay them on the heater when I got back to the hostel, strip them off with layers and layers of skin until I was naked down to my brown, shriveled core. A numb, mute being under the bed sheets, happy like the buried dead.

Angela Eun Ji Koh

OLEANDER DRIVE

At night as Mom had, I rubbed
my wrists with ginkgo lotion.
They rested by my face
and I fell asleep smelling her.

Each morning in my garage-home,
I boiled salt water with pepper sauce,
used the same chopstick to stir.
I drank it.

Since I had no phone, she shipped
kimchi packets that ripened on the trip.
She penned letters from Seoul;
I signed the postal slip on tip toe

and set them aside—her folded slip
with foreign squares, short crosses,
stops, points—
crowding the page, covering the creases.

Bryant Davis

UP IN UNION CITY, TOMAHAWK REMEMBERS HIS BONES CAN STILL RATTLE

Tomahawk and I got into his car and headed up to Union City. It took us twenty minutes to wind our way up over the back roads and through Riceville Corners and Tamarack, but we made it. Union City was a town made of all these streets intertwining up and down the south branch of French Creek, but only one of them mattered. It was called Main Street, same as every other town. We came in on Main Street. We drove past the elementary school and the dead Ethan Allen plant with the *For Rent* signs up in every window. They said, *Store Products* or *Furniture* or *Your Boat*. I imagined myself as a boy looking through a dusted window and seeing a boat inside and not just a fishing boat, but a great boat, a sailboat, or even a full yacht shrunk down to fit inside the warehouse where it waited day and night for its master to come and take it home to deep water. But then the building passed, and so did the image, as we went over a hill and came down through the vinyl-sided houses and yellow brick churches that led into the center of the town, where for a couple blocks—if you could call them blocks—the street became lined with storefronts and the skeletons of storefronts.

We parked the car in a gravel lot nestled between the best of the blocks and the stream. Except for an old Ford truck, we were the only people in it, and for a minute we just sat in the car, while some song Tomahawk liked was playing itself out. A man was singing in a hollow voice that switched between lows and highs the way a madman's eyes flit from one side to another. He had a guitar, too, but he plucked the same ugly chords again and again. Tomahawk liked difficult music like that.

The man told us: *Grandma, my rapture's so lonely; I feel like I'm painted on the bedroom floor.*

That was the sort of music I liked too, but I remember not caring then and looking out through the windshield at the hill across the creek. (When you look at it like a map, it feels like a stream, but when you see it so thin and frail between its cinderblock banks, it seems only right to call it a creek.) The hill was all grass, like a park, but at the peak of it there were these three spindly, white crosses that looked like they were made out of telephone poles.

He saw me looking. *Welcome to Golgotha*, he said.
I smiled.

I guess I should tell you something about my friend, but I'm not sure how. I could do it in a sentence. I could say that he was tall and thick and had brown hair that would turn red in the summer. Or I could tell you that he would run his hand through it like a rake when he was trying to tell you something important. Or I could even write out a dozen whole pages about why in my thoughts I called him Tomahawk, though nobody, not even me, had ever called him that to his face, but I don't think any of those ways would do any good. Even if I told you the last, I think I would only be telling you something about myself. So let me say something about the architecture of his heart. Let me say that he looked for the things he needed in bad places. Not bad places like in a movie-made-for-TV, but he looked for them in parts of himself that he kept hidden away behind his hands and eyes. And it was those secret things that made him reach out as hard as he did, grasping at straws and girls who could never manage to love a kid who, even though he laughed all the time, you could tell was dead serious about everything. But it wasn't their fault. He didn't really demand to be loved or understood or appreciated that way. When he said, I want you, he didn't say *Goddamnit, I need*, but he would mumble, *If you wouldn't mind, could you maybe . . . ?* Who could answer that with a yes? You say you could, but you couldn't. I know better. He wasn't good-looking enough for all that, and you can't make love from dust—not unless you stand over it with a two-by-four and demand it get up and transform itself like an alchemist turns lead into gold.

We got out of the car and Tomahawk climbed into the back seat to get his messenger bag. That's another thing I can tell you about him: he always carries his messenger bag the way a woman carries a purse. It was stuck, though, underneath the seat and, while I waited, I looked up at the sky. It was blue and miserable and the sun shown down like it wanted to fight us.

. . .

As he moved, Tomahawk kicked at the big stones on the ground. They scattered one way and then another, tumbling and clicking. But he kicked one stone that landed in this gleaming pile of white, up against the edge of the building. It turned out they were tampons. Unused tampons, but tampons all the same. And not like two or three, but a horde of them, like somebody had bought a bag and then just tore it open and dumped them there on the edge of the parking lot out of spite.

I touched one with the edge of my shoe.

Do you think it's alive? he said.

It could be. You never know. I picked it up and turned it over in my hand. All of it was there: the string part and the torpedo shaped body and the

little grooves. I handed it to Tomahawk. He looked it up and down and then pitched it off over the squat wall separating the lot from the creek. I didn't hear a splash. It was too small and light.

You'll ruin the environment like that, I said. *Some duck will choke.*

He sucked on his teeth. *So it goes,* he said.

We both knew that line from English class.

• • •

We walked down the block, passing all the different stores. There was a Dollar General and a True Value and a Gold Star Chinese. Before the bridge, though, there was a Salvation Army, and even though we had one just like it in our own town, we stood and looked through the windows. We thought maybe there would be something special inside, but there wasn't. There was only kids' stuff and big coats hung up against a wall that, with all the heat, seemed stupid to even think about. In a corner, there was this mannequin draped over with a woman's blouse whose fabric was painted with a dozen green and red gears. Tomahawk saw it too. He said, *It's beautiful.*

It's hideous. I said.

If I buy it for you, would you wear it?

I shook my head.

Come on, he said. *It'll make you the belle of the Rotary Club ball.*

But I kept on shaking my head. *I don't wear women's clothing.*

He grinned at me, and I tried to grin back.

That's a shame; you would have been gorgeous.

• • •

On top of the bridge, we stopped to look down at the creek, which from up there seemed to have turned back into a stream. Down a dozen yards, by the edge of where they had built the drive-through for the Northwest Bank, I could see the tampon caught up in some reeds. I picked up a pebble and threw it side-arm down towards the white speck, but I missed, my pebble clattering off the cement embankment.

Well, look at that, Tomahawk said.

I picked up another pebble and tried again.

Tomahawk did the same with a sliver of concrete, and for a minute or two, we just pitched junk down the stream, at that little dot of white, but we never even came close—not even close enough to make it tremble with a splash.

Tomahawk leaned back on the railing of the bridge. There was a little wind then, and it made his hair jostle around his neck. He was looking up at the library sitting on the hill. I knew what he was thinking.

I said, *I hoped it wouldn't come to this.*

It always does, he said.

I know, but I hoped we would find something better, a new place or a girl.

He smiled. Do you really think the girls here are any different than the ones back home?

I threw another stone and it made a splash.

Besides, he said. Why shouldn't we do it? This is Union City; it's not like somebody will miss them.

You never know.

You always know, he said. You can see it in the damn color of the buildings. In the way the people walk.

I don't know if that's true. I don't know if I believe that people are so easy to see through, but I looked down at his foot. It was crushing the burnt-out end of a cigarette somebody had left on the sidewalk. Under his weight, the ash and the tobacco were squeezing out like mucus.

• • •

The Union City Public Library was made of yellow bricks and wedged between the slope of the hill that the crosses were on and the flat of the road. The building was only about as long as a modular home, but it had two full stories, the lowest of which opened out onto the street. On the side that faced us, someone had spelled out the library's name in silver letters beneath an image of a sexless human figure reading a book. It was new, too. You could tell because time and the weather hadn't yet stained the bricks green or grey or rust.

Don't you wish, I said, that we had one like this back home—one that wasn't just a trailer covered in vinyl siding?

No, said Tomahawk. I like ours better. Grey-beige is a prettier color.

• • •

Breaking in isn't all that hard. You come on a Wednesday. It's closed that day and you go in the first floor door which leads into the basement. It's never locked. There's nothing much in the basement. Not a single book; just a pair of locked doors, a dim overhead light, and a stairway. But if you take that stairway, it'll bend around and leave you right in the middle of the library with the lights off—like right dead in the middle—like in-between the computers and the children's books with only a wall and a gate built between you and everything else. The wall, though, is only two-and-a-half feet tall. I guess they built it to keep the little kids from falling down the stairs when nobody was looking, but Tomahawk's six-foot-two and I'm five-ten.

For a minute we stayed there on the landing. I ran my finger across the wall like I was checking for dust. It felt cold. The whole room felt cold.

Tomahawk just stood there, looking off into the dim light. He sighed, like the walk up the stairs had taken hours instead of minutes and said, *You'd think that after three times, they would have done something.*

Maybe they haven't noticed. It's not like we walk away with whole computers in our bags.

Tomahawk shrugged.

• • •

The gate was only held shut by a latch, like the kind on a bathroom door, and just as easy. You could have just reached over and pulled it. *What a joke*, Tomahawk said and lifted one leg right over it. Nothing happened. No alarms. No security rushing out from behind one of the seven bookcases. So he lifted the other over.

He headed for the bookshelves on the far side of the library, past the checkout counter and the patches of light coming in from the tall glass of the front entrance. He didn't look back at me. He just went about his business, looking through each row book by book.

Eventually, I followed him, but I didn't climb over. I unlatched the gate and it swung out softly over the carpet.

Haven't we taken enough from this place, I said when I got to him.

He smiled, but he didn't look up from the book in his hand. He said, *Look at this book*. He flipped to the card on the last page. *No one has checked it out in twenty, twenty-two years.*

Maybe it's not the best book.

It's a famous book. It deserves someone to read it just for that.

I shrugged. *Maybe they read other famous books instead.*

That's fine. The little kids and the old schoolmarms can read whatever they want, but if they leave scraps behind, I'm going to take them.

He walked away with that book in his hand and disappeared in-between two of the upright shelves. I looked at all the spines facing me. There were dozens and dozens, some of them bright and full of life while others were tattered and worn like the skin of an old man.

I pulled one off the shelf. It was small and paperbacked, but its pages were still pure white like the flesh on the underside of your arm that never sees the sun. It was a book of short stories, I think, because every chapter began and ended with a line that sounded like it was supposed mean something.

