fugue

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Issue 39

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Fiction submissions are accepted September 1 through March 1; poetry and nonfiction submissions are accepted September 1 through May 1. All material received outside this period will be returned unread. Please visit http://uidaho.edu/fugue/for submission guidelines. All contributors receive payment and two complimentary copies of the journal. Please send no more than five poems, two short-shorts, one story, or one essay at a time. Submissions in more than one genre should be sent separately. We will consider simultaneous submissions (submissions that have been sent concurrently to another journal), but we will not consider multiple submissions. All multiple submissions will be returned unread. Once you have submitted a piece to us, wait for a response on this piece before submitting again.

Cover art, *Suburban Owl* by Leiv Fagereng [2007] oil on canvas, courtesy of Froelick Gallery, Portland, OR.

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9TH ANNUAL RON MCFARLAND PRIZE FOR POETRY JUDGED BY ILYA KAMINSKY

FIRST PLACE: "FLIGHT PLAN" BY CAITLIN COWAN

"'There were, of course, the birds,' so Caitlin Cowan begins a poem which takes us to the dialects of the personal history, to uncle without a wife, to a fiery cardinal, to cranes arabesqued with wire legs. The piece brings together various clear details to compose a lyric that is beautiful, and 'secret ears' know (to repeat Keats) melodies unheard."

FIRST RUNNER-UP: "THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS" BY CORRIE WILLIAMSON

"Corrie Williamson, too, is interested in the 'language of birds,' in 'crows tongues' that years ago 'were sliced down the middle, straight / into that strange bone inside – in hopes / they might summon a few human words.' The poem, at its best moments, goes above the personal pronoun in the natural setting, and questions that very pronoun in its striking imagery: 'I want / a bone in my tongue, to ask how much / of the fear is still inside me.' This is a sort of a question most of us, at one moment or another ask. Argument with someone else is a rhetoric, argument with oneself is poetry, Yeats taught us. This image and this 'fear' reminded me of Yeats' lesson."

SECOND RUNNER-UP: "AUGUST GHAZAL" BY RACHEL MARIE PATTERSON

"Rachel Patterson's ghazal is able to take the speed implied by the image ('Your beat-up Maxima climbs faster and faster. // You paid for me at restaurants, left your fingerprints / on my elbow. When I laughed and ran ahead, you ran faster') and slow it with the repetition of that very word, 'fast' ~ we are given a slow motion view here inside of larger speed, we are looking 'out of windows,' 'off balconies,' 'on curbsides,' and we are 'in the field' and 'the spiders below us' also move, as does 'blood' inside us. To achieve so much in a short lyric is a beautiful thing."

.

Caitlin Cowan

FLIGHT PLAN

There were, of course, the birds.
Each feather etched, their wings
tooled thin– the breadth
of a hair. But my grandfather spoke

other dialects too: the simple
block bears, square
unvarnished spaniels and raccoons
with wood-burned tails. I would enter

the shop, a tabernacle
of amber dust and nails. I named
the creatures and he got to cutting,
saw rattling the lacquer jars and paint.

But the birds still flickered,
their determined beaks upturned.
A chickadee shirring the blue air
to the uncle without a wife, a robin

resting on his youngest son's sill.
Ours was a fiery cardinal, wings
that flashed a plucked cherry
stain. He said he could see them

fluttering in the great hunks
of basswood before he'd touched them
with the gouge: feather-tips combing
each bulk's edges in the crush.

Wings folded or raised, he could not
carve them into the air. Sparrows perched
on driftwood, tupelo tinted and fitted
to their feet; Cranes arabesqued

with wire legs, looked beadily on
as he hunched, heron-like, over the shims.
His name singed onto their backs— an apology
to their yawning bones, their secret ears.

Corrie Williamson

THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS

Years ago, crows tongues were cut, sliced down the middle, straight
into that strange bone inside – in hopes
they might summon a few human words.

Think of all that's been spoken to you
though not in your language, though not that you could
even hear; and all
that you tried to make speak, which held its silence.

Evenings, light rides out of the valley like an azure horse. I go out
in the dark. There's an awfully fearful thing
about the passage of autumn to winter, though I can't call its name.
It knows mine, like a bird, always speaking,
now and then understood.

January's cold whiplash, and I'm stunned
by ice on the James.
Only so many months ago, autumn sneaking, I put in my kayak
at Narrow Passage, watched the rain come in
behind me. It broke, and broke
warm, tapping the trees' reflection
on the wide water. Ahead, the geese told one another of
my bright boat,
and took off, trailing white wakes in the river, a slow rising,
a long arm gesturing.

Death licks the road with his red tongue. His hands are small, black
and dexterous as a coon's cupped around a pale egg.
I want to hear the words all nested in my belly, to feel them flash
against my throat, I want a bone in my tongue, to ask how
much of the fear is still inside me, its rained-upon wings
all folded tight in my ribcage.

Rachel Marie Patterson

AUGUST GHAZAL

We roll through the night, the black matchstick trees.
Your beat-up Maxima climbs faster and faster.

You paid for me at restaurants, left your fingerprints
on my elbow. When I laughed and ran ahead, you ran faster.

You smoked out of windows, off balconies,
on curbsides—just outside my door, breathing faster.

When we walk the field, we feel the spiders below us;
blood fills my cheeks, pumps faster and faster.

Lime juice stung the cuts on my fingers:
I sipped the whiskey, you poured it faster.

If the dress was short, I meant it. I dream of vampires.
The only word I can make out: their lips mouthing faster.

I am what I gave you; you are what you took.
Rachel, wake up now: the sun's rising faster.

9TH ANNUAL FICTION PRIZE
JUDGED BY JUNOT DÍAZ

FIRST PLACE: "A WALK IN THE PARK"
BY COLETTE SARTOR

"Vivid, sharp, human and ugly, a fine story with a protagonist that's equal parts fetching and infuriating. A winner in so many ways."

RUNNER-UP: "JUMP SHOT"
BY PAUL VIDICH

"Superbly pitched, with a steely pace and a heart as big as a city."

Colette Sartor

A WALK IN THE PARK

Someone is killing cats in Claire's neighborhood. A cop shows up Sunday morning to examine the nearly decapitated tabby on Claire's front lawn. Its eyes are milky, its head thrown back. There's a triangle of blood-soaked grass between its neck and body.

"Probably a machete," the cop tells her.

He crouches by the dead cat and squints up at Claire, who shivers in shorts and a tank top that just covers her gently mounded belly. A house key is tucked in her running shoe. She was about to go on her daily walk when she found the cat. Looking at it makes her want to gag.

"You should be more careful, ma'am, especially in your condition. Carry a cell phone for emergencies," the cop says. He's got saucer ears, a lipless mouth. She's pretty sure he's the guy who testified against one of her assault cases last year (a homeless kid who took a swing when the cop woke him up in an alley). He seemed like a blowhard then, too. With his baton he prods the cat's head, tearing the gristly bit of connective tissue. "Third decap around here. Seems like the modus operandi"—*prod, prod*—"although there was a skinned cat near Fairfax"—*prod*—"and one chopped up on Miracle Mile, guts spread out all fancy, like the killer was being arty."

The gristle rips completely, freeing the little head; it rocks blindly toward Claire. The cop wipes his baton on the grass. The bully. Fairfax and Miracle Mile aren't even that close to here. Poor pregnant girl can't stand a little blood, he's probably thinking. She nods and feigns indifference.

"He was trying to scare me," she says to Duff later that morning. Duff is reading the arts section in their tiny breakfast nook. She is standing at the kitchen counter mashing bananas for banana bread.

"Fat chance." He grins at her. His newly bleached buzz cut glows in the sunlight. Dead cats, burglaries, occasional shootings—all are normal in L.A., even in this Westside neighborhood, which is quieter than where they used to live in Hollywood. That's what she and Duff reminded each other earlier, after the cop bagged the carcass and Duff hosed down the lawn until there was no trace of blood. They're city people. They've seen everything.

She takes the bowl of mashed bananas to the breakfast nook window and looks outside. She's gaining too much weight for the second trimester, but lately all she can keep down are sweet, bready things. Her stomach feels queasy again, her skin prickly. It's the adrenaline from this morning, and the increased blood flow from being pregnant. The combination intensifies smells, sounds, colors, tweaking her perceptions. The sidewalk outside seems more broken, the surrounding duplexes—old, stucco Spanish-styles like theirs—more cracked and peeling than before. On their lawn a patch of damp grass glistens in the sun. Most of her clients are guilty of what they're accused of. It's never bothered her before.

"Remember my client who killed all those prostitutes downtown?" she says. "Growing up he used to catch birds, break their wings, and then boil them alive."

Duff keeps reading. "That's something I'd rather forget."

"Animal torture is the first step to becoming a serial killer." She thumps down the bowl on the table. He stares at her. She feels herself trembling. "This cat killer could graduate to people. We'd be stuck here with a baby."

"Whoa. I didn't know you were freaked out." He takes her hands. "We can always move."

"I'm not freaked. Not really. Besides, if we move now we lose our security deposit."

"Screw the deposit. I could pick up extra gigs at the foundry, or teach another seniors class."

He pulls her onto his lap and hugs her. She could sit like this forever, his heart steadily beating beneath her palm, his close-cropped hair bristly against her cheek. She loved his mane of dark curls, but he likes to mimic the aesthetic of whatever sculpture he's working on. The new one is his first commission, for a law firm lobby. He's chiseling it from a creamy marble block, a spare, angular woman yearning toward the sky—what Claire used to be. She misses her runner's body, firm and taut, not a speck of fat, letting her slice through the air as if she were weightless.

"I just want to keep the baby safe," she says.

"We'll get a big-ass dog that only bites guys with machetes."

She laughs, links her fingers behind his neck. "And cops with batons."

"Now you're talking."

When she kisses him, she lingers on his lips, their familiar roughness. It's her day off, the first one in ages. Maybe they'll go to the neighborhood park and lie in the sun, swing on the swings like children, and she'll forget about her clients—the rapists, the druggies, the bangers, the meth dealers. Maybe she'll even forget about the cat killer.

They spend an idyllic afternoon at the park that's over all too soon. Before she knows it, she's in bed reviewing case files. Duff surfs the net beside her on their laptop. She'd rather be curled against him watching Letterman, enjoying the last easy moments of the day, but there's work to be done.

"This could come in handy on your walks," he says after a while. He's staring at the computer screen, which displays a closeup of a taser with a lightning bolt etched on its side.

Bloody whiskers, sightless eyes.

She shuffles through her files. "Great. Give an attacker something to use against me."

"True. Dumb idea." He closes the computer. "Maybe pepper spray. Just to make me feel better."

"Common sense, that's all I need," she says and kisses him.

Monday morning she and Judith drive out to Eastlake Juvenile Hall. They've been assigned a new client, a fourteen year old who killed his grandparents. The ADA filed against the boy in adult court, which requires an immediate objection. Claire usually welcomes the investigating and strategizing involved in a new case. Today she dreads the details. It's a relief when Judith drives a while, whistling resolutely, before sharing what she knows.

"He called the police after he did it." Judith steers the car toward the freeway exit.

"Did he give them a typed confession, too?"

"Just his knapsack with his grandparents' hands and feet. Their heads were in the oven."

Claire can't help gagging. She grips the dashboard. Judith glances over.

"Morning sickness? Or have I finally succeeded in grossing you out?"

"I'm okay." Claire digs some crumbled banana bread from her bag and chokes down a bite. Her skin still feels clammy, but her stomach stops heaving. "This case sounds impossible."

"We'll figure out an angle." Judith brakes for the exit ramp. "Savvy was sick constantly her first few months. Said it should be called all-day sickness instead of morning sickness. Or strike-me-dead sickness."

Judith's smile makes her plain, freckled face luminous. Her wife Savvy just gave birth to a baby boy, which has made Judith even more upbeat than usual. She has always whistled when she's anxious, to raise her spirits, and now she's added countless nursery rhymes to her repertoire. Claire tries to emulate her positive attitude, especially about work. The system can't function unless people like her and Judith defend it. They have to forget about guilt and innocence and focus on protecting their clients.

From outside, Eastlake Hall could be a rec center or a school. The front is a wall of gleaming windows, with palm trees and flowerbeds flanking the entrance. Inside, there's no mistaking it's a prison. The metal detector by the door has guards at either end. Posted nearby is a large sign listing visitor rules: *No blue or gray or khaki clothing, no weapons, no drugs, no alcohol, no gifts, no backpacks, purses, briefcases, hip pouches, packages, or parcels; limited paperbacks, magazines, notebooks, and postage stamps allowed, subject to inspection and approval.* As always during visiting hours, there's a long line of people waiting to be patted down. Claire usually uses this time to jot questions, consider options. Today she can't look away from the visiting children with their unbridled energy, the way they play hide and seek behind the grown-ups' legs. They could be anywhere.

Once Judith and Claire get through the metal detector, they sign in at the reception desk manned by a guard behind bulletproof glass. Then they are led through several locked doors to the visitation center, where they wait in a tiny soundproof side room that smells strongly of disinfectant and more faintly of mildew. They take the chairs closest to the window overlooking the visitation center, leaving the chair by the cinderblock walls for their client. Claire has braced herself for his youth, but she still isn't prepared for the hulking boy who shuffles in, his hands and feet shackled. His name is Zeke. He's well over six feet tall, but his face is splotchy with picked-over acne and his features are softly rounded. Floppy brown bangs fall into his eyes. His pupils are so dilated he looks like a startled animal. Fear or drugs, maybe both. Judith said he's on a mood stabilizer, which could bolster an insanity defense. He's probably textbook abused, too. There's a story to be woven here. They can defend this kid.

A guard removes the leg shackles before he leaves, shutting the door behind him. The boy is barely an arm's length away. He staggers when he goes to sit. Claire's urge to jump back startles her. She makes herself reach for his arm, but Judith gets him first.