I read one allowed: *And it is my dream, that in time, I too will learn to forget everything.*

Tomahawk stirred behind his wall of shelves. I could hear his mouth make a noise I couldn't identify as anything without seeing his face.

I like this one, too, I said. *It's sad, but warm.* I read: *But still there are beautiful things in this world, like the hands of a small girl folded around*

a wounded bird.

Sentimental, he said, like he wanted to make sure I heard it.

There is nothing wrong with feeling.

He didn't say anything. Probably he just grinned to himself like I had fallen into a trap or said something I didn't realize was a joke.

I put that book in my pocket.

I'm only going to take one this time. I think we're pressing our luck.

Fair enough, he said, and came back around the side of the shelves. He had three books in his hands and he handed me one of them bound with rough fabric. He said, *But I think you'll like this*. And then he kept going wherever it was he was headed.

The book was made of poems, but they were poems like rivers that stretched out and never ended. I just kept flipping through like it was one of those animation pads, watching the lines grow and shrink and bend.

He asked from someplace I couldn't see, *Do you like it?*

I don't know, I said. *They're all too long to read*. But I didn't get rid of it. He didn't often lead me wrong.

• • •

Tomahawk took three books, and I took two. We made sure we left nothing on the floor, and we put the books inside his bag so that it bulged out like a terraced field. And with it slung over his back, we walked out, down the stairs and out the basement door. No alarms, no detectors mounted against the wall—nothing to stop anybody from doing anything.

We could have left then. We could have just walked down the hill and across the bridge and gotten into his car and drove away, but we didn't. Instead, we stood, looking around, in front of the building. A couple people even passed us by.

Tomahawk looked up at the ugly, white shop at the top of the road that ran an adult movie rental out its back door, and I looked back up the hill that the library and the town hall all rested on. Between the edges of the buildings, I saw one of the white crosses peeking out. We walked towards them.

On top of the hill, there was no church beside the park explaining the crosses. Instead, it was like they had just sprouted out of the ground to impose themselves on those walking by. Tomahawk even walked up and tapped his finger against its side, like he wanted to know what it was made of, but it didn't make a sound, and he never told me what he learned. Instead, he walked over to the edge of where the hill dropped off towards the stream, and as we stood on that hill beneath the crosses and looking down at the creek and the gravel parking lot, he said, *The other night I had a dream about her*.

He didn't have to tell me who.

I was over at her house—I was a playing her a record, I think, but I couldn't make it work right, like the grooves were all these weird geometric shapes, like caverns and rectangles. But that's not what matters. What matters is she told this fucking joke. I don't even remember what it was, but it implied she was snorting meth with that friend of hers, Greg.

I rustled my hands inside my pockets. Down behind the Chinese place, a kid who looked fifteen was smoking a cigarette and kicking around a can. This was going to be a long story. He always told long stories.

I don't know why it was meth in my dream. I mean, all I ever knew about the shit she was in, I knew just from hints in the things she said, you know, but none of them ever hinted at that. I mean I don't even know if that's what you do with meth, but we have three assemblies a year just to tell us about all the shit that stuff will do to you, and I always thought—or hoped, or whatever—that she was smarter than to end up like Beaver or those fuckers who lurk outside the telemarketer's, smoking three cigarettes at once. But that joke, it hit me like an epiphany and cut my brain in six parts, so I panicked. I pushed her down on the ground. But it wasn't like a malicious thing—like I was attacking her; it felt warm somehow, like I was hugging her—and I kept saying stuff at her like, What the fuck are you doing? And, That stuff will wreck you—that stuff will melt your flesh. You know, like stupid, your-body-is-a-temple shit. And while I said it, she wouldn't look me in eye. She just tilted her head off to the side and said, Alright, I know, and when I think about it now that's the most obnoxious answer—like Stop Being a Nuisance by Giving a Shit About Me, but, fuck it, it was enough for me in the dream, and I let her up.

In the sky, two clouds were passing beside the sun, but neither—not even for a second—covered it.

I tried to walk away, too—I remember that—but I didn't make it. She caught up with me and pressed her body up against me and, even though she had on this blue hoody that was so blue it glowed, I could feel her warmth—you know—like I could feel that she was alive. And then she pressed her lips up against my cheek. I'm not sure how she did—I'm so much taller—but somehow she did. And it wasn't like I sold out in that first instant—I remembered all the times she had fucked me over, all the worst shit she had done, and I resisted, I wanted none of it, but then she did it again—this time against the corner of my mouth, and she said to me: I'm sorry. All those other times I wasn't ready, but now I am.

He rubbed his hands up through his hair, which had grown long from neglect, and when he pulled them away, his hair stuck out like a bill.

That broke me. I gave in. I let myself be happy about it, but the happier I felt, the more I hated myself for it, you know? I mean, that girl was so

fucking awful to me, and Lauren's been a great girlfriend for me—I'm so much happier now, less troubled, but still there's that empty part, you know, that wants to be filled and, there it was, feeling filled, but fuck being filled to hell 'cause you know it's just a lie or a trap.

But then I looked back at her, and we were outside somehow, and she was walking away down a street I didn't know, even though it looked like every street I've ever seen in my life.

I shouted after her, Where are you going?

And she said, I'm going to Greg's.

Why?

Because I promised him—we're going to break into the clinic again tonight. But I didn't have any idea what the hell that meant, so I just stood there. Then she shouted, Do you want me to bring you back anything? A pack of gum?

A pack of gum? What the hell is that? I don't even chew gum and how the hell do you get that from a clinic? But that was what she said, and so I said the only thing I could. I said, No. And then she kept on walking. But I got this feeling in my stomach, because I didn't think she was ever going to come back, and I didn't know if it was because she was going to die or get caught or if she just didn't want to, because for that second I got scared—or lost faith or something.

*He looked over at me, his face pulled together like it might explode into a thousand burning moths, but it didn't, and I had long since stopped paying attention. Instead I had been looking down into the valley, at the car and the tampons and the old furniture factory lingering on the horizon like a corpse or a cloud. *This place is such a shithole,* I said. *How do people live here?**

I don't know, Tomahawk said. *I guess it's because they don't have anywhere better to go.* Then he shrugged and looked down at the ground beneath his feet. It was brown and covered in grass the same as every other patch of earth.

It told him, You think you are a tough bastard. You think just because you're hungry you can have everything.

I don't. I don't believe that all.

Look at the girl.

What if I told you I cared about her?

You don't.

I do. Even through all the shit in my head.

No. You're just being comfortable—biding your time like you always bide your time, waiting for something better to make the decision for you.

No, in the dream—I felt so bad—so guilty, it nearly killed me.

You're lying. I was there. I saw it. You would leave her in a heartbeat for a girl with bigger tits.

I know.

Tomahawk started to cry. Or was it explode? Or did he finally burst into those ten-thousand burning moths I saw in his eyes? Who can say, except me, who was there but cannot be sure?

• • •

When we got back in the car, Tomahawk dug out a record from the side pocket of the door and stuck it inside the slot. It made the radio play static beeps and bleeps at us like it were reading barcodes as poetry.

As we pulled out of the parking lot, I said, *Remember when we used to listen to music with songs in it?*

Tomahawk pushed out a smile and turned the wheel of the car, so we could get out of Union City alive.

Still, I said just the same, *No me neither. To hell with that weak, miserable shit.*

Outside of town there is an Amish farm, and as we drove past, they were burning off a field so that it made the whole sky black like oil. They were smiling, though, the men with their beards and suspenders. It wasn't such a bad life, I thought. It had its joys even without electric light.

I looked back at Tomahawk. With one hand, he was driving and with the other he was rubbing his nose, and I knew that we were forgetting each other and, in time, would never say another thing.

Sebastian Doherty

SALES ASSOCIATE

I sell clothes, folding color stories
by the wrap of my index fingers, wringing
high quality Teflon in each whorl
and loop of my prints, good for thirty
washes before beginning to wear and fade.

It's singing with your hands and not sign
language, though everyone is deaf
to the voices of color: heather grey, royal
purple, true white, and two-tone black.
Even the dents and creases of the fabric
add dimension to the ether of shade;
the immutable mustards and nuclear
oranges, pressed to align the new balance
of drape in your shoulders as though fury
or atomic sadness could be limited
to your skeleton.

There's a philanthropy to African cotton,
Beachwood lacquers modal with its Arbor Day
grease. So much is made of what
you are able to own as it applies to your body,
but no one will possess the basic element,
the valence of orbiting stars orchestrating the knit,
the weave, no artistry but the blade cut to suit the shape
of your legs as though they say, "The grief
of my calves are in this silhouette."

You cannot measure the light and the seismic
call of its pearly throat—only the kindness
of its mimic as it settles across you
like a dressmaker's dummy. Consider the cost
of truth if it lays in your apparel, perhaps
not by the body inhabiting it, but by the hands
disclosing admission as though he that folds
can give you the funnel to song as he
when he sings with his hands.

Alice Rhee

THE LITTLE DIPPER IS NOW THE RICH AUNT

Dream ฝัน

(In Which I Land Ashore)

Branches of Persimmon

Branches strong in the summer of memory, fruit with a heart and thin skin
Flower perennially when it is the season of Persimmon, and I return to the garden
Where my aunt sliced into porcelain bowls the dribbling fruit, half in sun, half in shade.

Grandmother's Grave

With each step the ground sinks to engulf me—mind, it has rained for a month.
On top of the plateau of my grandmother's grave I'll play hide and seek with my cousins.
After dusk, we will watch our elders present the best of the kalbi to our hiding place,
And in their bowing and praying realize what we have done.

Song in the Missing Hours

Let me ask you, Korea, do you remember your absent ones?
Perhaps you will recall a girl, a pink bicycle's ungainly speed?
The soft-glass fragments of Korean planted in the roots of a swing set?
If we can jog your memory, maybe there is hope for me.

Caty Gordon

I AM NOT NEDA

On the corner of Wisconsin Avenue and W. PI Northwest, in front of the Iranian Interest Section in Washington, D.C., I met a woman from Iran whose life was completely unlike my own. She was born in Tehran, the younger of two daughters, and was forced into exile by her government at the age of eighteen because she was gay. “In Iran you have three options,” she told me. “You either leave, have a sex change, or they will hang you.” This woman chose the safest route, albeit more heartbreaking. She told me that she had not visited her family in over seven years and that her parents forewarned her that she would never be permitted to enter Iran again.

This, however, was not because of her sexual orientation. “I cannot go home,” the woman lamented, “because my family has seen my face on the state-run Iranian television seven times at protests here in DC. If I tried to enter Iran now, Ahmadinejad would kill me.”

And, yet again, on a Saturday morning in early May 2009, this woman was standing on the street corner in front of the Iranian Interest Section with hundreds of other protestors like me who were denouncing re-elected Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and demanding that the Basij stop killing protestors in Tehran. “United Nations, pay more attention!” we chanted.

“Stop the bloodshed, stop the violence, the people’s voices won’t be silent!”

“Neda’s blood on your hands, give them back their beautiful land!”

“I can’t just sit at home on my couch,” the woman said. “I have to do something and fight for my parents.” I found it most astounding that this rally, though, was peaceful. Much of the posters espoused messages of positivity, encouraging the people of Iran to continue their quest for rightful democracy. Many signs read, “Thank you President Obama for condemning but not meddling” (an obvious reference to Admadinejad’s outcry that Obama had “meddled” in his re-election, later leading to the accusation that the CIA had shot and killed Neda, a young female protestor whose death was caught on cell-phone video and spread worldwide over the internet, causing her to be the face of martyrdom in the fight against the regime).

Most of the protestors were from Iran and still had family there. Nearly everyone who came to the protest walked up with scarves, bandanas, or

sheets of cloth partially covering their faces. I thought this was perhaps cultural. I was wrong.

These protestors knowingly undertook an enormous risk that was unclear to me until a man explained the significance of video cameras pointing in our direction from inside the Iranian building. “See those cameras?” he said to me from behind the green bandana covering his mouth and nose. “They are taking our pictures to send back to Iran. Our families will pay the price of us defying Ahmadinejad. Do you know someone over there?”

I shook my head.

“Then you are safe.”

The man continued to tell me stories of horror that his family, who still live in Tehran, have communicated to him via telephone and internet. First, that a website has been set up with photographs of demonstrators for citizens of Iran to report the identities of those listed to the government for punishment. Secondly, that Neda’s body was mutilated and then hastily buried by the Iranian government. Her family did not even know where her grave was. They were instructed, according to this man and BBC reports, not to hold a memorial service for their daughter. He explained that Neda’s family had since been evicted from their home in Tehran to discontinue any support that she, and the resistance movement, had inadvertently gained. But perhaps most astounding was this man’s admittance that it was the policy of the Iranian government that the protestors who were killed by gunfire could not be claimed until their families paid the Basij for the bullet that was wasted on the body.

I realized then that I had nothing in common with the man and woman who faced such personal sadness and violence in their lives. Despite these circumstances, the woman was careful to tell me that she just wanted peace. As she spoke, a man entered the rally shouting profanities in Farsi, and was quickly asked to cease or leave. “We don’t want violence or anger,” the woman leaned in and told me. “He is saying terrible things, and we don’t want that getting back to Iran. We only want peace. We want justice.”

As for the families who remained in Tehran, the woman asked that we continue to show our support for them. She also gave me a flyer with ways to help. One suggestion: “Tell all of your friends in Iran to carry a plastic bag with a cloth soaked in vinegar. This will help deter the effects of tear gas.” Another: “If you believe in a higher power, please pray for us and our families.”

Another woman at the rally greeted me and tied a green ribbon (the symbolic color of Moussavi’s campaign) around my wrist. She seemed very surprised at my being there. “How did you hear about this?” she asked. “Do you know any Iranians personally?” I told her that I was a student and that I had been following the coverage of the protests in Tehran religiously. “Then you are Neda,” she told me with a smile.

All week, I watched thousands of pictures surface, people across the globe wearing t-shirts that read, “I AM NEDA.” Magazine articles, blog posts, newspaper headlines—all of them read, I AM NEDA. All week leading up to the protest I followed coverage of the international outcry for UNICEF and UN intervention in Iran.

But when that woman spoke, I realized how wrong she was. I was not Neda. I had known no personal grief like Neda’s family, or the gay woman’s, or the man standing beside me who so kindly translated the chants from Farsi to English for me. I have never worried about my family being shot in the streets for wearing a particular color or for raising their voices in opposition to the government. I have never feared for my sisters’ deaths, or considered paying my government for a bullet. I do not rely on Twitter to tell me if my mother is still alive. Never have I faced eviction for my political opinions, exile for supporting gay-rights. I am not Neda.

I am not Neda because I stood there protesting and did not fear that a blast of bullets would explode inside my chest. I am not Neda because I did not become a symbol for martyrdom. I am alive, in a country where I can spit on my leader’s name and live without shame. My mother will never wander the streets of a ravaged city looking for my removed left leg—a practice of the Basij, to ensure the body won’t rest peacefully in the afterlife.

I finished the protest, took the Metro back to my home, and tuned into coverage on the BBC about protests that had taken place in London, Berlin, Paris, Moscow, and Cairo. I followed the covered faces of Iranians and wondered how many of them would come home to Tweets and text messages telling them that family members perished because they had been recognized by the Iranian government on the state-run channels. For their bravery, and resilience, I was in awe.

In light of what the Iranians in Northwest had told me, I found it more important than ever to let Iran know that the world was watching closely, as both an ominous warning to Admadinejad and the Basij and to demonstrate solidarity with the people of Iran. I sincerely hoped that the protests would strengthen and succeed and that through peaceful demonstration democracy would be fulfilled in Iran. No person, regardless of political opinion, should ever be subjected to violence as a result of exercising a basic human right. This was not about being pro-West or ethnocentric. Because to see all of those people, young and old, women and men, standing side by side in a sea of green and black, taking part in this mass demonstration of power and freedom of expression, was nothing short of remarkable.

Adam Lizakowski

GOING TO WEST

JANUARY 12, 1981

I'm sitting in a cold apartment, wrapped in a blanket and musing over a sheet of paper, deciding what to write, what has not been written yet. Would the province of Dolny Slask (my little homeland known as Owl's Mountain) be attractive to those from the capital? What is new that has not been covered yet?

I kicked off 1981 at a New Year's Eve ball with my girlfriend, Halina, at the Mrowisko club, ending the previous year of tragedy—on December eighth, John Lennon was killed in New York—and happiness—two days later, Czeslaw Milosz received the Nobel Prize for Literature in Stockholm. The ball, the death, and the prize—these have been the three most important events in my life during the past weeks. Thanks to Lennon, I started studying English; thanks to Milosz, I embarked on my adventure with twentieth century literature.

And how was the old year—1980? Wonderful. It was the birth of Solidarity, the year I took sick leave from the army, when I first met Halina, and the year of Milosz's Nobel Prize. Lennon died so that Milosz could be born. On the altar of ashes of one dream is born something more beautiful and bolder for those whose hearts ring out to announce life rather than simply pump.

JANUARY 26, 1981

In Mr. Zenek's barbershop, I listen to the conversations of his clients, who patiently wait for a haircut. Workers who not long ago had worked persistently to build communism complain. They worked without stopping to think if they were happy or not, although they started demanding Saturdays off. They organized warning strikes, which of course led to all kinds of disruptions in the country's economic life. The Voice of People *Trybuna Ludu* wrote about these on its front page. But Mr. Zenek's clients don't worry about it at all, because they realize that, if the economy completely collapsed, communism would collapse as well. If the situation gets worse, life will be better. Of course, no one is talking about what will happen to the factory where they work now if they stop working or if the factory stops making money for the country.

FEBRUARY 18, 1981

On February twelfth, General Jaruzelski became the prime minister of the communist government. The previous prime minister didn't make a good impression on me. I didn't even pay attention to his ruling. He disappeared like a stone dropped in the water, as some kind of just-read novel hero who is immediately forgotten as soon as the book is put away. The new vice prime minister was Mieczyslaw F. Rakowski, a former editor-in-chief of the weekly newspaper *Politics*. In a word, the armed forces and the media now govern us. Can this kind of government be stable and reliable? Probably not. The journalist's black ink clashed with the soldiers' red blades. The mixture of colors reminded me of mud. What this means I don't know, but if I went to Mr. Zenek's barbershop, I would certainly find out. The people in Pieszyce know everything. For many local workers, it is as obvious and clear as the sun at high noon. Poland will be free only if Russia collapses. There can't be a free Poland without a free Russia, so we are two vessels joined at the hip. But how can we win not only a free Poland, but also a free Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, etc.? Is this possible? Once Russia itself bursts, everything will be possible.

MARCH 2, 1981

I sent a few of my poems to Warsaw's *Poetry*. The New Year spills a few new pieces from its sleeve. It is another attempt and probably not the last. The invisible competition is ruthless, and my hand shakes when I throw poems into the garbage can. Unfortunately, I rarely know why my poems are rejected. *Poetry* is a nationwide magazine that I have read for five years. In my opinion, it is very unevenly edited and not always interesting. I do not always understand the editors who classify poems for print. All in all, it's not my business to judge those who judge others' artistic work. The only thing I can do is call time as my witness, who will adjudicate as to who was right.

MARCH 25, 1981

The ruling party subscribes to socialism. The twenty-sixth Soviet communist convention has ended. Leonid Brezhnev is once again elected the political leader of the USSR, and the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. No one in Poland is surprised, neither is Eastern Europe. I suspect that Reagan is not surprised either. The surprise would have been if they had chosen somebody else. Then the world would frantically wonder what is happening. Who should they be afraid of? Where do their friends lie? But everything is clear—the Soviet communists don't live in the Polish poverty. Victory is always on the side of the stronger player.

APRIL 12, 1981

General Jaruzelski made an appeal for the suspension of strikes for

three months. Some see this as clever subterfuge for a communist who needed time to pull everything together. Others see in Jaruzelski's appeal as the weakness of the communist government. Everyone knows that strikes weaken our economy. They generate chaos and create confusion, but that is a small price to pay to regain—even if only temporarily—our freedom.

Already friends in groups of three and five have left for the West, to Germany. They claim that they feel summer in the air. Work in Poland is decreasing, and zloty is no longer money but just a contract. However, in the West, as spring draws to a close, there will be more and more work, so there is no need to sit in the country and starve. I myself ponder about such a departure. Maybe I should leave—even if not for money, for my curiosity to see with my own eyes that forbidden, legendary, rotten West, to smell that flower without picking it in that romantic Polish way: with my teeth set and my eyes full of tears.