"Your meds must be a little high," Judith says to him. "Our shrink will adjust them after she interviews you. And we'll work on transferring you to a psych ward."

Her tone is casual, as if they're discussing what he had for lunch. She looks tiny next to him, breakable. He barely glances up, just grunts as he steadies himself on the spindly wooden table. His hands are chubby, the nails bitten below the quick. The hands of a child. But what he's done. What those hands have done. Claire hasn't seen the crime scene photos yet, but she knows enough from three years in the Public Defender's juvenile division to envision the spatter pocking the grandparents' cheeks, the ragged meat beneath their chins.

"We'll get you through this. Right, Claire?"

She looks up to find Judith frowning at her: *Pay attention.* She tries, but for the rest of the meeting she barely registers the boy's slow, stumbling responses to Judith's questions. She can't help imaging him holding a knife, slicing through flesh and fur.

A week later she finds another cat.

It's early, the sky just brightening. No one else is around. A low-fat bran muffin is tucked in her jacket pocket. She's a few blocks from home on her way to the park, which she will lap several times at a brisk stroll, her iPod blaring to distract her from the achy protests in her ass and thighs. Until recently she ran this route with ease. The doctor has been urging her to walk. Running overheats her body, which taxes the fetus. At first she simply decreased her usual quick clip to a jog; then she came home spotting a few weeks ago. The bright drips of blood in the toilet alarmed her enough to start walking.

This part of the neighborhood is quieter than hers, uncluttered, no apartment buildings or duplexes. One after another she passes small, neat bungalows with trim lawns and higher-end cars parked in the driveways. Large leafy trees line the streets, unlike the saplings on her block. She's thinking about how she'll leave work early tonight no matter what to make Duff a special dinner, chicken thighs braised in tomato sauce, oven roasted brocollini, something chocolaty for

dessert. A mea culpa for the thought she's had more than once: *We could move if you got a real job.* She doesn't really want to move, and she doesn't really want him to get a real job. They're both doing what they love. That's what matters.

She is near the park entrance when she notices the cat beneath a house's box hedge. At first she thinks it's sleeping. But the odd angle of its neck. She averts her eyes, then, retching dryly into her cupped palm, crosses the lawn to the cat. A fluffy black and white split from sternum to anus. The intestines piled nearby steam in the chilly air. This cat is newly killed.

"What're you doing?" she hears behind her. Her heart pounds hard and high.

A man on the front porch squints at Claire. His sparse hair is mussed and he's wearing a bathrobe. He peers past her. "Gus?" he says, and then he races over shouting, "What did you do to him?" He pushes by her to get to the cat and she falls, her face and neck raking the hedge. She hears the man vomit before he yells, "Brandy, call the police!"

Claire lies on her side clutching her stomach; there's a faint shifting, a cramping. The cat is inches away, its insides flayed like bloody steak, the intestines a slimy coil. The air reeks of shit. In the distance someone laughs.

The scrapes on her throat are the worst. For the rest of the week she covers them with a scarf, which she takes off when she visits clients in lockup, so someone can't reach through the bars and choke her with it. Duff wants to confront the cat owner, who begged her forgiveness once the cops calmed him down. Afterward an ambulance took her to the hospital where she spent the night wearing a fetal monitor. Whenever a technician did an ultrasound, she and Duff searched the screen for signs of distress, but the fetus floated peacefully in its murky sea. Once, it started sucking its thumb, lips gyrating in steady pulsing motions that should have reassured her. This should be the easy part, keeping the fetus safe while it's inside her.

"That guy could have hurt you," says Duff the third morning in a row. He's sitting on the bed watching her dress. She's in her underpants, her breasts swollen and heavily veined, her belly jutting out like a little shelf. He likes to admire it, stroking its widening expanse, but the past few days he's been obsessed with her neck. "He could have hurt the baby," he says, his hands clenched.

"He thought I killed his cat." She sits beside him, unclenches his hands, places them on her stomach. "Besides, we're fine."

She's not fine. The laughter she heard when she found the second cat: she hears it as she falls asleep at night; it wakes her in the morning long before her alarm. Still, she untwines herself from Duff's sleepy warmth and rises for her walk. It was probably a neighbor laughing at a talk show. She doesn't scare so easily. In law school she had to be dragged off a guy twice her size who tried to grab her bag. She reacted instinctively, jerking back so hard that he fell, still pulling, and she fell too and then she was pummeling him, blind to everything but his surprised, bloody face. Even afterward she didn't feel afraid, only a pumping rush of certainty: *Screw you. I did it.* Duff prods her to tell the story at parties. "The police threatened to arrest her just to get her off him," he always finishes for her. "This woman is *fierce*."

Duff starts getting up early with her, to put in extra time on the new sculpture, he says. "The sooner I finish it, the sooner I get paid." But she doesn't like the way he plants himself at the picture window as she leaves to walk, how he's waiting in the same spot when she returns. He calls several times a day, with the same questions: How're you feeling? How's the baby? Where are you, where to next? "Stay safe," he says instead of goodbye, instead of "I love you."

One morning when she's tying her running shoes, he emerges from the bedroom wearing sweats.

"Thought we could make this a family thing," he says, yawning.

He's only a few inches taller than she is, and as lean as a boy. He's strong, though. She's seen him sling a marble slab over his shoulder like it's nothing. But a stranger would think he's just some skinny kid.

"Go sculpt," she says.

"It wouldn't hurt to have some muscle along." He flexes his arms and growls.

She laughs the way she knows he wants her to, but his concern feels overbearing. He used to trust that she'd take care of herself. He used to brag about it.

"I don't need a bodyguard." She gives him a quick kiss, then she's out the door, alone.

She and Judith work overtime on the juvi double homicide, making numerous trips to Eastlake, where Zeke is cooperative but quiet. The preliminary reports from the shrink and the PI reveal a grim history: the father has been in prison since before Zeke was born for beating a man to death during a burglary; the mother is a schizophrenic who's lived in halfway houses since Zeke was five. He was shuffled between foster homes, which resulted in a series of suspicious burns, bruises, and fractures until the grandparents took him in last year. Despite everything, he's had no other brushes with the law and he's an outstanding student with a genius IQ.

He has emerged from his stupor over the past few weeks: his stubby fingers drum the table; his knees jiggle in their institutional blues. He's put on weight, from the meds and the starchy food. His hair has been shaved so close he might as well be bald. It makes him look more menacing, a better fit with the other boys and their flat, cold faces. Always he is polite, his speech littered with pleases and thank yous, but there's a watchfulness about him, like he's waiting for them to reveal something that will give him an advantage. Each time he sits down across from them, Claire is startled by her urge to bolt from the room.

One day he arrives wearing glasses with thick lenses that magnify his eyes. When she asks where he got them, he says, "My grandma. She was always bugging me to wear them." He picks at an acne scab. "She was pretty good to me."

"Then why?" Claire asks.

He regards her steadily.

"I wanted to see what it felt like to cut somebody up."

She freezes over her notes. Beside her she senses Judith stiffen.

"It was a lot of work, especially their hands and feet. I got pretty sweaty." He pushes at his glasses with a raw-looking index finger.

Judith's wife Savvy thinks they'll lose his objection. She says so over brunch at her and Judith's house. Claire and Duff are there to meet the baby, who is asleep on Duff's chest.

"You haven't got a chance," Savvy says.

Judith stands to clear the table. "You're entitled to your opinion," she says as she gathers dishes, "as wrong as it may be." With her hands full she knees open the kitchen door.

"That monster doesn't deserve a reprieve," Savvy calls after her, but without much conviction. She's a prosecutor, and a good one, known for her ruthless cross examinations. Her eyes are puffy from lack of sleep and her full, finely-etched mouth is tensely pursed.

Claire stacks the remaining plates. She should stay quiet. Savvy looks too tired for more debating.

"We're not asking for a reprieve," Claire says, "we're asking for him to be tried by a court that will keep in mind he's a kid."

"A kid with the knife skills of a sushi chef," Savvy says.

"It sucks being the only civilians, huh, Luca?" Duff smiles down at the sleeping baby.

"Sorry." Savvy blinks like she's waking from a dream. "I don't get much chance for shop talk lately."

Judith reenters, whistling along with a steaming teakettle. "You were pretty sick of it by the time you went on maternity leave."

"Nothing to miss about dealing with scumbags all day," Duff says.

Claire stops stacking plates. "I thought you admire what we do."

Duff shrugs. "I'm starting to see the downside."

"Funny how you change." Savvy gazes across the table at the baby. "Last week I was driving on the freeway with Luca and someone cut me off. Nothing major, didn't even deserve a honk. But I started shaking so much I had to pull over. All I could think was how Luca

could have been killed. Judith had to come get us. I haven't driven since."

Judith sits and takes her hand. Duff holds the baby close as he nods his understanding.

Later, Claire sits on the floor of Duff's garage studio with a baby carrier in her lap. Duff is chiseling a tall marble block marked with careful gridlines. A hyper-slender woman has emerged in places: elegant arms extended overhead, delicate face in profile. It's going to be one of his best pieces, maybe kick his career into overdrive. She loves to watch him work, daydream about their future successes, but today she can't stop fiddling with the baby carrier. It's from Judith and Savvy. There are sturdy shoulder straps, a padded chest pouch for the baby. She slips on the straps. "I'd be back on the freeway already."

"Maybe." Duff glances at her. "Or maybe you'd wait, too, until the kid was bigger and less defenseless." He takes a pad and starts drawing.

"That's crazy. There are other ways to feel safer. Get a better car seat."

She stands to look over his shoulder at his unfinished sketch. It's her wearing the carrier, a baby nestled inside. On her face is an unfamiliar, gentle expression.

"Parenting isn't always a rationale process," he says. "Or so I've heard."

She lengthens her morning walk to include an additional lap around the park, the house with the tidy box hedge in her periphery each time she nears the entrance. There's no trace of blood or intestines by the hedge—of course there's not, there wouldn't be, weeks have passed—but the spot still draws her eyes. She tries to think like a predator, to keep herself alert to potential danger. Sometimes the bushes rustle (an animal? a person?) or she passes someone walking or running or cycling, but mostly she is alone. Whenever she sees something questionable, she forces herself to investigate. Just a dried-up lizard, or a possum smeared in the road. She relaxes a little.

As she's leaving the park one day, she sees a dead squirrel by the curb. It's intact, no sign of what killed it. Maybe hit by a car. Or maybe strangled and left by someone who wants it found. When she crouches down—slowly, her belly is bigger—she notices that the squirrel's front paws, twisted and wizen like arthritic hands, are clasped as if praying. *What did it feel like?* she finds herself wondering.

She flees, her body awkward and heavy, faint laughter buzzing in her ears.

Their first afternoon in the duplex, she and Duff took a blanket to the park. She was newly pregnant, not yet showing. They spread the blanket under the trees and watched some guys in low-slung jeans playing basketball. She saw kids like them every day in lockup, separated by gang to avoid fights. These guys in the park just bumped chests when they disagreed over a play. Children swarmed the jungle gyms and counselors organized circle games and a bicycle cop patrolled the chain link perimeter. Claire felt lazily self-satisfied sprawled next to Duff.

"See." She leaned against him. "A real neighborhood. Perfect for a baby."

He stayed quiet a while. He still had his curls and looked closer to thirteen than thirty. They could only afford the new apartment if his money jobs stayed steady. But they'd find a way, like always. Take her pregnancy. They hadn't planned it. When the test stick changed color they were still living like kids, picking their apartment for its proximity to their favorite clubs and using beach chairs for furniture. But they went out and found the new place, a second-floor unit near Beverlywood with its good schools and nannies pushing strollers along the sidewalks. Their street had more skateboarders than strollers, and an occasional bum scouting junk, but it was still better for kids than Hollywood, where music from the Strip sometimes made their walls vibrate.

"What if the foundry closes?" Duff said. "Or the seniors center lays me off?"

"We've eaten ramen before."

"But it was just us." He raised his face to the sun. "A baby, man."

He helped her up, and, arms laced, they crossed the park so she could pee in the surprisingly clean public bathrooms. She smiled as she washed her hands. They may not have planned this pregnancy, but they could plan everything else.

When they returned to their spot under the trees, their blanket was gone.

She orders a taser on the internet. The website says it's small, the length and width of a dollar bill, and it doesn't look like an actual gun the way some tasers do, which is comforting. Less risk of getting shot by someone who thinks she has a gun, although she has no intention of using it. It's for reassurance, that's all.

Duff is showering the night she orders the taser. By the time he's done, she has shut the laptop and turned on the television. Her heart is pounding as he lies on the couch, resting his damp head in what's left of her lap.

"I set up an interview," he says. He looks tired. Every night this week he has stayed up late job-searching online. "A prosthetics company's looking for fitters. There's a training program and everything. Good money. I'll bet we can rent a house right in Beverlywood soon."

"What about sculpting?"

"The job's nine to five. I'll have mornings and evenings, weekends." He reaches up to stroke her face. "I saw a listing for a white collar defense firm. The pay's outrageous. You'd be perfect."

"I'd be bored."

His mouth is a solemn line. She takes his hand, examines it, the thick, rough fingers, two knuckles uneven where he broke them carving headstones one year, the burn scars from chasing bronzes at the foundry. The odd jobs, the money jobs that get them through, help her stay a public defender instead of droning for some corporate law firm.

"Aren't you ever afraid of those kids?" he asks.

"I thought this was about money."

"It's also about knowing you're coming home every day in one piece."

The baby moves inside her. She finds herself hoping for a boy. A girl would be more vulnerable and difficult to protect. The taser is small; it will fit snuggly in the palm of her hand. She should tell Duff, let him remind her they agreed it wasn't necessary. *My woman is fierce.*

He sits up. "I felt something." He presses his hand against her stomach; the baby butts up against the pressure.

She puts her hand over his, feels a steady thumping from both outside and within."I've been thinking. Maybe it's time I took some precautions."

"Finally." He grins, his first real smile all week. "For starters you could take prenatal yoga instead of walking."

"That's not exactly what I had in mind—"

"You're almost six months pregnant. You shouldn't be wandering around alone in the dark. After what happened with those cats—"

"What, you think I can't take care of myself anymore?"

"I didn't say that. But why take any chances?"

"Living my life is not taking chances."

She picks up the television remote to channel-surf. She senses him watching her, but she stays fixed on the TV.

"Okay," he says, "live your life."

She feels him shift position on the couch, so that he's just out of reach.

She and Judith lose Zeke's objection. He'll be tried as an adult. He shrugs when they tell him.

"I'm not sure you understand," Claire says. "You could wind up in an adult prison forever."

He chews his thumbnail cuticle, examines the wet, raw spot. "Could you bring me some comic books? Nothing bloody or they'll get taken away."

On the drive back to the office Judith says, "He belongs in a mental ward."

Claire stares out at the squat warehouses lining the traffic-packed freeway. They'll enter an insanity plea soon. If they win, Judith will get her wish: Zeke will be placed in a prison psych ward, his release contingent on him getting better, which isn't likely. He's a sociopath, Claire is certain even without a final psychiatric report. People like that don't get better. Still, there would be the possibility for his release. She thinks about the child inside her. He'll have Duff's curls, her ropey runner's thighs. If he was playing in the park, if some bangers got in a fight; if someone pulled a gun and stray bullets flew—she can't think any further. Her clients' crimes used to feel distant and theatrical, like ghost stories told at slumber parties.

"Maybe he should stay locked up," she says.

Judith shakes her head. "He's just a kid. Someone has to help him." She grips the steering wheel and starts whistling an off-key, determined tune.

During a lunch break Claire trades in her ancient cell phone for a sleek new one and immediately programs 911 onto speed dial. She puts the taser in her glove compartment when she's in court or at Eastlake visiting Zeke. Otherwise she carries it everywhere.

She works from home one day so an alarm system can be installed. It's the most expensive kind, with a digital touch pad, window screens that trip the alarm when cut, a panic button to hang by the headboard. The landlord objected until Claire agreed to pay the difference between the cheaper system and this one. She tries not to think about her credit card balance creeping toward its limit. She's taking a few extra precautions. She can still take care of herself.

When Duff gets home, she is putting alarm company stickers on the kitchen windows.

"I didn't know we were getting an alarm."

She glances over her shoulder. He's holding a grocery bag.

"I thought I told you."

He puts down the bag. "It's a good idea, with the baby and all."

"It's no big deal."

"Hey, I'm agreeing with you."

Behind her she hears him rummaging through cabinets. She smoothes out a sticker on the window over the sink, where she can see it while she's washing the dishes that accumulate so quickly lately. When she's not working or walking she's baking, trying out low-fat recipes to keep her weight in check. Even that makes her achy. Her ligaments and joints are already loosening for birth.

Duff says, "I got the job with the prosthetics company."

She turns around. He's holding two champagne glasses. A bottle of sparkling cider is on the counter.

"You're sure that's what you want?"

He puts down the glasses. "I thought it's what we both want."

"You insisted on this job, not me."

"Because you refuse to even contemplate changing jobs."

"Why should I? We're fine the way we are."

"Alarm system and all."

"I never said I wouldn't make adjustments."

She affixes a sticker to the breakfast nook window. When she turns back around, he's gone, the glasses abandoned by the sparkling cider.

Usually, once she's this far into a case, where most of the investigating is done, she's all business. Pick a strategy, stage the defense that's most likely to create a reasonable doubt. She spends hours preparing exhibits, scouring evidence files for facts she may have missed, prepping and re-prepping witnesses to ensure they'll withstand cross. Sometimes she doesn't see the client for a month.

She sees Zeke weekly, driving out to Eastlake alone with comic books and rolls of quarters for the visitation center vending machine. He points to what he wants and she slides quarters into the slot. He's not allowed to take money from her. Then they retreat to the tiny interview room with the table between them and she grills

him: What's your earliest memory of your mother, your father, your grandfather, your grandmother? Have you ever even met your father? Did you have friends? Did you have pets? Did you hurt them? What toys did you play with, what cartoons did you watch, what books did you read? Who touched you, where did they touch you, how did they get the chance? She fills one notebook, another. Cautionary tales about how not to raise her child. What to protect him from.

The baby is so big he's crowding her lungs; she gets winded climbing out of bed. Still, she walks. Nothing dead or maimed or bitten for a while now. Every morning she leaves the duplex a little bit earlier; it's a little bit darker. Her jacket pockets are weighted down with her phone and her taser. On the mornings after she visits Zeke, she feels fully equipped, like she's done everything she can to protect herself. There is no faint laughter in the distance.

Duff starts training for his new job. In the evenings he spreads manuals and prosthetic limbs across the dining room table and pores over them. Often he doesn't finish until she's asleep. He's already studying when she wakes up. They haven't been talking much, a few clipped sentences—"Pass the creamer," "Want to shower first?"—but nothing more. Whenever she asks how the new sculpture's going, he says, "Moving along," without looking up.

He's not home when she gets back from her walk one morning. She finds him in the studio examining the marble block. It hasn't changed much, the woman still mostly merged with stone. Duff is dressed for work, pressed khakis, a new polo shirt. His hair has grown out, the ridges of his skull softened by thick waves, dark at the roots, that aren't nearly as luxurious as his curls.

"I was getting worried," she says.

He polishes the marble with a drop cloth. The file cabinet filled with sketches, the metal shelves lined with drawing pads, sculpture tools, mallets, chisels, blow torches, boxes of wax and modeling clay—everything is coated with dust.

"This will make a good playroom," he says.

"Where would you work?" When he doesn't answer, she says, "You can't just quit."

"One of us has to start sacrificing."

He won't look at her, fixing on her jacket. She should hug him, remind each of them what they risk with a poorly chosen word.

"I'm the one renting out my body for nine months," she says. "Even my toes feel bloated."

"This isn't about you anymore."

"You think I don't know that—"

"Claire, what's in your—"

He grabs her jacket pocket, and she's so startled she grabs too, it's reflex, she's imagined so often pulling out the taser to stun an attacker.

Duff gets it first.

"Are you nuts?" She's never seen him so angry. He shakes the taser at her. "If I can take this away from you, someone else can. Someone can use it on you. Isn't that what you told me?"

"That won't happen."

"Why, because you say so? You can't control everything."

"I'm protecting myself—"

"So go to the gym instead of walking alone. Or get a job that doesn't lock you up with rapists and murderers every day—"

"You mean I should give up, like you."

"No, you should get realistic."

"My whole life doesn't have to change just because I'm pregnant!"

"Christ, Claire, grow up! Everything already has changed!"

He throws the taser at the sculpture; it hits the shoulder, chipping the marble. She stands staring at the chip, listening to his ragged breaths.

Zeke is being transferred to the adult county jail. They file a flurry of motions, but there's nothing they can do. Given the violence of his crime, the court thinks he's too great a risk in a less secure juvenile facility.

The last time Claire sees him at Eastlake, his fingertips are bloody crescents, the nails barely visible in the ravaged flesh.

"Can I go to school there?" he asks.

She shakes her head. "But you can do correspondence courses."

"I've gotta have books." There is panic in his voice. He sounds like a little kid. He is a kid.

She is at the supermarket filling her shopping cart with carrot cake ingredients when Judith calls to say the transfer's done. "Now he'll get a crash course in murder 101," Judith says, releasing a short thin whistle with nothing musical about it.

Claire's vision blurs as she shuts her cell, but she won't let herself cry in this crowded market. She pushes the cart slowly to the cash registers, her belly tight against the cart handle. People stop and look at her more often now that she's bigger. They smile, sometimes raise a hand as if they want to touch her. The last thing she wants is to be touched. Zeke will probably lose everything, and there's not much she can do about it. Worse, she wouldn't want it any other way.

As she nears the registers, one of the cashiers waves her over, a plump Ethiopian man whose name she never remembers. He walks his terrier on her street and always stops to chat.

"I'll ring you up," he says and flips on the "Lane Open" sign.

A kid in a hoodie pushes past her into line. The cashier frowns.

"This lady was first," he says.

"I'm only getting gum."

The kid tosses a pack on the conveyer belt and stuffs his hands in his pockets. He scans the store exits. One hand jiggles in his pocket as he leans forward to whisper to the cashier. The cashier listens, glances down, shakes his head. He says, "Only the manager—"

"I'm not joking," the kid says, his voice rising. Then he's yelling: "Do it!" Before Claire can react, he pulls out a gun. "Open the fucking register!"

The cashier tries, he punches in codes, but he can't get the drawer open.

Claire fixes on the gun, toy-like with its stubby barrel. The taser is

in her purse, in the cart basket meant for children. It's within reach. If only she could look away from the gun.

The cashier is now pounding the register with his fists. The kid jumps the counter. She is in his line of vision. She sees his eyes with their dilated pupils, his pallid skin, his rotted teeth and emaciated addict's arms that barely fill his sleeves, and she knows: He'll do anything.

Light glints off the gun as the kid smashes the cashier in the head. Then in one fluid motion he stands back, aims, fires. The cashier—his name is Hagos she remembers as she scrambles behind a magazine rack—staggers against the register. "Oof," he says softly, and there's a wet blossoming on his apron. He falls and people are screaming but she can't look again. She curls up, cradles her stomach, gasps for air. **f**

Paul Vidich

JUMP SHOT

Brian jogs up the pedestrian path that rises toward the Brooklyn Bridge's dark granite towers. His legs stretch, heart pumps, and he finds himself sprinting in the winter night toward a finish line in an imaginary race with his father. The ecstatic, numbing rhythm of his feet on the bridge's wood planking concentrates his attention and his senses take over. Twinkling Manhattan skyscrapers blur in the sweat that rolls off his forehead. Anxious thoughts give up their grip on his teenage mind. His chest tags the imaginary tape mid-span and he finds himself laughing at nothing – nothing – because that is all he can do. He slows, walks, stops. Bent over, laughing and gulping air. Heart pounding. He looks back where his father would be if he were alive, coming up behind, having let Brian win. Dads, they're crazy like that. Thinking a win is all you need.

Brian settles down on a wood bench and gazes at the panorama of container ships moored in the black lacquered bay – his father's words for moonlight glistening on water. He remembers his father's stories of foreign ports and he remembers how his child's mind embellished the narrative with dreamy details. This is the view they shared on Saturday afternoons doing nothing, killing time. Brian quiets his mind to commune with that past. He casts his eyes upward to inky oblivion. No stars or moon, just a spider web of bridge cables etched into the vast night sky.

"Yours?"

Brian opens his eyes. There is a girl about his age sitting in deep shadow on a nearby bench. He looks around to see whom she is addressing. They are alone. Brian follows her eyes to the bench

between them, where running shoes, soles up, sit on top of neatly folded jogging clothes, and beside them, vibrating, an iPhone with headphones. She is pale, thin, smoking, and dressed in black Converse sneakers, ankle-length dress, and a colorful flowing scarf.

"No," he says. "Not mine." He goes back to his view of the harbor.

"They belong to a jumper," she says, taking the cigarette from her mouth, but not turning her head. She inhales again and casually flicks the glowing butt over the bridge's railing.

"Men's shoes," she adds. "The size gives them away, and the color. He made a plan. Depressed men jump spontaneously. They don't fold their clothes or remove their shoes. Did you see it happen?"

"No," he says. He sees no reason to point out that the soles are up, a precaution he thinks at odds with the concerns of a man about to take his life, but he doesn't want to start a conversation, so he keeps that detail to himself. The phone continues to vibrate, and in a minute, he looks at her.

"You going to answer it?"

"It's not my phone."

"Someone is trying to reach him."

She looks at him. "What would I say? You don't know me, but I'm here at the bridge and the owner of this phone jumped."

"Someone should be told, shouldn't they?"

She stares at him for a moment and then wraps herself in her arms. She stares out over the bay. "It happens a lot. A couple of times a week. It's wide open. No guards. One long fall." She gazes at the water far below, then turns to him. "I followed you up here, you know."

Brian turns to her. "You followed me? Why did you do that?"

"I saw you up ahead. You were running fast and I thought, well, he must see something. So, I biked up. Found you meditating."

Brian's eyes drift back from the mountain bike leaning against the railing. He hadn't heard her approach. "That's all?"

"Well, not all. I know you."

He tries to place her face, but he can't make a connection. "I think you're confusing me with someone else?"

"No. I'm sure. But I don't know your name."

"How do you know me?"

"You go to my high school. I've seen you on the basketball team. You practice foul shots a lot. You don't talk much. You're the new kid on the block."

"The block?"

"*Jesus*. You're so literal. The new kid in school."

Brian likes to keep to himself, and from time to time he is startled when a stranger knows who he is. He wipes his forehead with his sleeve. He isn't hot or sweaty, but it's something to do since he doesn't know what to say. He is surprised when she tosses a water bottle. He snags it mid-air, unscrews the plastic top, and drinks what's left.

"You're welcome," she says.

He pitches the empty bottle over the railing.

"It's a hundred thirty feet to the water," she says. She tosses a pebble. "Six seconds down. You can't hear them when they hit. Some scream on their way."

Christ, he thinks. He looks away, and when he turns back she has gone to the railing, leaning over, and is looking past the twelve foot beams that lead from the pedestrian path to the bridge's outer edge. "This your hobby," he asks, "watching suicides?"

She turns around, elbows leaning on the railing, eyes steady. "Actually, I pray for them. I feel their pain. I'm sorry. I must sound sick to you."

"Don't be sorry. I don't like it when people say they're sorry." He waits for her to answer. "I don't mean it that way."

"What way do you mean it?"

"I mean just own it. You do it for a reason. Own the reason."

"Why did you run up here?" she asks.

"Not to jump," he says under his breath. He gazes at her puzzled expression. "Are you disappointed?"

She frowns. "Disappointed? Yes. I was hoping you would cartwheel over the side and finish with a double pike into the river."