MAY 6, 1981

The workers received a gift from the people's authorities on the workers' holiday: an increase in the price for meat. As usual, the explanation was the large demand; with this, the average Pole eats more meat than Western Europeans. The same is true of alcohol. Poles drink too much compared to other civilized nations. Yet nothing was said about the fact that the country makes a profit on vodka. The specter of hunger is making more and more passes around Poland. We are all hungry, which is no joke. On April thirtieth, new food stamps were introduced for meat and its preserves, as well as butter, flour, rice, and grains such as grouts, buckwheat, millet, and barley. We came into what the working-people and rulers created: total economical decay. In all my life, I would never have believed that the communist party would be able to drive every nation into such a frenzied degradation. Old people say that being under German rule was better than now. I don't want to believe that. Germany was an occupier, but making everyone starve looks like some surrealistic movie. There are lines for whatever one could buy. Unfortunately, less and less is available, and money has lost its value.

MAY 17, 1981

Something horrible happened on the St. Peter Plaza in Rome. On May thirteenth, an assassination attempt was made on the Pope. Who does the Pope bother? Communists—that is the first answer, the first presumption. In my work, no one has any doubts that it is the work of the "reds." What next? Will the Pope survive? It is a miracle that he wasn't fatally shot—despite so many bullets, only three hit him.

JUNE 6, 1981

My dreams are deeply coded into my subconscious; only I can reach my

memory, which is always there. I knew a little of love, but expected a lot of it. This love for the West was not only mine, but of the collective society. A trip to the West—that was my idea for living in Pieszyce. To live HERE in moderate comfort, I must leave THERE. How much logic is in this thinking, I don't know. The communist reality is that there is no logic, but it makes sense to live here after returning from the West with money.

JUNE 14, 1981

Milosz came to Poland in June. It was good that Milosz came to Poland, because with him came a hint of the West and a bigger sense of freedom. That thread connecting us with that better and richer part of the world took on a symbolic meaning—as if tying the two worlds together. Only now it could be acquainted with his works, which he created only for the chosen thirty years. In a word, the poet was the biggest event of this summer.

Milosz's Nobel Prize created a big breakthrough, as communists had to take into account both him and his work. Many things must be revisited and reinterpreted from scratch. He will bring facts hidden since before World War II, as well as those hidden during post-war years and the Stalinist period, into the light of day.

Of course, it won't happen in a month or a year, but what has already happened will be of great importance. Young poets will grow on Milosz, they will pore over his work, which has the power to knock down the state, so entrenched as it has been for the last forty years—which is why his poetry was hidden originally. This change will be the starting point for the post-war era of all Polish literature. Such interesting times we live in: first our Pope, then solidarity, and now Milosz. Who will be next? Will it be Walesa?

JUNE 21, 1981

Yesterday marked the one-year anniversary of my nationwide poetical debut in Warsaw's *Tygodnik Kulturalny* ("Weekly Culture"). The poet Thaddeus Nowak helped me with it. The past year—my debut year—has been my poetical pregnancy. I parade around with it, pricking others' eyes, saying "look at me" while having the pleasure of communing with poetry.

On this small private holiday of the provincial man and his poetry, I invited the girl of my heart, Halina, for lunch at the Ratuszniak restaurant. We talked a lot (over the burger) about our common future, made plans for a common life, and discussed the common publication of a small volume of poetry. Halina is an artist and painter; she could create the cover and has drawn some graphics for my poems.

After talking with her, I felt as if I could move the Owl Mountains. Unfortunately, I don't believe I could publish a small volume of poetry living in Pieszyce. I don't have any idea how to organize that. But one thing I know

for sure, I must have connections through acquaintances. To establish that, I must look towards Wrocław. It would be even better in Warsaw or Krakow, because only those cities are truly accountable. I set my sights on some poets and vowed to torture them with my correspondence to the bitter end.

JULY 2, 1981

I talked with Halina about a trip to the West, but she is more interested in setting the wedding date than my trip. We could have a church wedding even today, but my father died in November of last year, so my period of mourning for a year has held us back from that step. So as to avoid returning to this matter now, in the middle of summer, I agreed to a December wedding date. I need to talk about whether I go to the West or stay in Pieszyce. I also shared with Halina my anxiety, but she perceives it differently, explaining it as my being overworked—or as, she described, my desire to escape myself. “I could never escape from you,” I answered her.

Halina is a very practical and sensible person, blessed with great tact and a sense of fairness. I’m truly head over heels in love with her, but I am aware that I’m not mature enough yet to marry. I want to establish a family, but I don’t want to hurry. She treats me in a motherly way, meaning that if she doesn’t agree with me, she ends the debate with: Remember, the last word belongs to you, but I’m the most important person in your life and wish you well. For me, she is an angel and the best thing to ever happen to me. I love her, but I can’t decide about marriage. She can.

JULY 15, 1981

Yesterday, the ninth Special Convention of the Polish Communist Party (PZPR) started in Warsaw. What will happen as a result of this special convention no one yet knows, but it’s not that hard to guess. The ruling party will publicly declare their concern for workers and then announce the next increases in the prices of meat, vodka, cigarettes, etc.

If only any of the big PZPR communists openly said, “People, it’s bad; communism is ending, we are bankrupt, we apologize to the whole nation for everything that has happened over these icy years under communism. A new time has arrived; let’s sit down and talk about our mutual home. Poland, forgive us,” then that would be a special convention for me.

AUGUST 11, 1981

I’ve come back to *Literature Around the World* and the further studying of Milosz. It says: “I knew an old woman, who in difficult moments of life slowly lifted her hands to temple, saying: ‘Oh, I’m located on a desert island, I don’t have anything to do with people, run, run somewhere far.’”

We are all—to some degree—this old woman facing our own helplessness

in the surrounding world. We focus on the island of legend and desire—that somewhere else could be better. Yet we crave our island-safety, which means isolation from the rest of the world.

Life requires warfare to survive—brutal warfare, in which there is no place for mercy. I close my eyes and see myself sitting on the edge of a cage with a club in my hands. I open my eyes, and I'm walking into the Pieszycki dry goods store and asking if there are any socks or underwear. No, there are not, the saleswoman answers. And down falls all of the Western Roman civilization—with its Coliseum, Shakespeare, and Mickiewicz—squarely on my head, leaving only an oddly opaque fog in its place. For what is the purpose of such inventions, if we can walk with the bone of the wild boar in our nose, a bird's feather held into the hair, and a wreath of grass around our necks.

AUGUST 20, 1981

During the last week, the leaders of our nation (at least, that's who they think they are), Kania and Jaruzelski, met with the Soviet leader Brezniew at the Kremlin. *Poland hatched an anti-socialistic force, trying to knock down a unique, bright system in the world.* What must be done? Don't let them eat, lengthen their work hours, scare them with the rotten West and eventual prison.

The countries of Western Europe declared aid in the form of free food for Poland. Italy is the latest country to come to Poland's aid. The communists—without embarrassment or shame—take such delicacies to share among their party friends. If the nation would demand bread, we would have . . . well, a gun butt across the lower back.

The most recent joke in Zenek's barbershop is to declare a war on Germany, surrender, let them catch everybody in a roundup, and then let them take care of all the work. That's horrible.

So how is it with communism—good or bad? Good, probably, but only for communists and sly fellows. For the people like me, it is horror, plain and simple.

AUGUST 28, 1981

Finally, I have in my hands the June issue of *Literature Around the World*, dedicated completely to Milosz. The light green cover boasts a handwritten poem entitled *Gift*. On the back is a poem called *Hour*.

Milosz defines the poet's attributes: greed of eyes and will to describe. However, whoever comprehends poetry—knows and describes it—must be conscious that they are stepping into a serious dispute with modernity, fascinated by innumerable theories of specific poetical language. Every poet writing in his native language depends on generation, for he has inherited

style and forms developed by those before him. However, at the same time he feels that the old manner of speech is not adequate for his own experiences.

What Milosz thought about writing—greed of eyes and will to describe—and how it relates to innumerable theories of specific poetical language . . . I must think about that a bit longer. When I read that, I had the impression that I understood it. Now, when I put the book on the table, my thoughts escape like frightened birds.

SEPTEMBER 5, 1981

A few hours ago, Halina went to her house in the town of Bielawa. All things considered, two weeks passed by as if a beautiful dream. Now, sitting in an empty apartment, I appreciate her presence even more. I walked her to the bus stop, and her smell has not yet had time to dissipate. I still feel the warmth of her hand on her tea cup, and I already miss her and can't wait for her to be here. However, during our time together, we did not talk much about my trip to the West for the Golden Fleece. There were many chances, but she clearly avoided that topic. Why didn't I push her to the wall and ask her directly? Only one explanation is available: if she would like to go with me, she herself must bring up the topic. Suddenly I came up with an idea—instead of having to persuade her that a trip to the West would offer us access to all its profits, I would wait for her to give me a sign if she would like to go with me.

I didn't have time to return to reading *Literature Around the World*. I thumbed through it, stopping briefly to pore over parts. On page 230 was the poem of Robinson Jefferson, an American poet who died in 1962, translated by the Nobel Prize recipient. His poem was entitled "Love the wild swan."

SEPTEMBER 10, 1981

I was so focused on politics and everything that what was happening in the country that I forgot about my question: go to the West or not? But how could I think about this when the Solidarity Convention at Olivia's Hall in Gdansk started on September fifth? Rebellions arose in Polish prisons. Criminals were demanding their rights. More and more often, life is surprising me with something that—not that long ago—was completely normal, to which I was practically indifferent. What is going on at present is so important and exceptional—probably the first time since the end of World War II that the eyes of the world, with great interest and friendliness, have been directed at Poland.

We could make the most of this fact for ourselves. I have the impression that the West has started to feel a certain affinity for Polish people. Many of my friends have already assumed that I have left country. I have carried my passport in my pocket for three months. It's high time to make some

decision. I will go work in Germany or Austria. How strange it sounds in the ears of a Polish man. *I will go work in Germany*. Even almost half a century after the war, my homeland cannot secure essential resources for life for its young generation: shoes, bread, meat, TV, a piece of chicken for Sunday lunch . . . It's a shame to write about such prosaic issues, but they are the main reasons the young Poles make trips to work abroad, knocking on the doors of strangers.

SEPTEMBER 14, 1981

Halina doesn't want to hear about any trip: "We will go nowhere." Her words are deafening in their resoluteness. When I make plans about earning money in the West, I tell her how we could spend it, but she gets even more upset, hanging her head down and signaling to me what she thinks about all of it.