"Funny."

"You almost laughed."

"Stupid funny." He sits quietly, but brings his eyes back to her. "My father brought me here as a kid. He hated baseball, hated Coney Island, but he loved architecture. This was his favorite spot. Why do you come?"

"For the view...to be alone...I don't know...One night I saw a woman jump. I don't come here to see people jump, but it happens. That's it....Your old man still come here?"

He shakes his head. Brian surprises himself with an urge to tell the full truth of his father's suicide when he was twelve, but the urge passes, as it usually does. His mind drifts off to the police officer who came to their front door and delivered the news.

"Why not?" she asks.

He kicks a stone toward the railing.

"What?"

"Nothing!" He feels the muscles on the back of his neck constrict. "I don't want to talk about it."

She approaches him slumped on the bench, legs crossed, arms folded on his chest, eyes averted. She looks down, pauses, stares. "Thanks for sharing."

She has turned to leave and is mounting her bicycle when he comes off the bench, standing awkwardly. His hands are plunged deep in his pockets, eyes flashing. "Wait –"

She turns. "For what?"

"I didn't introduce myself. I'm Brian."

"Right." She nods. "Jenny."

Brian doesn't make plans to visit the bridge the next night, but the day slips by, night falls, and he finds himself at loose ends in

his mother's small apartment looking at the bridge across the East River. He gazes aimlessly, eyes resting on the thin roadway gently arced between two Gothic towers. He wants to see her again, but he doesn't want to make the effort only to be disappointed if she isn't there. He wavers between going and staying. His mind ties itself in knots. After an hour, he says, simply, "Fuck it.' He leaves home on foot, grabbing a coat, and heads into the chilly night, buzzed on one of his mother's beers.

Brian runs up the planked path, mind concentrating on the embossed center stripe so he doesn't think about what he's doing. "*Walk*," he says to himself. "*Calm down. And walk.*" He slows his pace, head looking down at nothing, thinking he'll jinx his chances if he looks ahead. He comes around the stone tower and sees her on the bench, alone. She is smoking, eyes gazing at the East River, her long colorful scarf wound around her neck.

He steps forward. "Hi."

She looks up. "You again."

"Yes. Me." He is embarrassed when she doesn't respond and he has a sudden impulse to keep walking.

"Actually, I thought you might show up," she says. She scoots over, and he sits down beside her, but keeps his distance. A brightly-lit tourist boat is slowly heading up river toward the bridge. There is the distant sound of amplified pop music and laughter, clear like struck crystal.

"You come here every night?" he asks.

"Why would I do that?"

He shrugs. "I don't know."

"I like this place, but not that much." she says. "I like it because it's quiet."

"We don't have to talk," he says.

She looks at him. "Talking is okay."

Brian shrugs. He looks at the tourist boat, pretending that he's interested in the people crowded on the top deck. He taps his fingers on the bench and looks around at nothing. "His stuff is still

here," he says, nodding at jogging pants still folded under running shoes.

Brian walks over and examines the jumper's pants, careful not to disturb anything, but curious why no one has touched the clothing. He sees a yellow spandex jersey underneath. He slips his hand into the pants' pockets. "There's no wallet," he says. "It's been taken. Or he took it with him when he jumped. What do you think?"

She shakes her head and flicks her cigarette over the railing.

Brian scrolls through the play list that appears when he turns on the phone. A Frank Sinatra song was played last, and lower down he sees Pink Floyd and Creedence. Brian clicks to voicemail, but there is none. He is puzzled by a man who can disappear without anyone noticing, or caring. How sad is that? He redials the call logged the night before.

"It's not your phone," she says. "I wouldn't touch it. It's creepy. Don't you have something better to do?"

He ends the call after nine rings. "No. I don't. Not at the moment...Like what?"

"Let's climb out to the edge. I'll show you how to do it." She nods toward the edge of the bridge, where the roadway is held by braided strands attached to huge cables that rise in a long arc to the top of the granite towers. Part-way up locked gates strung with concertina wire block the path.

"I don't mean climb up the cables," she says, seeing his eyes contemplate the tower. She points to the metal beams that connect the pedestrian path to the bridge's outer edge. Cars rush by one level down. "Let's go to the edge."

He stares at her. "I get vertigo," he lies. He folds his arms across his chest and stretches his legs so that he's comfortable on the bench.

She regards him for a minute. "Fine."

She removes her zippered down jacket and folds it neatly on the bench. She slips off her loosely tied canvas sneakers, and places

them beside her jacket, soles up. She removes her ankle-length skirt, and stands skinny and pale in white cotton underwear.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Jumping."

He laughs. "Right."

Brian's confusion deepens when he sees her walk barefoot to the railing and climb over. She stands on the narrow metal beam that attaches to the bridge's outer edge. She proceeds to cross without looking down at the rushing traffic.

Brian leans forward, mouth open, not speaking.

"Don't come close," she warns. Her voice softens to a plea. "If you come near you'll make me nervous."

Brian finds himself perfectly still, arms at his side, feet rooted to the wooden planks, eyes watching her move like a cautious wild animal. She is pale, thin, and small against the night. Her breath fogs in the air, and she takes one step, then another, hopping on one foot, waiting until she has gotten her balance again, then hopping again. She undoes her scarf from around her neck, dark hair falling to her shoulders. She pauses and is frozen there on the metal beam above fast moving cars. Ends of the unwound scarf drop to her ankles and lay along-side pale, bony legs. She lifts the scarf, unfolding her arms like a bird taking flight, testing the wind, feeling for lift. Her chest swells and a single musical note leaves her lips. It's a weak sound, and then the shy quaver finds a confident pitch. Soprano notes come tentatively, but build intensity and range, until they are carried into the night by the wind.

Brian has stopped himself. His confusion becomes disbelief. He is lost in the moment listening to the girl belt out a song. He's heard the song somewhere, but not radio. It's French. Then he remembers. A film he saw twice. *Padum, Padum Padum*. She sings the refrain again. *Padum, Padum*... Brian remembers the melody and then the song ends.

She beckons him out. "Come on." She takes the scarf in her hands, and casts the ends to the wind. They unfurl in a gentle

rolling motion and stream gaily out over the traffic. She laughs. Throws her head back and laughs.

Nothing Brian feels at that moment can be translated into words, perhaps not even into a memory. The moment doesn't feel real, but a dream, and not his dream, but a dream she is dreaming that he has entered.

There is a deep jarring blast from the horn of the approaching tourist boat, and camera flashes go pop, pop in the night. Brian sees her fall. He comes off the bench, but she has recovered her balance. She is crouched on her knee holding the beam, one leg dangling. She waves him off. She glares at the tourists looking up, eager for a thrill, and raises her middle finger. She dismounts backwards, walks unsteadily to the bench, taking a spot beside him, and stares out at nothing.

Brian studies her face. She begins to tremble and tries to laugh, but he hears a nervous giggle disguised with false confidence. Brian puts his arm around her shoulder because he feels compelled to do something, and it's all he can think of. She leans on him.

"Hold me," she says.

He *is* holding her, he thinks. He places her jacket on her bony shoulders. "You're crazy," he says.

She is laughing through her tears. He's surprised when she rests her head on his shoulder. He has no idea what can happen next, and he ignores questions that come into his head, letting himself drift with the moment.

"Good performance," he says.

"You liked it?"

"I could do without the drama. Your Dad and Mom know you do this?"

She lets out a single note of laughter. "Divorcing."

He says nothing because he's afraid he'll say the wrong thing.

"Don't sweat it. It's their life, not mine. I walked out on them tonight. They were talking, you know, yelling at each other. Why did they bother to have a kid? Some nights it's bad. They wake me up

and I climb under my bed. Crazy isn't it. I mean I'm eighteen. What am I doing under my bed at midnight? Life is fucked, you know."

She lights a cigarette, inhales deeply, and blows smoke from the corner of her mouth. "What's important is that I finished the song. That's never happened. I could have sung another if the fucking boat hadn't blasted its fucking horn." She turns to Brian and looks directly at him. "It's about focus. I come here to practice my concentration. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?"

He can't find words to say what he's thinking. He nods. In the silence that follows he becomes aware of her bare thighs, blue in the cold. He averts his eyes and sees the tourist boat pass under the bridge. When he looks back she has slipped on her skirt and is walking away.

Brian comes to the bridge the third night. He doesn't see her on his approach, and she isn't hiding behind the granite tower waiting to surprise him. He tells himself that he isn't disappointed, but all the same he was prepared to be surprised. He still believes that one day the hard slog of life will break in his favor with the illusion of happiness. He had gone home the night before, fallen into bed in his clothes, and put a pillow over his head.

Brian waits at the bench because he has nothing else to do, no place he would rather be, and he rejects the satisfying urge to let the usual disappointment take hold. He settles into the familiar view of container ships moored in the bay, recent arrivals resting where none had been. The bay's lacquered surface hasn't changed since his father made the observation. His father left Brian a few mementos, some memories, the three words: black lacquered bay. It was too true. So true that the sight of the water reminded him of the words. They were a clue to a man he had hardly known, a window into the lost world of his father's mind. Brian's days are spent coping with the alternative universe he found himself inhabiting the day the policeman delivered the news. His mother told him to leave the room, but he secretly listened through the closed door, and when

his mom embraced him and repeated the news he didn't know whether to fake surprise, or cry. Now there's a man in his mother's bed trying to be the replacement dad. Brian spends his time looking for distractions. High school doesn't engage him. He's tried three. He finds contentment from the rhythm he enters when he stands at the foul line, sets, and shoots one after another.

Brian sees fireworks that someone has lit on the Brooklyn shore to honor the coming New Year. Rockets rise in a whoosh, and explode in an amateur display of red, green, and white. The giant clock on the bank building marks the hour, and the black hands give proof to the time he has waited. She isn't coming, he decides. He berates himself for letting hope blur judgment.

He has an imaginary conversation with her. He looks at the empty bench next to him. *My father's dead. I didn't tell you that. He died here. I didn't tell you he was crossing the bridge one night and never came home. Just didn't show up. Body found floating in the water two days later. I didn't know what to say to friends, or anyone. So, I invented a story. I said he was killed trying to stop a robbery. People are happy to hear the heroic version of Dad's death, so that's the version I tell. People understand the heroic version, and it's easy for them to offer sympathy, and I don't have to listen to an awkward condolence.*

Brian laughs because that's all he can do. He laughs at the idea that he's surrounded himself with a fake story because it's the one he wishes were true.

Brian sees that the jumper's clothes have been rummaged, and the trespass gives him permission to do the same. Pennies fall from the pocket when he lifts the pants, and he slams his foot down on one coin before it rolls far. There's no paper in the pocket, no letter bearing a name, or a scrap with a note to provide a clue. The spandex pull-over shirt has blown off the bench, and Brian can see that another strong gust will take it over the side, to the roadway one level down, and then it'll be lost. The iPhone's screen is dark, battery dead. He tosses it in the air once, twice, and on the third toss he rises in a jump shot that sends the cell phone to an

imaginary hoop over the river. He feels his rhythm, jumps again, and sends one running shoe to the basket, and then he takes the other and shoots. Foul shots. A useless skill except for wasting time and sending dead men's shoes into the river.

The shoe follows a high arc over the side, and Brian runs, skips, balances across the twelve foot beam to the edge of the bridge, and looks down. He doesn't count the seconds, but he knows in due course that the shoe has gone in the water without him seeing the splash. Time plays tricks on his mind. He looks at watery darkness, and there is a hissing wind that he can't see. He travels between his now moment and the now moment of jumpers poised at this spot looking down into the abyss. He tries to put himself in their mind, tries to transport himself to their state of depression and surrender. He feels lightheaded looking into the void. He needs to get a grip and understand that unless he holds on he is going down. Living, he knows, is another way of dying, but he will suffer the journey.

He quits the spot. He is disappointed that she hasn't come. A fine snow is falling.

Brian isn't prepared to leave things in an unfinished state, the way that life is a congeries of silences and grey-toned emotions without a framed geometry of beginning, middle, and end. That doesn't feel good enough. Doesn't have the satisfaction that he's taken things as far as he can. He isn't prepared to live with that. Christmas vacation will end, the last semester in high school will start, and they will pass each other in the hallway holding onto a conversation that isn't finished.

Brian returns to the bridge three days later. He creates a story for himself that he believes will shield him from disappointment, a sort of deniable truth that he's been on Ludlow Street at a club and hoofed it over the bridge, telling himself it was a good night for a long walk. Save the subway fare. He looks skyward, as he does every crossing, and he is drawn to the gentle symmetries of the giant stone

towers. He feels small and vulnerable under a vast night sky, and his breath fogs in the air on his run up the pedestrian path.

He stops suddenly. There she is walking ahead with her bike in hand. He sees her linger by the bench, looking at the spot where no one sits.

He plunks down beside her and says nothing for a minute. He becomes a prisoner of his own silence, one minute becoming two, and to escape this silence he suddenly turns, sees that she too has turned, and they talk at once, cutting each other off, canceling each others' words.

"I'm sorry," she says. "Go ahead."

"No. What were you going to say?"

"Nothing. Just...how are you?"

Christ, he thinks. How am I? That's it. "Hanging in there," he says.

"Me too. Singing. I got a show."

"I was here the other night," he says. "Tuesday."

"You were?"

"Yup. Just me. No jumpers, but I did see fireworks. I thought you might come by."

"I was at home. More psycho drama stuff. Did we agree to meet?"

"No."

"Did you wait long?"

He shook his head.

"Are you mad?" she asks.

"Why would I be mad?"

"I don't know. You sat down and didn't say anything."

"You didn't either."

She nods. "That's true. I was thinking you'd speak first, but you didn't say anything. I thought I'd said something stupid."

He swallows a grin. Why was life so complicated? Words so useless?

"I want you to come to my show, okay?" She looks at him. "I want you to sit in the first row where I can see you, okay? I want you to look at me so I can make eye contact and feel safe. Will you do that for me?"