She still doesn't have a passport. "For me, the West doesn't exist," she says. The French catalog of wooden furniture that she liked so much a few days ago she now shoves away. I point to it, explaining that we would have to work our entire lives in Poland to be able to buy such furniture. But she brushes me off with her "so what," adding that people are happy without beautiful wooden furniture. They live, work under communism, and nothing bad happens to them.

The West no longer interests her. She considers Western well-being to be a luxury she can do without. She has grown indifferent to stories of a better life, stating that Poland offers the best life for us because we were born here. Why look for happiness in the rest of the world if we can't find it in the place we know best—our own home? She is even ready to see the beauty in the lines for bread and milk. "Look," she says to me, "how wonderful is it that people wait in lines, talking as they pass the time so nicely. Without such lines, everyone would buy their products quickly before rushing back to their apartments, where they would double-lock their doors, switch on the TV, and die from boredom due to loneliness. In line, the people are more authentic and nicer—even if they are arguing."

She pushes me stronger to get married now. "December is a long time to wait," she explains. "Let's get married today." She hangs her head, adding, "Someone told my mother that we were living together. Apparently, all of Bielawa is already talking about that, and in Pieszyce everyone knows that we are a married couple."

SEPTEMBER 15, 1981

The atmosphere in Pieszyce has become increasingly sad. My friends and acquaintances are leaving in groups. People openly talk about a state

of emergency—even war. Solidarity announces new strikes. The Soviets won't wait much longer. They are looking for a sign from Moscow. What will happen then . . . it's better not to think about it.

The summer has not left us yet, but autumn is already stubbornly knocking on the door. Nights are particularly haunted by the impending cold. People bustle about their homesteads like squirrels, stocking provisions for the winter. They can pickles and shred cabbage. Mr. Rysio Marczuk makes his fruit wine and swears not to even look at a bottle before the New Year. Others dig up mounds for potatoes. Old lady Kaczmarkowa has been chopping wood by herself for the last three days. She has so much, she could burn down all of Pieszyce.

The smell of fresh pickles and cabbage mixes with the smell of apples and plums being cooked for jam. Garlands of mushrooms swing in windows as if amulets, testifying to the exceptional luck of their owners. Not waiting for winter, Koszela—the neighbor from below—kills rabbits and Mazurek coypu. In the front yard, he smokes the meat of the animals in specially prepared brick ovens, making sausages. At night, people listen to Radio Free Europe or Voice of America, shaking their heads with resignation as they wash barrels, churn butter, and salt pork fat.

The Soviets have organized military maneuvers close to Poland's border to the east. Everyone knows something's cooking—something bad—but no one wants to foretell evil aloud. "Our" Soviets stationed in nearby Swidnica also become nervous. "The Poles stopped striking because, for the last few months, we have been sleeping in our clothing and shoes," Kuriata, who trades gold with them, repeated what they said. The Soviets want to scare the followers of Solidarity. If something happens, the Soviets could be in Pieszyce in half an hour. That thought won't let me rest. Without shooting a single bullet, they could do anything to us. Other than axes and scythes, we don't have any weapons. Moreover, a stronger will to live is no longer evident.

SEPTEMBER 18, 1981

Halina doesn't want to go to work in Austria. In general, she doesn't want to go anywhere. Now, after six months of talking about it, she has decided to stay at her mother's in Bielawa. The West is not for her. She doesn't feel well if she thinks about trips. Neither furniture nor the vision of a better, more comfortable life interests her. She claims that we have been sentenced to poverty and have no chance to escape it. No one can run from destiny. Trying to run only creates more poverty, and you will lose what you have already gained here. It's hard for me to talk to her, much less convince her. She acts as if she knows better, and no one and nothing can convince her otherwise.

SEPTEMBER 21, 1981

At the disco, I reached an agreement with two friends, boys from respectable homes—the so-called Pieszycka intelligence. I have known them for many years. There were times in our lives that we were friends—even close friends. We shared common outings to the mountains or to Otmuchowskie Lake, not to mention the disco at Mrowisko club. The youngest of them, my namesake, Adam, lives merely a few houses down from me in the agricultural school dormitory. I have often played ball with his father in the agricultural school yard. I have actually known him my entire life.

Similarly, Alek and I have known each other for years. We have spent many weeks together during the summer, catching fish in the pond by the train station. We went to the same grammar school—Number 4, called “Millennium”—which prisoners built. Twenty years after it was built, it fell apart as if made of mud. We often shared stories of how the prisoners gave away lime, cement, and bricks to the local farmers in exchange for a bottle of wine. The school was built on a construction manager’s word of honor, so it’s not strange that it is falling down.

SEPTEMBER 22, 1981

A friend of a friend bought my TV, and I gave Zbyszek Wojcik some of my books. The rest I would give to Marian Zachoszcz to keep until my return. I have to sell everything from the apartment: the table, armchairs, my stamp collection, stuffed birds, deer antlers, post-German paintings, and a collection of French books from the 18th and 19th centuries that I long ago dug out of a paper dump behind one of the textile factories. These books and other objects that I so wanted to have to be happy and feel good in their presence I now must sell in a week. I have to get rid of all of this as soon as possible, straight away. I don’t have any opportunity to haggle on the prices because the buyers know that I have decided to go on a trip. If my prices don’t suit them, they simply hold out until I can’t help myself. As soon as possible, I must open a bank account in dollars. I have five dollars; to leave for the West I must have 150—such a big amount that it’s hard for me to imagine it. How do I get that kind of money? Few people want to get rid of their dollars. People believe the downfall of the zloty is imminent. In Poland, the dollar has always been a way to protect us from this—besides gold, of course. By some miracle, I was lucky enough to buy two camping rations of canned food on the black market for my journey.

SEPTEMBER 23, 1981

Halina is growing increasingly sad, and in this sadness she is becoming more and more beautiful. I could even say that sadness suits her, but I don’t say that because my internal world is falling apart due to her sadness. My

heart crumbles when I look at her. I can't imagine life without her, but I keep my decision to make my trip without her. The girl runs wild; she doesn't even want to be touched or kissed. I talk to her, but I have the impression that my words don't reach her. Old lady Kaczmarkowa would say that the girl is dejected. At present, our conversations consist of convincing each other, so she shows her point while I show mine. Neither of us wants to retreat. She advises me against my journey, sharing horror stories of being frightened by hunger, being knocked around—whatever the worst she can share. But I can't withdraw. I don't even want to. Besides, I don't trust her fear of hunger. It seems to me that her idea about the West is too antiquated to be true. My ideal of the West is different.

Many things I have already sold ridiculously cheap. I can't even say for how much, because it would be a shame for the family, as people say. I do everything to get those longed-for dollars. I am giving my apartment to my brother even though I could sell it quickly. I prefer to be protected in case something goes wrong, so I can always return home.

My brother can't eat he is so happy, although he doesn't turn away alcohol. He doesn't want to believe that I have given him the apartment for free, on the condition that he puts candles in my name on our parents' grave and, if something goes wrong, he always lets me in under his roof. In a single day, I have become a benefactor for his family, and his children look at me like a hero. All in all, he couldn't wait to get the key to the door. This is how much a brother's friendship is worth—a brother with whom I slept in one bed, under one blanket—given the possibility of getting an apartment.

SEPTEMBER 26, 1981

In the leather store, I hand over my meat stamps to bribe Jola. I need a suitcase or some carryall bag. I don't have anything in which to pack the sum of my life. I remember we once had some suitcases at home, but clearly father managed to sell them for vodka before death closed his eyes. As with all of our most valuable possessions: he sold post-German clocks, antlers, samovars, paintings, chairs, a table set—in a word, everything for which there was both a buyer and a demand. The rest of the devastation I did myself.

The price of the suitcase is almost equal to my salary. When I tell Halina, she shrugs her shoulders and says: "So what?"

"What 'so what?'" I'm surprised. "That is paranoia."

"Yes, paranoia," she repeated, "but 36 million Poles live in this paranoia and they don't run to the West."

"I am not running either," I defend myself. "I am going for money for furniture, clothes, and that's all. Money is needed for a normal life even in the abnormal country of Poland."

“You work for furniture, but you don’t have an apartment anymore because you gave it up to your brother. So you must earn enough for furniture and an apartment—and then a car and the devil knows what else. In a word, life is not long enough to earn enough to pay for all of it,” Halina says.

“Then go with me. Together we can earn the money faster,” I say, but she turns around and sobs.

Over her sobs, I hear her choked words, “Furniture is not needed for your happiness; I’m needed for your happiness. Don’t you understand that?”

“I understand,” I reply humbly. “You are needed for my happiness, which is why I’m begging you go with me. Together we would experience something wonderful, something we could never dream of here, where the store shelves are empty. Even vinegar and mustard have disappeared. Meanwhile, three saleswomen sit in the empty store knitting. Why should they care about the empty shelves? The state is paying their salary regardless. The same is true throughout the country. How many stores are there like that?”

SEPTEMBER 28, 1981

Halina still doesn’t believe I am going. She thinks I’m kidding. My energetic actions—selling books and other stuff from the apartment, quitting my job—mean nothing to her. Nothing reaches her. I could leave her alone. She cries. I assure her as I only can that I love her, that she is the most important thing in my life, and that I would never love anybody besides her. The more I reassure her, the less she believes in my assurances.

She claims that, if I truly love her, I would not even think about a trip without her, leaving her alone. She can’t understand that life is life, so love is love. For her life is love, and for me love is life. How can I solve all this? More and more, I let her drag me into philosophical discussions, from which nothing is resolved. I don’t want to leave because I don’t love her, but because I *love* her. Unfortunately, something has happened to me, and life in a communist system is no longer interesting to me. Suddenly, I felt unhappy; I realized that 300 kilometers west of here, my life would look absolutely different. Why not take advantage of such an opportunity and taste such forbidden fruit? Nine of my fifteen best friends have already left. They have seen the world, returned with money, bought apartments and cars, and sent their children to private language lessons and dance or music schools. For such basic goals in life, must one so obviously betray their homeland and love?

“How much could I earn as a worker of the Cultural Center? How much could you earn as industrial interior designer?” I ask her, but she only hangs her head and cries. “Think about it,” I say. “Solidarity has already closed all the cultural and tourism sections in the center. Only the manager, librarian, and janitor are left. It’s the end of grants for culture. Photographers don’t

have money for supplies, and even if they do, the stores have nothing. The same is true for mountaineers and people who enjoy sailing or fine art. I give up. It's over. Something has to change."

"If it must change, then it should change as soon as possible," she replies, looking at me with eyes full of tears. "You think you can run from here and forget about me and about everything, but you are mistaken. Even if you left for the end of the world, you would always be back with your thoughts here, because this is your only place in the whole world. Don't you understand that?"

"No, I don't," I reply to her, even more furious at her than usual. It is the same old argument—that happiness can only be found here, this is the best place, etc.—and I have had enough. Why would I miss this place? Why would I come back here with my thoughts? Never would I look at this site with a tear in my eyes, because this place will always be inside me. With it, I would wander around the world, but without exaggeration. I can love Pieszyce, but do I have to suffer from it? That's too much to say.

OCTOBER 4, 1981

With Halina, we had an "Indian wedding," a party that simultaneously served as a farewell for our friends. The party took place in my empty apartment. We sat on the floor, some on a piece of wood or trunks, which my brother will burn in the stove during the winter. We spent the evening happily, having a lot of fun, but I quickly tired of the company. My thoughts turned to the unknown world to which I am heading. The faces of friends smiled at me, their eyes dazed with alcohol as they looked at me for the last time. At least I have that hope, or I must here make the correction that, if not the last time, then probably we will not meet anytime soon.

Halina gave me a wedding present: a volume of great poet Mickiewicz poetry and two fish in tomato sauce cans. I completely forgot about a wedding present for her. Using an old shirt, I wrapped two notebooks with my poems—over 400 poems in all. I also gave her the old washing machine "Frانيا," which my sister-in-law had wanted. For the first time in several weeks, I kissed Halina while giving her the presents.

The smells of her skin stupefied me. For a second, I wanted cuddle, but her eyes clearly said no. I felt the sadness in her look, and even if she didn't cry this time, her eyes were watery and each invisible tear fell from her eyes becoming a hot spark on my cheeks. I love her that much, but she can't understand that. What do I do? For the first time in my life, I am in a situation with no going forward or back—or even to the side. I fall into the trap of my imagination. It's very hard for me. I suffer and experience a searing hot hell of internal uncertainty. I ask myself the same question a thousand times: *What do I do?* How can I survive with such stress?

OCTOBER 7, 1981

After selling off my whole apartment, I just have 80 dollars. I still need 70 to open a bank account. Alek, my trip companion, who sold his house, offers to lend me the remaining 70 dollars, but for interest, he takes one of my cans of food for the trip. I didn't have a choice; I had to give it to him. The money would stay in the bank for a few days, and then I would give it back to him. It's unbearable to think that—three years of my work and the valuables I have sold have a value of 80 dollars, the average cost of a bottle of perfume in Paris. Pure abstraction, surrealism, paranoia—in a world heaven of communistic stagers, for whom *eau de cologne* has no importance.

OCTOBER 13, 1981

It is just now starting to hit me what I'm actually doing. I don't want to turn back, even though I feel that Halina will be lost forever. By not agreeing to the journey, she seems to have made the decision to split from me forever. Our love—sweeter than handmade furniture, a mutual future, being supported by our own hands—now hung over a ravine. However, can one put an equal sign between it and furniture? My anxiety is growing, fear in the face of losing my dearest, sweetest angel with red hair, green eyes, and lips sweeter than sultan's cream is moving up my throat, slowly paralyzing me completely.

OCTOBER 24, 1981

I have already packed everything—a few old shirts, sweaters, slacks, towels, etc.—and in a few days we are setting out on our journey. I still have several thousand zloty, which I can spend on anything, but there is nothing in the stores. The Szym (lower house of the Polish parliament) is calling for civil rest. Solidarity is calling to make decisions about strikes with deliberations. If such a situation remains, the simple people will completely lose their orientation. Never mind the fact that they will not have anything to walk with—my so-called shoes are literally falling off my feet, and I'm not able to buy new ones because there are none in the stores. I have even tried to arrange for some, but they brought me shoes that were three sizes too big, so I gave up. If I would stay in Poland, I would undoubtedly take them for exchange, as money is losing its value.

There is no need to write about how tired I am, how my nerves are frayed by Halina and the trip, and it is only with great difficulty that I can find a place for myself. I'm exhausted, and as my departure nears, I feel an increasing stabbing pain in my heart. My gaze is on the clock, as I impatiently monitor its hand movement. I don't sleep, but keep a vigil, waking every few dozen minutes. I stay by myself with the packed suitcases; Halina has already moved away from me, withdrawing from my life, which is already beyond

the border—I think about this with great sorrow and feel bad. It’s almost four A.M., and dreams are closing my eyelids. I want to fall asleep, but the sheets are burning my back.

The driver will be Alka’s brother-in-law, one of the shrewdest boys in Pieszyce, who goes shopping abroad a few times each year—this is why he is considered smart. Four of us will head into our better future in a small Fiat. It is no Mercedes, but history knows many who set out on a journey only have a gnarled stick in a cupped hand.

OCTOBER 29, 1981

At 2 P.M., we set off, just as the first shift left work. Halina didn’t even cry. Rigid, and maybe numb, with semiconscious gaze, she said farewell. I held her close to me, but I didn’t feel the beating of her heart. As puzzling as the Sphinx, she remains silent, her goodbye to me as with the deceased. At the last moment, she gave me four sandwiches with sausage saying, “I skipped work to buy this sausage for you, and now am almost late saying goodbye to you. My manager sends his regards; he thinks you are doing the right thing. Go and come back quickly, I will miss you. I don’t care about the money you haven’t earned yet, I need only you. Stay, please—sausage, shoes . . . that’s not everything. I love you.”

People I have known since birth arrived on the sidewalk, with closer friends on their heels, and the street growled with the engines of cars. For a moment, the town was revived, and I felt embarrassed. The passers-by glanced at my face, and I wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

With the end of my scarf, I furtively wiped away my tears, furious at myself, Halina, and the entire world. I wished for only one thing: to cross the Polish-Czech border and be as far away from Pieszyce as possible.

“Go, go,” I urged the driver. “Go and don’t stop anywhere along the way.”

Robert Whitehead

HYPNOSIS

I.

As when you've been driving for miles, but have no memory
of how you did it. Or, like myth, when the road turns symbolic
and improbable, when you start seeing things on the drive

that aren't there

and, perhaps, always were—*when I count to three*
the highway will become an image against stillness, the quick grey

moving past and away, irrevocable as time, which we've
discarded now for our purposes. *Let your mind*

be stupid and tranced, let this insistent pavement meaning *onward*
charm you out of your wits

and then, into them—*tell me what you see.*

A gull turning from shine on the hood of a blue sedan
into shape, wings across an overpass on I-95. You see
the moment, repeating, attentive. This is your memory, working.

You see a sea-bird, big with imagination. First it was riding like a car
on the air, then—swift transformation—it *was* the car, the held sun
on rough-shined aluminum. And for a while you don't know which

was more true, the car or the bird—

a question of what's to trust

which you do not have to answer right now.

II.

And then, when you arrive at the end of the road, you see the trees hung
with Spanish moss and think *ghost hair*, even in broad daylight,
even though you can touch and therefore prove the spirits away.

Though, what stake have the senses in what's knowable? The instinct
could be as true as the fable—choose how much, not what, to believe:
As it goes, there once was a Cherokee man who fought for his land

*no more than the one who trooped in with his Spanish wife and plans
for a plantation. When the wife was alone, Cherokee man cut all her hair
and threw it into the live oak. Are you standing with the men, the wife?*

Are you watching her raven hair deaden and grey, frizzing to the other trees?
The city is coming soon, a whole city of houses, rising as a story of how
they never existed, how the moss was some accident of travel, some seeds

or spores on the skin, an image transplanted and prospering.

Later,
you will run through the park to Beethoven. When the moss falls

from the branches overhead onto your heaving shoulder, tell me what
scared you the most—the foreign touch, unexpected in the foreign place,
or that for a moment you saw the woman, throwing her hair down in an-
guish,

making you to snap into it, the natural world's transfiguring—the symbol
stays the object it inherits. The moss ghosts, grows, is wakeful.

Andrew Cothren

STORAGE

My soul has been sending me postcards from different countries and cities. *Enjoying Brussels; make sure you call your father. You'd love Tokyo; don't forget about Anna's anniversary. Sydney is fantastic. You should look into getting a cat; I know you've always wanted one.*

There's dozens of them lining the walls of my corner office: coastline opera houses reflecting off the surface of unknown harbors, candlelit cathedrals, statues of long-dead war heroes leading an invisible charge in a park full of sunglassed young lovers. As nice as the view of rooftop parks is through my window, it can't approach what he's seen, what he's seeing now on his international jaunts. He's a stranger a world away, a tourist in a musty shirt, enjoying all the things I never could.

...

You've got to understand, it was a rough time for me back then. Anna, my ex-wife, was pregnant by her new husband, some hotshot professor at Columbia. I spent most nights every week in my car across the street from their house, watching her ballooned silhouette through their bay window, scared shitless that she'd leave to walk to the door or something and see me there, my eyes red and wet. I had this recurring dream where she gave birth to baby after baby while her husband stood next to the bed in hospital scrubs, reading Chaucer to the newborns.

My job was just as discouraging. At my graphic design firm, I was in charge of creating layouts for tickets, placing barcodes in aesthetically pleasing corners, making sure the logo for whatever airline/concert venue/tech conference was legible and recognizable. This was during the time when they were laying off large waves of people, and one of the partners, Ellen, took a vested interest in me. She spent a good part of the day standing over my shoulder, asking me questions about this arrangement or that, making recommendations that could have been either helpful suggestions or demands. I could rarely tell.

I wasn't sleeping, and I was eating terribly. I wasn't above having a whole jar of maraschino cherries for dinner. There was about a two-week period where I spent my nights doing nothing but watching infomercials about knives that could cut through hammers. I started to lose hair in large chunks.

When the idea to put my soul somewhere for a while came to me, it made immediate sense. I did some research and found one of those self-storage places along my commute. It was a four-story walk-up, and the air conditioning was always turned up much too high, but it was cheaper and easier than renting a second apartment.

“This is just a temporary thing,” I told him. “Once I’ve got things worked out a bit, you know? Then we’ll see where we stand.”