"Sure."

He is gratified when she smiles and he waits for her to thank him, or say anything, but when she doesn't, he moves on.

Later, alone, his thoughts drift from one pocket of time to another. A cargo ship in the bay triggers a string of random memories, the beginning of one cutting off the end of another. He collects the pennies that lay under the bench. He takes one at a time, makes a wish, and sends it over the railing, counting out the seconds of fall. In less than a minute nothing remains of the man who he knew only by his folded clothes. **f**

Charlie Clark

PROVISION

Having grasped so well each other's bodies, and finding
in that texture and weight perfect distraction, they slept out

the duration of their lives, dust piling on them, and they let it—

why not—smoothing out the slopes of elbows and neck on neck
until, had someone come upon them, that person would have

seen only the indistinct contours of their limbs like tree roots

threatening to break through the already-surrendered
and mounding lengths of earth they lay below. Not that

they became the earth or trees, not that they became any more

than withered bodies held in the love-lock to which they had
resigned themselves, but someone seeing this, the depth

of powder the couple's stillness had endowed, would, perhaps,

knowing no better, be merely rapt by the beauty of the subtle,
near-human arcs which nature, when it chooses, can provide.

Margarita Delcheva

HOUSE, VILLAGE

We see a truck set free another dogpack
on our village every week.

To rid the city of strays. Children are not
the first thing they eat. We find dog teeth in our hoods.

Uncle locks us out inside our village.
Marisa picks our huge doorlock with her pinkie.

We dry our hair on the gas heater.
We cyst in this house like off-fruit.

The dogs' stomachs become the graveyard
for our chains and keys.

The sure provision in our village
is the truck. The packs howl it in.

He locks us out. The way we fight the dogs
is to twirl until they wobble.

The mail came to our village, once.
Our village licked the envelopes with its flames.

He locks out Marisa. I toss the dogs braids.
We pinkie-touch through the lock.

I pick dog teeth from her hair like lice.
At green dusk truckprints eat the one road.

We swear he won't see us knot our hair into one
whip. We dash – it hisses behind us.

A beggar came to our village once.
Our village flicked its ash in his cup.

Sarah Fawn Montgomery

EKPHRASIS: WHAT MY GRANDFATHER SAW

If hung in a manner most observers would call *right side up*, the painting depicts a natural enough, albeit drastic, progression from dark to light. One lower corner is an intense, matte black. The darkest of dark, this corner is so saturated, so dense nothing might penetrate it. The blackness spreads out across the bottom and up one side of the painting, covering a diagonal half of the five foot by five foot canvas. A counterpoint to the darkness, the opposite top corner is nearly white—pure and unadulterated. Just as the darkness creeps across the bottom of the canvas, so, too, does the light glide across the top edge of the painting, covering a diagonal half of its own.

In this painting, this 1960's, 1970's garage-sale nothing, light and dark dance diagonally, and meet in a sunrise, sunset middle. They fade and merge with stokes of a blunt brush, the oil on canvas dimensioned with ridges and valleys fit for a fingernail. Strokes shift with the shades—broad and loopy in the light, darting and deep-grooved in the dark. In the middle of the canvas where dark and light meet like dusk and dawn, the strokes are invisible. Moving to inspect more closely the brushwork, one can smell dust and oil. With eyes closed, the dark smells musty, the light of musk. With eyes open, synesthesia steps in and the darkness smells like green. Like the last moments of cold metal. Like the body's drying moistures. And the light smells of inland fog, of unfinished, un-splintered oak. Of Mondrian's yellow squares.

Scrawled across the canvas, originating at the center, but falling into the darkness and reaching towards the light, are bold orange flowers. They resist categorization; they are Gauguin's tropic flora,

black-eyed Susans, sunflowers. In the canvas center where the diagonal halves meet, the flowers are fireworks, thrusting petals garishly outward, exposing seed and stamen unashamed. They defy the pastoral. Flowers in the dark corner are anemones floating in the murk. Languishing in the gloom. Flowers in the light are cirrus wisps of petal. Effortless.

The painting continues a centuries-old study of the relationship between light and dark. It is a not-so-still life of the opposition between primitive and modern, good and evil, real and unreal, so much like the stick figures on dank cave walls in Lascaux, the grotesque fairytale of William Blake's acid-etched *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Van Gogh's apocalyptically-manic *Starry Night*. Each of these images uses dark and light to suggest something beautiful and yet terrifying about the human experience. A brief art history reveals the interplay, the dance between the two. What would we think of the *Mona Lisa*'s pure face and suggestive smile if it weren't for the way her dark hair and the dim landscape contrast with her milky skin? Of Warhol's work if he hadn't inverted the colors and played with our expectations? Monet's ponds would be nothing if not for the bright reflection off dark water.

The artist needs one to create the other, for without the darkness of shadow how can one appreciate the light of the curves of a woman's body, of the wax on the skin of fruit? Without darkness how can one see the shapes of the clouds—mere condensation—that backdrop Dali's peaceful distortions? Just as true, without the light how can one show the way the body ages with wrinkle and worry, the grotesque hilarity and terror in Chagall? Without light we could not know the way the earth is isolated in a dark, dense universe. Dark and light render realism, alter perception, make one see things in the abstract. Eternally contradictory, the two exist together, their relationship fantastic and frightening.

Along one side of the canvas, just where the diagonals of jet and gold meet, is a tear the size of a deliberate fingertip. It is clean and it is precise. Perhaps it isn't a fingertip at all, but the circumference of a stiletto or a pool cue. This hole is disarming. It distracts from the

composition, makes the viewer question perspective and reality. This nasty hole confuses wrong side up, sideways straight, top end down. If the painting is hung in a manner most viewers would call *right side up*, and the hole is on one side, it appears as though light triumphs dark and things are organic and ethereal. But if one wishes to hide the hole and rotates the painting until the hole is on top, the hole becomes a suspicious eye or a fearsome sun, and light and dark line up sideways like lovers and armies. If rotated further, the composition inverted from *right side up*, the hole moved to the *wrong* side, darkness looms at the top of the painting, threatening to sweep across the surface, overtake the glowing land, and now at the bottom of the canvas, the last light looks as though it is cowering in the corner. The painting is only appealing if things are *right*—darkness a mere suggestion skirting along the bottom of the canvas.

Before the tear my grandfather used to rearrange this painting, my mother tells me, used to mutter about light and dark like a madman. He used to turn and tilt the painting ever-so-slightly, watching boundaries blend and blur. My mother sighs as she tells me of the hours he spent hours studying the painting, his nose close to the surface, breathing the musk, eyes devouring the anemone flowers. An incessant alcoholic, he saw things in it—taunting in the light, skulking in the shadows. His eyes roved the shapes and he whisky-wobbled while he watched the spinning canvas. When light was at the top, he shuddered weighty relief. When darkness spun around to shadow the rest of the canvas, he tensed and reached for his drink, steadied himself against a wall, his mouth a thin line.

A Depression youth and WWII soldier, my grandfather longed to find the *right side up*, a pattern to the dark and light, a prediction maybe. The harder he looked, the more confused he became. Like the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, his analysis led to uncertainty, his interest to obsession. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* an unnamed narrator and her husband retreat to a mansion for the summer so the narrator can rest her nerves, though she does not believe she is ill. Forbidden to work, read, or write, the narrator

is confined to a room covered in yellow wallpaper. The paper's pattern irritates her with its chaos, with the way it seems to make sense from one angle but not from another, the way shapes pleasing to the eye perturb the spirit. Her husband refuses to relocate her to another room, assuring her nothing is wrong with the paper, and cautioning her that imagination brings out fear and panic, makes even the most stable see things that aren't there. Despite his warnings, the narrator examines the images, revealing her findings in a forbidden journal. She becomes obsessed and depressed, and spends most of her time studying the patterns despite her growing anxiety. She sees things in the wallpaper—flowers, fungus, eyes—and day and night alter her interpretations.

When my grandfather was drunk he saw things in the painting and shared his fears with my mother, then just a child. His study revealed a battle, a clash of color down the canvas center. Sometimes he saw the darkness winning, pulling the flowers down like stars, sucking color from the heavens. Sometimes he joined forces with the light and shouted at the blackness. Sometimes he staggered in victory or cowered in fear. The painting was visible from nearly all the rooms in the house, and my mother heard him muttering about the war going on just beyond the canvas's flowers at the dinner table, in his living room chair, over the water of the shower, late at night from her tiny bed. She once found him hunched beneath the painting, murmuring about demons as he tried to peel back the corners of the canvas.

My mother hates the painting. She hated it as a child and after my grandfather passed away. She hated it when grandmother kept it another decade after his death. And she hated it still after my grandmother passed and I decided to hang the painting in my home, just over my bed. The painting covers nearly half my bedroom wall, envelopes the room in which I work and sleep, impels me with its history of power and seduction. I've kept this painting despite my mother's apprehension precisely because of it—how can a still life cause so much angst in this life?

Maybe as a child she hoped, and hopes still even, the hole might grow until it stretched across the canvas and ripped through the flowers, the canvas shards left to scatter. The painting is the landscape of her adolescence in many ways: her father pacing, her parents fighting, swift violence, tearful embrace. Her life, too, can be spun around a hole, from one angle beautiful, from another terrifying.

Perhaps my mother imagines me like I imagine my grandfather—fascinated to the point of obsession by art. Perhaps she knows I spend nights wine-woozy in my bed, staring up at the flowers from under the shadow of the painting. I think she hopes I'll grow tired of the painting, conclude my interest in my grandfather and her tumultuous childhood the way I close the pages of a book after the final lines or a cap an ending sentence with punctuation.

When I tell my mother I've been studying the painting to see what my grandfather saw, to determine what I can see in it too, she frowns. Maybe she imagines me standing on my bed in front of the painting late at night, my weight dipping low the mattress, moving closer and closer as if drawn in by some artistic force. Maybe she pictures me turning my neck to see it in a new way. Maybe she worries I'll search and search for some meaning in it, finding nothing, or worse yet, something. There's nothing there, she cautions, nothing there but what people bring out.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator eventually begins to see a woman trapped in the paper. The woman moves back and forth behind the pattern as if it were bars holding her in, and the narrator begins to think, or realize perhaps, that the trapped woman is actually herself. She becomes part of the painting in some way—speaks only of it, lives her life as if she was surrounded by the pictures. Art is transformative for the narrator. It requires the power of the mind to understand it, yet once understood it is powerful enough to alter the mind entirely.

At last, muttering and brave, the narrator tears the paper down. The tearing of the wallpaper is her attempt to leave her mark on it, to have physical contact with the landscape that has captivated her and

holds her captive as a result. It is a final act of madness. Her husband and maid find her crouching, crawling along the floor, shards of the paper clasped in her hands, muttering about the pattern, about the good and the bad in it, the beauty and the terror. Frantic, her husband faints, frightened by what her study has managed to bring out.

My grandfather brought out fire. It's all fire, he might have said while cooking, still smiling, despite the beginning of his obsession. The flowers are a phoenix, feathers all flame, fighting before falling.

Bombs, he may have muttered months later, the hours he stood in front of the painting increasing each night. Bombs in a smoggy, apocalyptic sky. Smoldering, repellent, unclean, like the wallpaper. There should be a rat creeping quietly on its slimy belly among the flowers and sulfuric swirls.

Perhaps alien flowers, sharp as pinpricks—his three a.m. revelation.

A bulbous fungus. Dandelion spores to impregnate and infect, he shouted at the silent house, raising his finger to the air like some Biblical figurehead, my mother peering at him from behind a chair, watching her father—six months of fascination with the painting, a year obsessed, two years—become unrecognizable.

Or maybe, sometimes, vulnerable and tired, hanging his head in his daddy hands, my grandfather saw the flowers his own father brought home for his mother back in Pennsylvania when my grandfather was still just a boy sipping on ginger ale. And maybe he sat down crying, my mother recognizing her father again finally, relieved for a night of quiet in the house after years of his mutterings. Sobbing and vulnerable, he still frightened her.

Eventually he grabbed the frame in his hands, shook the painting to disrupt the landscape. He did this each night for a month, two. Then again a year later. The flowers were pungent and stinking. They tore themselves from the canvas, looked from certain angles as if they were reaching out to him. So he ducked. He cursed. He retreated to the porch and his whiskey.

As he obsessed, depressed, his eyes bagged. He heard echoes. He swore the demons from the painting crept around the kitchen late at night, hid behind the flowers in the day.

The flowers were a metal dragon, he began to argue. A mustard gas jungle premonition.

The darkness was a big black hole. Magnetic.

The light an atomic burst.

Armageddon.

God.

Finally, something—my mother can't recall what—made the tear. And once the tear was there, down the painting came, banished to the floor of a dark spare room, my grandfather refusing to look at it, though he loved and hated it so, and spent nearly all his years living in an alcoholics' rendering of reality.

That awful tear marks this painting, so I study the canvas to see what led to it. I remember the painting in its dusty, banished state from my childhood—dejected and powerless. Now dusted and displayed on my wall, the painting is a reminder of what was, not what is. Despite my mother's fears, I am drawn to the painting not by some irresistible force, but for the sake of story.

Still, my grandfather's terror and my mother's anger suggest the battle is inherent in us all—that art is transformative, that imagination can corrupt, that perhaps nothing is free from history. I see the dark and I see the light. I rotate perspective and alter reality to study the relationship between them. Though for me the painting remains benign, I have spent enough time with the colors and the flowers, know enough of art history to recognize what my grandfather might have seen. Light and dark, good and evil, nature and progress, expectation and reality.

When I look at this painting with its awful flowers, I can see Munch's *The Scream*—its canvas divided between dark and light, into the bright red and orange of the sky and the black and blue of the wailing figure.