“Mike, I understand. You do what you have to.” He put his hand on my shoulder. I marveled again at how much he looked like me: same tousled hair, same haphazardly worn suit jacket. He was much more at ease, though. Sometimes it seemed as though not a muscle in his body ever tensed. He spoke with more patience, too, as though he were thinking of the right words to say minutes in advance. “Hey, with a little attention it could be as nice as your place.”

I found some bookshelves and a carpet in the classifieds and bought an old recliner off one of the HR guys for twenty bucks. My soul requested stained glass lamps, and I found some in a dusty antique store in the suburbs. They smelled awful, but he said he liked the light, and reminded me that they had originally been my idea during my Hemingway phase in high school, along with the portable typewriter he found that took weeks to find the proper ribbons for.

We set up his small storage container as a sort of apartment. Once we’d covered up most of the concrete and aluminum, it looked decent. “So what are you going to do with all your time?” I asked him.

“Well,” he said. “There’s a whole long list of books you haven’t read, movies you haven’t seen, music you’ve always meant to listen to but have yet to hear. There’s no shortage, really. You’ve always been close to being ambitious.”

...

The effects were instantaneous. Even as I walked down the stairs of the storage facility and out to my car, I could feel my emotions ebb inside me. The next day, the dread of going to work was replaced by complete ambivalence. Even Ellen’s lingering was harmless white noise. I did what I had to, and had time left over to help pitch layout ideas for a new brand of mixed nuts.

On the way home, I stopped by the storage place. My soul was sitting in his recliner, intently watching some old black-and-white French film on a small TV in the corner. I recognized it; I’d pretended to know about it back in college when trying to impress a girl at a party.

“There’s about five minutes left. Grab a seat, Mike,” he said without looking up. I sat on a dusty chaise lounge next to the bookshelf, which was already full of dog-eared paperbacks and language textbooks. He had the

movie's subtitles turned off, so my eyes drifted instead to the reproduction art prints that lined the walls. It almost looked like something out of a home and garden magazine.

The movie ended, and my soul's knees cracked as he stood up and put the disc in its case. He stacked it on top of several others; he must have spent the whole day watching. "Mind dropping these off?" he asked.

"No, not at all. Were they any good?"

"A couple of them were. Honestly, though, you weren't missing all that much."

As I turned to leave, he grabbed my arm. "You really should call your father," he said, in a voice that made me feel guilty. "I know you've been meaning to."

"I know. But he's asleep by now."

"Yeah, you're probably right." He looked at his watch. "I've got to go, the Philharmonic is starting in half an hour."

I nodded and handed him the keys to the unit. "Enjoy it enough for the both of us, eh?"

He smiled. I realized then that even though he and I had the same face, the smile my soul flashed, so natural and honest and full, would look forced if I were to try it. I got the sense that we were like brothers prone to periods of estrangement, who would end up, around the holidays, sitting together in silence on a couch in the living room, one wrong word away from ruining it all.

• • •

A few months afterwards, Ellen called me into her office. It was remarkably drab and undecorated in there and her desk, like mine, was almost suspiciously organized. "Please, sit," she said. She was only a couple years older than I was, and would probably have been pretty were it not for the tight bun in her hair that looked like it was fighting to pull the features of her face towards the top of her skull.

"How long have you been with us, Mike?"

"Fourteen years."

"And you are, I must say—considering the way you've been handling your accounts over the last couple of months—one of our best. Which is why I'd like to promote you to junior partner."

I tried to look shocked and surprised and grateful, but I'm not sure how I did. Her face was hard to read. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

She shook my hand. "I know it can get rough around here sometimes. And I know everything's been on shaky ground with the layoffs. But finding the right way to cope with it all?" I pictured my soul, probably at a pay phone somewhere, calling all the girls I had crushes on in elementary school,

checking in on all their kids and husbands. “That’s a rare thing, Mike.”

• • •

With the raise came a new office, and a new apartment on the other side of the city. My visits to my soul became less frequent, and when I did go and see him, it would always end up awkward. He’d respond to questions in Portuguese or Farsi, laugh, apologize, and repeat himself in English, just to show off his newfound knowledge. Old movies or books he’d seen or read would inevitably come up in conversation, and I could only discuss how I had always planned on getting to them over summer break, or after retirement, and my excuses for never having done so. He’d pour me a glass of wine and discuss notes of flavor while I choked it down.

“Twenty year reunion’s coming up,” he told me one day after going on about some memoir he’d read. My glazed-over eyes snapped back to attention. “You going?”

I laughed. “Wasn’t planning on it. I really don’t give a shit about those sorts of things.”

“Of course not.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot about you being the expert on what I think. Please, tell me what I should do. I need your guidance, oh wise one.”

“I just think you’d have a better time than expected, is all.” He sat back in his chair. “You should know that I went to see Anna the other night.”

“Excuse me?”

“At the hospital. Her and her husband, Todd. He’s not a bad guy, turns out, he’s really into—”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” I asked, fighting every urge my body had to strangle him. Instead I shoved my finger in his face. “You can’t make those sorts of decisions. You—you’re not even me.”

“Her name’s Holly Marie Hillman. She’s eight pounds, two ounces. And she has her mother’s eyes. She’s beautiful, Mike.”

My legs began to shake, so I quickly sat down on the couch. “You had no right to do that. You should have—”

“Should have what, Mike, asked you? And then what?” He stood and began to pace the length of the storage container. “You think you’ve got this whole thing figured out. You think that feeling nothing is better than sitting around sorry for yourself? Do you have any idea how happy Anna was to see me? To see you? Take my word for it; you’re better off suffering for those sorts of moments than being so numb all the time.”

I stood, slowly, and made my way for the door. I slammed it shut behind me, and the noise reverberated tenfold through the empty hallways.

• • •

At work, I flourished in my new position. The days flew by, five o'clock always surprising me when it rolled around. Profits were up, new clients were joining every day. I was completely void of creative ideas but, as a manager, I needed only nod my head with a hand on my chin while looking over new designs that my team had assembled. We secured an account with the state lotto, and Ellen celebrated by bringing me champagne and giving the firm a half day.

She even hired an assistant for me, and that's when things started to unravel.

Her name was Stephanie. She was very young, probably only a year or two removed from college. And she was stunning. Fairly tall, with short black hair, she wore bland blouses that seemed to make the rest of her glow even brighter, to paint her sharp features in higher contrasts. Everyone in the office took to her immediately. Her laugh, high-pitched and full-voiced, filled the break room for a good part of the day. On her desk, she kept a small glass jar of untouched jelly beans (too many licorice, several complained), a coffee mug full of fuzzy pencils that looked like googly-eyed feather dusters, and a picture of her at her college graduation, tassel turned to the proper side, her knuckles white clenching her diploma.

It took me a long time to notice the way she looked at me. There were, of course, subtleties, like her lingering at my desk for what felt like a second too long when delivering a message, or the way she covered her mouth when she smiled around me. Eventually, I found excuses, like calling her into the office to write my shopping list down on small pink Post-Its, or to look over that day's copy for new advertising.

She had a boyfriend, though, whom she brought to our Christmas party. He spent his time staring lustily at the other women of the firm, an ever-full glass of rum in his hand. "Guy's a grade-A shitheel," Ellen said, sitting next to me on one of the ratty couches in the conference room. "She's always sneaking out to the hallway to argue over the phone. Nice girl like that? She can do much better."

With the departure of my soul had gone my feelings of lust and need, and now I felt like I wanted them back. It reminded me of how I felt after I dislocated my shoulder falling off a tire swing when I was a kid. There was nothing but numbness, and I knew I wanted to move my arm, that my whole body wanted to, but the limb just didn't cooperate. As much as I wanted to lust after Stephanie, wanted to stare down her blouse or put my arms around her while she made copies, I couldn't work up any of the necessary feelings. It was an itch inside my skull, tortuously near but impossible to reach.

One day, I found her on the floor of the break room, coffee spilled over the countertop and staining the front of her shirt. She was sitting on the ground beneath the sink, head slunk to her chest, her body heaving with

loud, staccatoed sobs. Ellen was crouched nearby, her hand awkwardly placed on Stephanie's shoulder. She looked like she had no idea how to deal with the situation, and shot me a desperate "please help me with this" look.

I sat next to Stephanie and let her put her head on my shoulder. "He left me. The fucker left me," she said between her tears. "I can't believe him."

She looked up at me from eyes rimmed with haphazard mascara. I searched for something to say, for the right place to put my hand, for an appropriate joke, to sum up the male race for her in a way that displayed both wisdom and kindness, that showed I was the right one for her, the right one to make her forget about the grade-A shitheel and all the other wrongs of her life. I said nothing, though, and felt nothing. I sprang up quickly, my head spinning, and sprinted to the elevator, my stomach turning, dizzy with lack.

• • •

As I scrambled to unlock the door of the storage unit, I heard my soul inside, talking to somebody. I opened the door and found him sitting next to a beautiful woman in a bright blue skirt. It took me a long moment to realize that it was Ellen's soul. Her black hair was down, and curled up at its ends like a thousand letter "j"s. Her face seemed relaxed and kind, and she stood without the rigid corporate posture that the Ellen I knew practiced. She wasn't wearing shoes, and her cheeks were like a newborn baby's, warm and recent.

"Mike! This is a pleasant surprise. It's been a while, hasn't it?" my soul asked, throwing his arm over my shoulders.

I nodded, staring at Ellen. "We need to talk. I think I may have made a mistake."

He shook his head. "Nonsense. I'd like you to meet someone," he said, walking me over to her. "This is Ellen."

"Nice to meet you," she said, smiling more brightly than the Ellen I work for ever did.

"You look a little baffled, Mike." My soul laughed. "Well, it turns out you aren't the only one who had this idea. That's what most of the units here are used for, turns out. I bumped into Ellen on the way to an art gallery a few weeks back, and we hit it off. She's always meant to do many of the same things you have."

She got up from her seat. "We should tell him," she said, wrapping her hand around his.

"Now or never, right?" he asked, flashing her a smile. He turned to me. "Remember that trip around Europe you always wanted to go on, Mike? Taking trains, seeing all the old cities and chamber halls and all that? Acting like you weren't a tourist when you clearly were? Well, turns out Ellen always

wanted to go, too, so her soul and I are going to do it! She's got enough money saved up and all of that. Our flight's in a couple hours. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but I honestly didn't think you were coming back."