And I can see, too, Turner's *Rain Steam Speed: The Great Western Railway*, a large romantic canvas, mostly vast sky, cream and pink, soft brushstrokes and diffused light. But in the lower corner, a train and a play on perspective, so it seems as though the train is coming right at the viewer, threatening to rush out of the canvas, roll over anything in its way. It is painted all black and brown with harsh brushstrokes, its steel and smoke dreadful compared to the serene sky.

There's O'Keefe's reliance on light and dark to subvert reality—the dark inner parts of flowers and female haunting and foreboding, while bleached bones seem pure and promising against the dark backdrop of the living.

And finally Picasso's *Guernica*—the quintessential battle between dark and light, between what could be and what is, between what we want and what we do. It's all black background and white figures, everything lit by an overhead light at the top of the painting, casting shadows over the destruction. The light is in the shape of an eye, and it sees tragedy, or perhaps reality, death and decay of animals and humans, fire and bombs, and a single flower growing from a bloody sword. **f**

C. Doyle

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU SHOP FOR A DOORKNOCKER WHILE WRITING A THESIS ON POSTSTRUCTURALIST LITERARY THEORY

The hand-shaped one attracts you right away,
cast iron fingers curled into a fist.
You have to bend your wrist to bend its wrist
to knock. "Ironic doubling," you hear it say.
"The hand as meta-narrative." But you're
distracted by a gilt brass lion's head
that whispers: "If what I symbolize is dead,
why do you long to put me on your door?"
What use is argument – you know it's true
(though there's no truth, objectively) the mane
compels you. You can't deny the way the two
flared nostrils make you feel. But now the air
fills with fragmented voices from every aisle.
You turn back to the hand. It isn't there.

PRELUDE

i open the soft case
that hides your body,
the long zippered curve

a slow undressing
that reveals your shape,
the perfect waist,

your key a slow rise to pitch
from below (never from above),
always this balance between soft and rough

as i pin you between my knees,
an arm around your neck, your throat
a finger pressing gently at a tendon to tease,

to hold it until you sing wholly,
resonating deep inside
the hollow of your body,

and trembling in the curve of
lacquered wood,
(like your beautiful hip)

waiting to be kissed
on that stretch of skin
where the bone juts in,

so ebony smooth under fingertip
i draw the bow across you then,
and you sway and sing,

pray and swing,
pitch falling from
your trembling strings.

IMPORTANT GREAT CAMPS OF THE ADIRONDACKS

Porthos

Christoph Peltier was a classics professor at Williams College and made something of a name for himself by translating and publishing several volumes of erotic poetry from Corinth. But his literary interests were broad, and he was also a fanatical lover of Dumas, and when he took possession of his father's great camp, built on a hilly island in the Ostholm Lake Chain, he renamed the compound "Porthos" and redecorated the buildings with antiques and art from various martial periods of French history.

One of the more unusual items that Peltier owned was a small smuggler's ketch from Marseille. It had been built around 1830 – "About the time that Dantès would have escaped from the Château d'If," he often remarked. The boat sailed poorly, and it was hard to imagine anyone using it to successfully transport contraband from country to country in the Mediterranean, but Peltier loved it, and on the several occasions I visited him he insisted on spending every sunset aboard the boat.

Interestingly, it was on this smuggler's boat, in 1954, that I accidentally shot John O'Hara in the leg – although the now famous story has greatly exaggerated the actual incident. We'd been doing a great deal of cocaine that weekend, and Peltier had demanded we take a collection of pre-revolutionary French pistols to fire on the lake. They were confusing devises that took quite a bit of work to load, and it was difficult to believe that they once constituted weapons. In fact, I was thinking that warfare must not have been very dangerous two

hundred years earlier, when the gun went off in my hand and lodged a so-called "ball" in the calf of O'Hara.

The wound was fairly deep, and we had to rush him to a hospital, which was no easy task given where we were. The most difficult part of the evening, however, came when we felt obliged to tell the doctor that O'Hara still had quite a bit of cocaine in his system, he having continued to do it even after he was shot. I didn't want to say anything at all, but W.H. Auden, who was also with us, was afraid that there might be some sort of unpleasant chemical interaction when the doctor offered O'Hara an anesthetic while he removed the lead.

About an hour after divulging our cocaine use, we were all arrested by the Ostholm County sheriff, who left a guard outside O'Hara's hospital room and took Peltier, Auden, and me to the Ostholm jail. It was not too alarming though, and was, in fact, a fairly interesting experience, since I had never really seen the various forms of local authority in that part of the world. We were released an hour later, after a senior judge on the state court of appeals (who happened to be Peltier's brother-in-law) placed a discreet call to the local district attorney. The night ended back at the hospital, where Peltier, Auden, and I did more cocaine on the sliding bedside table in O'Hara's hospital room as O'Hara quizzed us about the Ostholm penal system.

The Straw Hat Theater Company

In 1958 my brother Jean-Louis and I spent a weekend at the Pierbrooke camp on Osgood Pond, just after Jean-Louis had undergone a procedure at New York Hospital to address a long-standing health problem that involved calcium deposits in the tissues of his kidneys. Jean-Louis had always despised America so it was rare for us to be there at the same time, but the nephrologist he saw was a specialist in Jean-Louis's particular ailment and since I had recently acquired a sizeable maisonette on East 71st Street he was able at last to justify a visit to Manhattan.

Following the operation, the doctor insisted that Jean-Louis do nothing but rest for the next two months. He was also forbidden to fly – or even to take a boat back to Europe, for that matter – so he was unable to recuperate at our residence in Interlaken as he had wanted. Instead, he spent his days outside on my maisonette's upper terrace drinking diluted cognac, and also at my house in Southampton, drinking the same on the balcony attached to his room. He complained about his surroundings often, although this was something he did even in the rare moments of his life when his health was not troubling him, and at last I insisted that we ought to change our scenery, and I accepted the invitation from my friend Gustav Pierbrooke to visit his camp upstate.

It did take some amount of convincing to get Jean-Louis to agree to the trip. The thing that finally led him to relent, surprisingly, was a short description of Saranac Lake's *Straw Hat Theater Company* and the news that they were then putting on a production of This *Happy Breed.* Jean-Louis had always adored Noël Coward and he was also a passionate supporter of regional theater, financing numerous ventures including the Ökrokevattnet in Jena. As a young man he even spent a summer acting in the Gallardo Conjunto in Madrid, although, by his own admission, he was an abysmal actor.

We arrived at the Pierbrooke Camp mid-afternoon the day after I first made my proposition, and we were soon aboard Gustav's twenty-four-foot Williamson Special, drinking pastis and listening to

the violinist Carla Mellia, who had been staying there for the past month. For dinner that evening we ate a stew made from turtle and goose liver, which was served with polenta and a salad of watercress, beets, and raspberries (the cook was some kind of Italian by way of Ukraine). Afterwards, we all sat together in the greatroom above the boathouse, listening again to Carla play the violin and drinking a kind of grappa that the cook had purchased from a Milanese alcohol importer he knew in Buffalo.

And Jean-Louis enjoyed himself very much. He claimed that he'd been very down on the general quality of the American diet, but found that this had been the most healthy and rejuvenating meal of his journey, and he even agreed to go canoeing with me the next day, although ten minutes after we began our trip, he began complaining of back pain stemming from his scoliosis, and we returned to the Pierbrooke camp shortly afterwards. His good humor quickly returned, though, and not long after our return we went to town to see *The Straw Hat Theater Company*.

Sadly, and by from any possible perspective, the play was a disaster. Two of the principals were played by understudies (a local taxidermist and some kind of frozen vegetable heiress) and it appeared as though they had only just learned their parts that afternoon, in a state of anxiety and, likely, drunkenness. Much of the audience seemed to know the lines better than the actors did, and at intermission there was a general atmosphere of confusion and disappointment. During the intermission, however, a rumor also began to circulate (and was then confirmed by two other sources) that the reason for the loss of the regular actors was a murder and double-suicide involving Delphine Bremner, for whom the vegetable heiress substituted, and William Cohen, the other missing actor. Apparently Bremner and Cohen had murdered Bremner's husband the night before – stabbed him with a ceremonial kitchen knife their cook had been awarded by the mayor of his hometown in Hungary. Bremner's husband had discovered an affair they'd embarked on during the summer season – he'd found the two in bed together, although, as the story went, "in

bed together" was a merciful description of what the husband came upon – and after attacking Delphine with an end-table he'd grabbed hold of, the lovers dragged Bremner's husband to the kitchen and killed him with the Hungarian knife. The couple's suicide came the next day. They'd thought about their options, as the evidence suggested, and then, apparently making their decision, assembled a late lunch of shad roe, malt-cakes, preserved greengages, and a bottle of Conambert Armagnac. Following their meal, they got into one of the larger bathtubs of the camp and, after filling it, they immersed next to them a new Zenith radio receiver, electrocuting themselves instantly.

Needless to say, it was a surprising story, and after the catastrophic performance finally ended, I apologized several times to Jean-Louis. He was, after all, still recovering from surgery and probably quite exhausted. Jean-Louis, however, seemed entirely captivated by the performance and the stories he heard at intermission, as we later took seats on Gustav's 1907 Caterling Electric Launch for a late night cruise, he insisted that he'd entirely misjudged the United States and that perhaps he loved his current surroundings as much as any place he'd ever been. As I heard some months later, after Jean-Louis finally found his way back to Interlaken, he even made a very generous donation to *The Straw Hat Theater Company*. I never learned the exact amount of the gift, but when I saw Gustav at a reception for a sculptor at Stockholm's Arnheim Museum the following year, he said that the company had paid off its mortgage, hired an ambitious young artistic director from Boston, and constructed an elaborate bar and lounge in the front part of the building, which was named (after quite a bit of debate) *Le Jean-Louis*.

Wiltonshire

In the summer of 1961 the famous pianist Gregory Hellmann brought enough heroin to the Wiltonshire Camp to keep the 17 guests busy for an entire weekend. The crowd was hardly used to such an overt presence of drugs, but most were art patrons in New York City and believed themselves to be, at the very least, sophisticated and worldly. It is a testament to Hellmann's charisma that he convinced everyone at the camp to inject themselves, although a few of the guests had used heroin many times before. It is true that it had been nearly a month since I had touched any kind of narcotic, or any alcohol for that matter as I'd been in training to climb Mount Impagnaro in Ecuador. It occurred to me that weekend that perhaps I shouldn't jeopardize the hard work that had gone into my preparations, but the spirit of the camp demanded a kind of unified activity, and I soon found myself sitting at the large mahogany table in the center of the Wiltonshire Camp's magnificent dining room, rolling up my sleeves, and trying to explain to an elderly Boston socialite how a tourniquet functioned. The one unfortunate outcome of the weekend was that one particular woman (the art collector Allison Greaves) developed something of an addiction afterwards, although, ever mindful of the penetrating gaze of society, moved to Paris to pursue it. It lasted several years, and cost her, I have heard, her country residence in Litchfield, although this is mostly because of the men with whom she associated. She did finally manage to arrest the decline, as it were, and moved back to New York City by way of a treatment facility in Switzerland. And after several years, and several wise investments, she raised enough money to repurchase a large portion of her estate in Connecticut.

Prentice House

William Tashall owned a camp on Morrison Lake which had not only qualified for the New York State Historical Society's list of 74 Great Camps, but was generally believed to be one of the five or six finest camps in the entire Adirondack region. He bought the camp in 1954, which was unusual because camps like Prentice House rarely changed hands. In this case the family sold because their wealth had simply become too diluted by the prodigious patriarch's many children and grandchildren. What was more unusual about the sale, however, was that Tashall was a local (he lived in the town of Plattsburgh) and camps like Prentice House were almost always the domain of families whose fortunes originated in Manhattan and Boston. But Tashall was a kind of genius when it came to business, and after taking a degree in mechanical engineering from Rensselear Polytechnic he went on to found a precision die operation which supplied much of the aviation industry with equipment related to landing gear. His success is something of a case study in the profitable aspects of invasive government regulations, seeing that he and several legal associates lobbied the Department of Transportation tirelessly for stricter rules regarding safe landing procedures, only to come out at the end as the single company that could supply the materials necessary to comply with the new congressional legislation.

Just one year after the regulations were passed, Tashall was in a position to buy several great camps if he liked. And given the fact that he bought one of the most opulent camps in the region, local gossip concluded that he would follow this with other lavish and déclassé purchases often associated with newly-made fortunes. But Tashall was frugal in many respects, at least in terms of only buying things that he would use and that were of top-quality, and soon he became a generally-accepted member of Morrison Lake summer society, especially since he was the father of five sons of remarkable athletic and romantic talent.

These five sons, however, did not make up the entirety of Tashall's offspring, and it was also a fact that he had a mistress (named Helen)

with whom he had a sixth son – this son coming long after his first five were born. It was perhaps the only folly in Tashall's well-ordered life, although it is likely that he would resist describing it as such. In fact, by all accounts, he treated both his wife and his mistress as two of the great loves of his life, although it is fairly certain that his wife never knew about Helen. There was one time, however, when she came close to finding out. Tashall kept Helen and their son in an expansive house near Whiteface Mountain, and, in anticipation of an evening together, Helen prepared an elaborate dinner consisting of roasted venison back-strap, duck livers poached in apple cider, and turnips glazed with cognac. But after leaving the stove unattended to bathe Tashall's son, a carelessly placed dish-cloth caught fire, quickly igniting the kitchen and then the entire house. Both Helen and the boy died from smoke inhalation as they hid from the flames in the downstairs sauna.

Tashall arrived that evening as planned (looking forward to the venison he had been promised) only to find the house in ruins. The few firemen that were still on the scene extinguishing the smoldering debris said that there were, in fact, injuries, but they wouldn't elaborate because they needed to contact family members first. Tashall had always been a discreet man, but he finally took one of the junior officers aside, explained his situation, and soon after found himself weeping against the steering wheel of his Daimler SP250.

I heard this story in the central library at Prentice House nearly three weeks after the fire. Tashall and his wife were hosting a long-before scheduled weekend party that included, among other guests, William Holden and Keith Moon. O'Hara, Auden, and I were in attendance, and the three of us found ourselves alone with Tashall at four in the morning on the first night as he tearfully told his story, strangely insisting that surely men like us could understand his sorrow. His chief torment was having to pretend to those he loved that no catastrophe had occurred, because he was sure that his wife and five sons knew nothing of his second family. He had attended social event after social event, he said, including this, his own party,

in a state of bewildering but hidden grief, and openly wept as he told us of this anguish. It was a terrible story for the three of us to hear and we all told Tashall that none of us would be able to bear what he was now facing.

We left on Sunday, privately saying farewell to Tashall with offers of assistance if he ever needed it, although he looked so unhappy that it seemed unlikely that we would ever hear from him again. Two years later, however, I did get news of him from O'Hara when O'Hara arrived for a prolonged stay at my home in Cap Ferrat. Still stricken with grief, Tashall had at last abandoned his family, sold his company and Prentice House, and moved to Switzerland, where he began trading transportation stocks. O'Hara reported that his gains had been nearly 30 percent each of the previous years, but that he was still entirely inconsolable. All the same, he had taken a new mistress and kept her in a chalet in Les Chavannes and they were trying very hard to have a child together, which I took to be very promising news, as did O'Hara.

A History of the Classification

There are exactly 74 great camps in the Adirondacks, by the official count of the Historical Society of the State of New York. The term "Great Camp" had no official meaning when it was first coined, and was a phrase first used at the turn of the century simply as a way to talk about the large summer residences in the Adirondack region. When the Historical Society was founded, however, in the 1940s, Greta Hollister, the matriarch of the society and an owner of one of the 74 great camps, expressed a sort of horror about certain camps being called great when, clearly, they were not. She agreed that the government could hardly be in the business of telling "who could call what great." But she then asserted that it was possible, on an academic level, and under the auspices of the society, to establish a formal, recognized term that would have an "official scholarly meaning," as she put it, and she and a newly formed Great camps Committee set about determining what the criteria would be.

Among the criteria they finally decided upon were age, acreage, size of boat-house, and number of buildings. "It must be more of a compound than a cottage," Hollister said, "although it must still retain the spirit of cottage life." The other provision was that age was the *sine qua non* criteria, and that no new camp could ever be added to the roll of 74. It was possible to remove camps from the list, however, if the camp was divided, or buildings removed, or buildings were added that somehow violated the great camp aesthetic.

In all, the committee took three years to set the criteria and compile the list. Most of this time was spent addressing concerns of several of the oldest families in the Adirondacks, many of whom were disappointed by the provisional lists and were extremely vocal about this disappointment. But the committee carried on, despite the complaints.

When the list was finally finished, it was read at a formal ceremony in the State Assembly at Albany in 1951. Greta Hollister was the honored guest, and afterwards she hosted an unusually large banquet at Albany's Tomahawk Club.

Interestingly, nearly one year after the banquet, the Hollister family lost all their money when Greta's brother gambled their fortune on a consortium of silver mines in Mexico. Subsequent to the bankruptcy, they sold their camp, as well as their townhouse in Manhattan, with the plan of relocating (all of them) to a modest two-story house in Rhinebeck. Fortunately for Greta, however, she died of a stroke exactly two days before she had to leave her home and avoided the unbearable indignities of the move.

Kittsgate Meadows

In mid-July of 1959 news surfaced that Margaret and Sarah Arnett, a pair of sisters who owned a camp called Kittsgate Meadows on Lake Devere, were not sisters at all, but, instead, lovers. They had been coming to Kittsgate for years, and since they looked something like each other, and (in the course of normal conversation) announced themselves to be sisters, no one suspected that there was any lie in the arrangement. They also lived in Santa Fe during the colder parts of the year, which was unusual in the Adirondack region, and there was no one from that area who might know their real story.

The true nature of their arrangement was revealed, at a cocktail party at the Frick camp, located on the other side of Devere Lake from Kittsgate Meadows. Margaret and Sarah were in attendance with four female "cousins" visiting from New Mexico, when Sissy Lydon, the wife of industrialist Winston Lydon, burst into wild, drunken tears and attempted to stab Margaret with a Vauxhall-Regents silver serving fork. I was in attendance with O'Hara – we were staying at the Frick camp – and I witnessed most of the altercation, which, as Sissy was restrained, culminated in a fairly detailed set of recriminations. They stemmed, I understood fairly quickly, from the fact that Margaret and Sissy had been sleeping together for the previous month and Margaret had just told her that their relationship could go no further. It was quite a thing to watch the very graceful Sissy Lydon in such a state of violent drunkenness, staggering around with a large silver fork and calling Margaret "a whore" and saying that she "would pay for being such a whore." Sarah, however, was more shocked than anyone, seeing as she apparently had no idea that Margaret had been cheating on her. And in another instant, she stepped forward and punched Margaret in the stomach (with astonishing force, frankly) causing her to fall over in gasping convulsions. Sarah then echoed Sissy's argument that she was a whore and that she would certainly soon pay for it.

Eventually the Arnett "sisters" and their four self-described cousins left, as did most of the other guests. Sissy's husband, Winston, at this point was drunk beyond all sense, and still couldn't understand quite

what had happened. But after people left, Sissy began to calm down, and I soon found myself sitting with her as she nursed a glass of Scotch beneath an enormous stuffed lion's head in the Frick Camp's Hunt Room. Sissy looked to be on the verge of tears throughout the conversation, but she managed to restrain herself as she told me how devastated she was – both by the loss of Margaret and by how she had disgraced herself that evening. It was a compelling tale, and surely not one I'll ever forget.

Surprisingly, though, the incident continued into the next day, and its second part ended up being far more painful. As was evident at the cocktail party, Sarah had been oblivious to Margaret's cheating, and, upon confronting Margaret, learned that not only had there been countless other women in her life, but that Margaret was planning to leave her just as soon as she could make proper arrangements. It was a devastating blow, as it would be to anyone, and that evening, after discovering a suicide note, Margaret found Sarah's body hanging by the neck from the rafters of the Kittsgate boathouse. By this time, though, O'Hara were on our way back to New York City, and I only heard about the suicide when I bumped into Winston Lydon at the University Club many weeks later. He told the story with some detail, although as he progressed, it was clear to me that he still had no sense whatever that his wife had been mixed up in it all. "To think, those sisters were lesbians the whole time!" he said repeatedly, before at last excusing himself to go to dinner. He was on his way to the club's annual *Stag and Gauntlet* banquet, an occasion which, in fact, I also attended, although Winston and I did not sit together and didn't meet again for the entire evening. **f**

Jennifer Moore

THEN YOU

(1)

The sky grew bees, the clouds spilled a kind of honey.
I let myself be close to your mouth.

In the backyard of my life, rye grass
made a small pillow for our sleep; the apple bucket

filled on its own and snap peas offered me sugar.
There were bells where there weren't bells before.

I tucked a lock of hair behind your ear.
What I mean is, there are ways to avoid speaking.

(2)

What used to be a cloud curled up in the sky
and spread to our house; it's a piece of weather

that interrupts. Where the sun should have been,
the moon like a sling; by the door,

a bucket of wasps. Left alone, I hear my ears
repairing themselves, doorbells ringing in cartilage.

(3)

This room is where a famine forms
and apples no longer appear.

You ate me, mouth.
There are strands of my hair in your teeth now

and twenty hungers in this small bed.
Have you asked yourself what you want

to undergo? This room is where a famine forms
and you are that famine.

LINES WRITTEN ON A GRAIN OF RICE

If I am carried by fork to the tongue
I will be carried by tongue to the throat.

Your swallow will single me out:
I'll wait in a sea of saliva, then fold

into your windpipe's wall. If you cough,
I might multiply; blooming there,

I'm the thing that makes you guttural.
The tiniest microscope will reveal

I've embedded myself: a fuzzy burr,
the bit you can't swallow. Surgeons

can repair the heart through the wrist
and through the mouth remove

a kidney, but can they unfasten
the grain from your voice? I'd like

to stay, a sprouting tattoo asleep
in a house I could love. Inside

your cough, a million coughs
and me, a seed inside a smaller door.

DISAMBIGUATION: ON DESIRE

For arrest, see Cardiac or Crime. For the place
you'll be taken to, the little place of forgetting, see Oubliette.

See Migraine for a world that weighs inside the brain
and Bulldozer for a sleep which stays awake.

Hope, or half the bird's bone, is what you'll get
when you arrive at Wish (for the science

of hidden messages, see Stenography), and if wishing
doesn't work, try the ancient form of night prayer (Nocturne).

For downpour, see the bin full of Broken Umbrellas;
the wide sky that protects you, Rainshade

or Shadow; that which makes of your body a bull's eye,
Fusillade. As a last resort, see the one who knows

how to make iron move (Locksmith).
When you're tired of turning pages, he'll tell you love

is a Taiwanese river, an empty seat in Oklahoma, one
of several names for zero. See Heart, see Cardiac, see Arrest.

David Shields

HIP HOP: an excerpt from *Reality Hunger*

259

Genius borrows nobly.

260

Good poets borrow; great poets steal.

261

Art is theft.

262

Why is hip-hop stagnant right now, why is rock dead, why is the conventional novel moribund? Because they're ignoring the culture around them, where new, more exciting forms of narration and presentation and representation are being found (or rediscovered).

263

American R & B was enormously popular in Jamaica in the 1950s, but none of the local musicians could play it authentically. The music culture was based around DJs playing records at public dances; huge public-address systems were set up for these dances. DJs started acting more and more as taste editors, gaining reputations for the distinct type of record each of them would play. After a while, the act of playing the records also became an opportunity for style and artistic expression. They still used only one record player, but they developed special techniques of switching records in a split second to keep the music going seamlessly. The Jamaican music industry

started producing its own recordings and they, too, were utilized by these sound-system men, who would make recordings specifically for their own dances and wouldn't let anyone else have the record. Even when Jamaican musicians were available to play these public dances, the audience preferred the manipulation and combination of prerecorded material.

264

Sampling, the technique of taking a section of existing, recorded sound and placing it within an "original" composition, is a new way of doing something that's been done for a long time: creating with found objects. The rotation gets thick. The constraints get thin. The mix breaks free of the old associations. New contexts form from old. The script gets flipped.

265

In the 1960s, dub reggae—artists recording new parts over existing music, often adding new vocals and heavy tape echo—evolved straight out of the sound-system DJ movement, which was always eager to incorporate any new advancement in technology. A decade later, King Tubby and Lee "Scratch" Perry began deconstructing recorded music. Using extremely primitive, predigital hardware, they created what they called "versions." After Jamaica was granted its independence from Britain, more and more Jamaicans started coming to the United States. It was only natural that these immigrants would gravitate toward the ready-made black communities in America, especially New York City. Newly arriving Jamaicans brought with them the idea of the sound system DJ; filtered through an African-American perspective, the music moved in a different direction than it had in Jamaica. In many ways, hip-hop was born out of the Jamaican idea of turning record playing into an art form.

266

From when I first met King Tubby and see him work I knew there was a man with a great deal of potential. He could make music outta the mistakes people bring him, like every spoil is a style to King Tubby. He would drop out the bits where a man sing a wrong note and bring up another instrument or drop out everything for pure bass and drum riddim; then he'd bring back in the singing. You would never know there was a mistake there because he drop in and out of tracks like that's what he was always intending to do. He do it all live, too. He don't build it up bit by bit, him jus' leggo the tape and do his thing. You watch him, it like watching a conductor or a maestro at work. And of course every time it would be different. He always want to surprise people—I think he even want to surprise himself sometimes—and if he mix the same tune a dozen times, you will have twelve different version.

267

In the early 1970s, many technologies became much more widely available to the general public, including the portable PA system, the multichannel mixer, and the magnet-drive turntable made by the Technics company.

268

You don't need a band to do this stuff. You steal somebody else's beats, then—with just turntables and your own mouth—you mix and scratch the shit up to the level your own head is at.

269

Lil Wayne, Nine Inch Nails, Radiohead are hugely popular artists who recently circumvented the music business establishment by giving their music directly to their audience for free on the web. The middleman has been cut out; listeners get a behind-the-scenes peek at work-in-progress. Lil Wayne can put out whatever he pleases, whenever he pleases, and the music fan gets access to far more material than a

standard album release would provide. For all three of these acts, sales went up after they had first given away some, if not all, of the new release. Their fans rewarded them for creating this intimate link.

270

In 2008, Damien Hirst, the richest visual artist in the world, sold his work "directly" to buyers through a Sotheby's auction rather than through the time-honored method of galleries; it was the largest such sale ever: 287 lots, $200 million.

271

What's appropriation art?

It's when you steal but make a point of stealing, because by changing the context you change the connotation.

272

Reality-based art hijacks its material and doesn't apologize.

273

My taste for quotation, which I have always kept—why reproach me for it? People, in life, quote what pleases them. Therefore, in our work, we have the right to quote what pleases us.

274

Elaine Sturtevant, an American artist born in 1930 in Lakewood, OH, has achieved recognition for works that consist entirely of copies of other artists' works— Duchamp, Beuys, Warhol, Stella, Gonzalez-Torres. In each case, her decision to start copying an artist happened well before the artist achieved wide recognition. Nearly all of the artists she has chosen to copy are now considered major artists.