I looked at the two of them. "Of course. Congrats."

Ellen's soul looked at her watch. "We actually have to go, the taxi should be here any minute. It's been really nice meeting you," she said, and gave me a big hug.

They each grabbed a suitcase from atop the chaise lounge. As they left, my soul extended his hand. "Thanks for everything, Mike. We'll write." I shook it, taking care not to meet his gaze. Other souls had gathered out in the hallway, all of them with the same relaxed posture, the same soft-spoken voices. They patted my soul and Ellen's on their backs as they walked to the stairwell, wishing them luck, telling inside jokes I didn't grasp the meanings of. Through a window, I saw them throw their bags in the back of a yellow cab and speed off towards the airport. I closed my eyes and felt thankful that as they drove away, my anger and sadness and jealousy began to ebb, slowly, slowly, down to nothing.

Courtney Kampa

PEARL & UMBRA

In answer to his question, no—
I'd never seen a herring's scales emit light as it died,
but I imagined it would be a sad, winged moment.

And maybe a little confusing. Like the moon and sun both glowing
opalescent in the sky at once. Like looking a pearl straight in the face:
its white-pink sheen of umbra.

We passed these kinds of questions between us like currency—
the exchange rate of one tender detail for another. “Do you sleep late
on Saturdays?” one of us would ask, and get back,

“What's your favorite kind of pie?” or, “Was your first kiss hot-veined
or apple-sweet?” It was breaking a 100 into smaller bills.
It was snapping our hearts

into pieces thin enough to pass through a phone cord.
He'd call, commuting across the Golden Gate Bridge,
his windshield washed in the champagne of un-set sun—

and my phone would ring out on M Street in D.C.,
where the red-mouthed moon
was already well into its second glass of wine

and would tell a handsome star whatever it wanted to know.
A country had opened between us— its extended, begging arms
veined with roadways.



Sometimes after the call, I felt a need
to step outside. To sit down on the curb, holding
the still-warm phone like another's hand.



It's a small word, the one you want to say.
Light, but unsafe— the eyebrow-singeing flame that bursts
out the tip of a match. Bright, and not yours—

the thin red ribbon a bird sleeps on in its nest.
Deep inside, the needle splits and you're a compass
radiating out in all directions. A disorienting throb

across the kneecaps; a spike through the forehead, and lower back.
Everywhere is beauty you won't remember.
You break, beaming. You're the ashy light

on the underside of a pearl. You're exquisitely quiet, and a melody
stirs wherever his hands have touched—
ripe, ivory chords of silence. It's cool out, and as your mouth

opens like a window, each breath escapes in smoke. You hear a crackle
and suspect the insides of your body
have caught on fire—suspect you're burning down.



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SEBASTIAN DOHERTY (“*Sales Associate*,” page 96) recently participated in the Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets and is the author of the chapbook, *The Real Donner Party*. He would like to jump into a fountain with you and introduce films for Turner Classic Movies.

STACI ECKENROTH (“*a dime a dozen*,” page 37), from South Amboy, NJ, is a senior Creative Writing major at Susquehanna University. She has been previously published in *RiverCraft* and *The Blue Route*.

RYAN GIL (“*After Alexander Calder’s Pomegranate, 1949*,” page 66) is a fourth-year student at the University of Virginia, and will be attending the University of Oregon MFA program this coming fall. His top three poetic influences are places, family, and his advisor, Lisa Russ Spaar.

CATY GORDON’s (“*I Am Not Neda*,” page 126) creative writing has previously appeared in *Silhouette* literary magazine. She is working toward her B.A. at Virginia Tech in English with a double-degree in Creative Writing and Professional Writing. Her work typically focuses on international affairs and global development.

SARAH GROVES (“*You Are at My Mercy*,” page 19) lives next door to a gymnasium and can see people running on a track through her kitchen window; it’s like having goldfish. When she’s not writing she bakes and reads comic books. She’s working on a novel, *River City*, scheduled for 2011.

MANDY GUTMAN-GONZOLAZ (“*Heat Lightning*,” page 17) grew up in central Chile and recently graduated from Knox College with a Creative Writing major. She currently resides in Galesburg, a small train town in the Illinois prairie, where she will spend the next year developing a Poetry Center for Knox while taking additional classes as a post baccalaureate. She attended the Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets in June 2010.

CHELSEA HENDERSON (“*Five Stones*,” page 79) is currently an undergraduate in my third year at the University of Virginia where she has the honor of studying under Rita Dove, Lisa Russ Spaar, and Gregory Orr. She has had poems accepted in *The Southern Indiana Review*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Sow’s Ear Poetry Review*, and *The North American Review*. She was awarded first place in the 2010 Hollins University undergraduate poetry competition, and second place in the 2009 James Hearst Poetry Prize.

KATHERINE HENRICHS (“*The Dog Man*,” page 67) is a junior at the University of Michigan, studying English Literature. In her free time she enjoys reading, sleeping, cooking, traveling, and preparing for the revolution. If she were graduating on time, President Obama would have been her commencement speaker.

WILLIAM HOFFACKER (“*The Whole Truth*,” page 68) is an undergraduate student studying English and Creative Writing at Susquehanna University. In his work he focuses on the genre of creative nonfiction, particularly memoir. He lives in Queens, New York.

JESSI HOLLER (“*The Square*,” page 80) is still in recovery from being born in the greater midwest. She opens windows during storms, dreams about small tornadoes, and is keeping up searching for Byronic heroes.

COURTNEY KAMPA (“*Pearl & Umbra*,” page 153) is an undergraduate student at the University of Virginia. She is a classically trained ballerina, and has worked as a model for *Seventeen* and a lobbyist at the United Nations. Winner of the 2009 Janet B. McCabe Poetry Prize and a James Hearst finalist, her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *North American Review*, *Portland Review*, *Sow’s Ear Poetry Review*, *Ruminate*, and *Orange Coast Review*.

CAROLINE KESSLER (“*I Open my Mouth to the Storm*,” page 91) hails from Baltimore. She is pursuing a B.A. in Creative Writing and a minor in Religious Studies at Carnegie Mellon University. Her poetry and prose has previously been published in *Grub Street*, *Dossier*, and *New Voices* magazines.

ANGELA EUN JI KOH (“*Oleander Drive*,” page 114) taught English in Seoul, Tokyo, and Santa Ana. She has been published in undergraduate journals such as *Matchbox Magazine* and *New Forum*. She holds an honorable mention for the 2009 Bret Baldwin Poetry Contest and placed third for the 2010 Ina Coolbrith Contest. She continues to study poetry under the Emphasis at the University of California, Irvine.

LOUIE LAND (“*Coal Town Blues*,” page 82) is a prose writer and musician from Herndon, Pennsylvania. His essay is forthcoming in *Transformations* and he has presented essays at Susquehanna University’s Undergraduate Literary Conference. He enjoys fiction, literary criticism, and blues rock.

Before the 1981 declaration of Marshall Law, **ADAM LIZAKOWSKI** (“*Going to West*,” page 129) escaped Poland and went to Austria. It was there in 1982 he was granted political asylum in the USA. He has lived there ever since. He is a poet and translator.

A native of Virginia, **SAM MITCHELL** (“*Machias*,” page 93) is currently studying for his undergraduate degree in English and Creative Writing

at the University of Richmond. He enjoys writing fiction and creative nonfiction on a broad range of subjects.

CAITLIN MORAN (“*All Her Numbered Bones*,” page 108) is thrilled to be part of the *Susquehanna Review*! She is a Creative Writing student at Boston College, and her stories and essays have appeared in *Stylus*, *the Laughing Medusa*, *Pure Francis*, and *Winds of Change* magazine.

KARISSA MORTON (“*Seafarer’s Semantics*,” page 105) is an English/Writing student at Drake University. She serves as president of Sigma Tau Delta, a literary journal editor, and writing tutor, among other things. Over thirty of her poems have appeared in various journals.

ALICE RHEE (“*The Little Dipper is Now the Rich Aunt*,” page 125) is a second-year Creative Writing major at Oberlin College. Her favorite smell is petrichor, the scent of rain on parched earth.

ROBROTELL (“*A Couple of Problems*,” page 40) is a senior Creative Writing major and resident gangsta at Susquehanna University. He designed the layouts for several issues of *RiverCraft*, *The Susquehanna Review*, and *The Apprentice Writer*. When he’s not reading, writing, or worrying, he’s probably running (and, of great newsworthy interest, recently found out that the local alpaca dealer opened another pen!)

SKYE SHIRLEY (“*The Paper Called Them Black Fish*,” page 92) is currently in her senior year at Boston College, where she is studying English and Creative Writing. She has been published in the following journals: *Plain China: Best Undergraduate Writing of 2009*, *Pure Francis*, *Stylus*, and *Laughing Medusa*. During her sophomore year, she received a first place Kelleher Prize for my poem “Estonia,” and in her junior year received the McCarthy Creative Writing Award for a chapbook of poems.

SHANNON AZZATO STEPHENS (“*No Letters*,” page 106) is a Creative Writing and Visual Arts student at Carnegie Mellon University, where she is poetry editor for *The Oakland Review*. Her past adventures include a stint in Americorps, a series of bike tours on the Northeast Coast, living everywhere from New York City to Mississippi, and attending the Southampton Writers Conference, where she studied with Billy Collins.

BILLIE R. TADROS (“*Medium*,” page 11) is a senior Creative Writing and music major and aspiring poet and composer recently graduated from Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. She is also the

composer, lyricist, and bookwriter for the musical *Fresh Ground*, which debuted on campus in April 2009.

JEANNE TROY (“*Burn*,” page 14) loves Hemingway and chai tea. She is (somewhat) widely traveled and Manhattan is her port of call. She has an adorable fluffy white dog and an absolute terror of zombies. She is a redhead.

KAITLYN WALL (“*Elusion*,” page 35) is a Creative Writing major at Susquehanna University. She is planning to attend a graduate program in poetry in the fall of 2010. Her work has been previously published in *RiverCraft* and *Essay*.

ROBERT WHITEHEAD (“*Hypnosis*,” page 144) is a senior at Ursinus College, the best-kept secret in all of Pennsylvania. He is the recipient of the 2008 Iris N. Spencer Poetry Prize from West Chester University, the Alfred L. Creager Prize from Ursinus College, and was recently a Fellow at the Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets. He is thrilled to be featured alongside a few of his fellow Bucknell poets.