275

Looking for songs to sample and melodies to use—picking through the cultural scrap heap for something that appealed to me—I went

through the *Billboard* R & B charts and the Top 40 charts from the late 1940s until the present. With the aid of the search function on iTunes, I was able to hear a 20-second section of just about any song I wanted to hear. It was fascinating to watch popular music morph and mutate year by year, especially the R & B charts (black music has always been quicker to incorporate new songs and technologies). It was like watching stop-animation film footage, seeing this object (the main style of the time) grow and shrink like a plant, rise and fall, swell and collapse: swing music slimming down and splicing into gospel and making rhythm and blues, rhythm and blues slowing down into soul, soul hardening into funk, funk growing into disco, and disco collapsing under its own sheen as hip-hop hid in the underground. It wasn't until after I'd gone through the whole set of charts and reviewed my notes that I realized there was a trend in the songs I chose to sample. The number of songs I picked remained consistent through the fifties and sixties, but by the end of the seventies it dropped off. I'd picked only a few songs from the eighties and none from the nineties. Why do the songs of the late seventies and afterward hold very little appeal to me? Somewhere along the way, as recording technology got better and better each year, the music lost something; it became too perfect, too complete. Which is why so many artists have turned to using samples and other existing sources in various forms: in this rush of technological innovation, we've lost something along the way and are going back to try to find it, but we don't know what that thing is. Eating genetically altered, neon-orange bananas, we aren't getting what we need, and we know something is missing. We're clinging to anything that seems "real" or organic or authentic. We want rougher sounds, rougher images, raw footage, uncensored by high technology and the powers that be.

276

Rappers got the name MC (master of ceremonies) because they began as hosts at public dances, and as the form evolved, they began to take more and more liberties in what they said between and over

the records. Emceeing evolved into a channel for artistic expression—the voice of the host or the voice of the editor fusing with the selected program. The materials of art now include bigger clumps of cultural sediment. Everything in the history of media is fair game: artists painting pictures over road maps, placing photos within comic book landscapes, Kanye West splicing together his own song "Gold Digger" with Ray Charles's "I Got a Woman." It's exciting to deface things that we live among, whether what's defaced is an Otis Redding record or a brick wall.

277

The birth of jazz: musicians made new use of what was available—marching-band instruments left over from the Spanish-American War. Jazz also made use of different forms of music, from ragtime to blues and impressionistic classical music. Later on, jazz ran improvisatory riffs on showtune standards. Or think of a cover version: a composition that already exists is revisioned by another artist. The original composition still exists, and the new one dances on top of the old one, like an editor writing notes in the margins. Hip-hop and dance DJs take snatches of different songs that already exist in the culture and stitch them together to suit their own needs and moods. The folk tradition in action: finding new uses for things by selecting the parts that move you and discarding the rest.

278

Facebook is a crude personal essay machine. On everyone's page is a questionnaire, on which each person is asked to list personal info—everything from age to sexual status. A user can choose a soundtrack for his site, post pictures of himself, post downloads, and redesign the graphics however he wishes. Many people update their sites constantly and provide running commentary on their lives in the blog function that comes with a site. Millions of little advertisements for the self. I learn more about my younger brothers from reading their Facebook page than I ever have from actual conversations with them. They

write detailed accounts of their personalities and take everything very seriously (as many do) in a sincere attempt to communicate with others but also to control the presentation of their "image." Every site is a bent version of reality—too unsophisticated to be art but too self-conscious to be mere reportage. In this new landscape, everyone gets a channel. It seems to be the ultimate destiny of every medium to be dragged down to the lowest common denominator, which is at once democratic, liberating, exhilarating, bland, deafening, and confusing. User-made content is the new folk art. If an eighteen-year-old girl in Delaware can't be in a Hollywood movie, she takes pictures of herself dressed how she imagines a movie star would dress and posts them on her MySpace page. If the members of a Missoula bar band can never be on MTV, they borrow their boss's camcorder, make their own video, and post it on YouTube. Reality-based art by necessity. Me Media. Blogs, wikis, social networking sites (like MySpace), podcasts, vlogs, message boards, email groups, iMovie, Twitter, Flickr: more than a third of adult American internet users have created original content and posted it on the web. And it gets more sophisticated every day: chain-email gives way to the blog, which gives way to the vlog, which gives way to the webisode. The massively popular video games *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* not only turn once-static content into an interactive experience, but the newer versions have extra functions to let the players actually create new music with the building blocks the game provides. YouPorn, a free YouTube-like site on which users post their homemade porn, has become one of the most popular porn sites. Karaoke is another example of how reality-based art is winning at a grassroots level, among nonexperts. Karaoke is a generic version of live hip-hop: a vocalist singing over prerecorded music. Little skill or equipment is needed to allow people to perform, but no matter how bad or ill advised the karaoke singer is, he or she is using existing material for means of self-expression, and the audience accepts the fact that there is no band and the music is prerecorded. The song already exists in the culture and is known to all involved. What is also known is that the music itself has been rerecorded and is a bastardized

version of the original backing track. Everyone knows there is nothing original going on, but somehow the whole thing becomes original in its dizzying amateurness. What happens in karaoke is a disposable variation on something iconic in the culture, such as a big eighties hit like "Billie Jean." It's reality-based art nearly devoid of art. The only self-expression is the uniqueness of the particular rendition that the karaoke singer performs. And within the space of the original hit, anything goes: squealing, shouting, changing lyrics, wishing friends happy birthday—whatever the singer chooses to do with his three minutes of spotlight. For some it's just a gag, but others take it very seriously. There's a communal feeling between audience and singer, because they're interchangeable.

279

From age thirteen to twenty-four I was in a four-piece rock band (same model as the Beatles through Nirvana). I came to Seattle at eighteen, playing that form of music, but at some point I felt there was nothing else—nothing more—to be done with the standard rock format. The band broke up, and I had a year to float around artistically. The fusion of hip-hop techniques and rock 'n' roll techniques seemed to be much more exciting. When I came out with the new sound, many of my old friends in rock bands thought I was selling out. It was a tough jump to make. Many musicians said that if I was using loops of other recordings, I was unoriginal or untalented or hiding behind technology. There was definitely a line in the sand, and when I crossed it, there was no returning to traditional rock.

280

Language is a city, to the building of which every human being has brought a stone, yet each of us is no more to be credited with the grand result than the acaleph which adds a cell to the coral reef that is the basis of the continent.

281

Just as the letters of our language are metaphors for specific sounds, and words are metaphors for specific ideas, shards of the culture itself now form a kind of language that most everyone knows how to speak. Artists don't have to spell things out; it's much faster to go straight to the existing material—film footage, library research, wet newspapers, vinyl records, etc. It's the artist's job to mix (edit) the fragments together and, if needed, generate original fragments to fill in the gaps. For example, when Danger Mouse's *The Grey Album* was released in 2004, listeners heard the Beatles chopped up and re-presented underneath the contemporary rapper Jay-Z's vocals. The album simultaneously reflected back to the Beatles, to Jay-Z's 2003 *The Black Album* (from which the vocals were taken), and to the artistic tastes of DJ Danger Mouse, who made the new piece of art. The songs work as songs, but they also work as history lessons. Another layer was added by the fact that it's illegal to use the Beatles for sampling. Capitol Records went to court to silence the album, but it was already too far out into the culture to be stopped. Beyond the use of old media to make a new project, there was the added benefit of a "plot line" on top of the music (underground art vs. corporate empire). This combination led to record-setting free downloads.

282

The DJ known as Girl Talk is taking sampling to its inevitable extreme. He runs Lil Wayne over Nirvana, Elton John over The Notorious B.I.G. Sometimes the juxtaposition is fantastic; usually it's not. The novelty wears thin very quickly. Anyone can throw together two random things and call it collage art.

283

When musical artists began using existing recordings as a medium of creative expression, they created a new subclass of musicians. An artist making use of samples, while going by a variety of names, is, essentially, a creative editor, presenting selections by other artists in a

new context and adding notes of his own. A literary equivalent would be along the lines of "creative translation," such as Ezra Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, in which Pound picked through the elegies of Propertius, translated them, cut them up, and reassembled them in a fashion he deemed entertaining and relevant. Examples from other forms: Thelonius Monk Plays Duke Ellington, in which Monk takes great liberties with Ellington's songbook. Lichtenstein's appropriation of comic book art. Picasso's use of newsprint, among other media, in, say, *Composition with Fruit, Guitar, and Glass. Paul's Boutique:* The Beastie Boys, Dust Brothers, and Mario Caldato, Jr., sample from more than 100 sources, including Led Zeppelin, the Beatles, James Brown, and Sly & the Family Stone. Steve Reich's "Different Trains," which incorporates audio recordings about train travel by Holocaust survivors and a Pullman porter. Musique Concrete, for instance, John Cage's "Imaginary Landscape No. 4," written for 12 radios, each played by 2 people (one to tune the channel and one to control volume and timbre). A conductor controls the tempo; the audience hears whatever is on the radio in that city on that day. Soviet-era composer Sofia Gubaidulina's "Offertium," which mutates themes from Bach's "Musical Offering" until they're beyond recognition. In "Three Variations on the Canon in D Major by Johann Pachelbel," Brian Eno bends and twists Pachelbel. The nineteenth century Christian hymn "Nearer My God to Thee" was "put together" by Eliza Flower, whose sister, Sarah Flower Adams, had written the lyrics in the form of a poem. Eliza set Sarah's poem to the music of Lowell Mason's "Bethany." Over the years, it's been set to other tunes as well. Eliza Flowers never gets credit for writing the song: credit going only to Adams for the lyrics and Mason for the music, although it was Flowers who "edited" the two together.

284

In hip-hop, the mimetic function has been eclipsed to some extent by manipulation of the original (the "real thing"): theft without apology—conscious, self-conscious, conspicuous appropriation.

285

Graffiti artists use the stuff of everyday life as their canvas—walls, dumpsters, buses. A stylized representation is placed on an everyday object. In visual art, as in other media, artists take unfiltered pieces of their surroundings and use them for their own means.

286

In that slot called data, the reality is sliced in—the junk-shop find, thrift-store clothes, the snippet of James Brown, the stolen paragraph from Proust, etc.

287

In hip-hop, "realness" is something to have and express, but not question. Realness is sacred. Realness is taboo. Realness refers to a life defined by violence, drugs, cutthroat capitalism, etc.—a life not unfamiliar to superstar rappers like Game (who has been shot five times) and 50 Cent (nine times) when their crews shoot at each other. "I got you stuck off the realness," Prodigy of Mobb Deep raps in the song "Shook Ones Pt. II," probably the most widely quoted use of the term. "We be the infamous / you heard of us / official Queensbridge murderers." It's Mobb Deep's realness that makes you a "shook one"; it's Prodigy's realness that got you stuck. This leads to the term's larger meaning, the meaning Cormega takes, for example, in titling his debut album *The Realness*. There's no title track to explain the term. It's posted at the front of the album like an emblem representing all that follows. The same for Group Home's song "The Realness," in which DJ Premier samples "Shook Ones Pt. II" to isolate the words "the realness" and "comes equipped." Melachi ends his verse by saying he "comes equipped with that Brainsick shit," referring to the guest rappers from the Brainsick Mob, but that's all we know about these terms. There's no definition of realness, only a declaration that they're equipped with it. In the spoken-word introduction to his song "Look In My Eyes," Obie Trice says, "Every man determines his definition of realness, what's real to him." Realness is not reality, something

that can be defined or identified. Reality is what is imposed on you; realness is what you impose back. Reality is something you could question; realness is beyond all doubt.

288

Cultural and commercial languages invade us 24/7. That slogan I just heard on the TV commercial: I can't get it out of my head. That melody from the theme song to that syndicated sitcom that arrives at seven every night: we're colonized by this stuff. It invades our lives and our lexicon. This might be of no consequence to the average media consumer, but it spells trouble for the artist. There is now a slogan, a melody, a raw building block of art living in his brain that he doesn't own and can't use.

289

The evolution of copyright law has effectively stunted the development of sampling, thereby protecting the creative property of artists but obstructing the natural evolution of human creativity, which has always possessed cannibalistic tendencies. With copyright laws making the sampling of popular music virtually impossible, a new technique has evolved in which recordings are made that mimic the recordings that the artists would like to sample. These mimic recordings—not nearly as satisfying as sampling the original record—are then sampled and looped in the same way that the original would have been. We don't want a mimic of a piece of music, though; we want the actual piece of music presented through a new lens. Replication isn't reproduction. The copy transcends the original. The original is nothing but a collection of previous cultural movements. All of culture is an appropriation game.

290

People are always talking about originality, but what do they mean? As soon as we are born, the world begins to work upon us, and this goes on to the end. What can we call our own except energy,

strength, and will? If I could give an account of all that I owe to great predecessors and contemporaries, there would be but a small balance in my favor.

291

A great man quotes bravely and will not draw on his invention when his memory serves him with a word as good. What he quotes, he fills with his own voice and humor, and the whole cyclopedia of his table talk is presently believed to be his own.

292

Mixtapes are used—as they've traditionally been used—to advertise and promote a new record, but they're also becoming a forum for illegal music: music that has uncleared samples and thus can't be released through proper channels. Much more than a collection of songs, mixtapes have a host who introduces the programs and talks in between songs as if the listener were at a live show. A DJ selects the music and mixes many different songs together into new pieces. Many times the singers from the selected songs will customize the song and add new twists unique to that particular mixtape. The new vocals are often extremely self-reflexive, mentioning the mixtape itself and how it was made. In the majority of mixtapes I've heard, the original songs are re-presented in unique new ways, but record labels then bust their own promotional operatives. Which is similar, in a sense, to the situation regarding file sharing: the same companies complaining about downloading are the companies making the machines that do the downloading (e.g., Sony). Instead of prosecuting people who have an interest in their product, these companies could try to figure out how to use this consumer interest to their advantage. Mass-media producers are wasting their time trying to hold the dam together, because it broke several years ago. The technology to duplicate, copy, and sample mass-produced media isn't going away. What do we do with "outlaw" works of art? If I'm burning copies of *Titanic* and selling them as supposedly real copies of the movie, that seems illegal, but

if I use elements of *Titanic* in a *Tarnation*-style film, that doesn't seem wrong to me. I think it should be a question of intent. However, both cases are wrong in the eyes of the law.

293

Chris Moukarbel, who was sued by Paramount Pictures over a twelve-minute video based on a bootleg Oliver Stone film script about 9/11, had another video in a New York gallery exhibition that sought to marry politics and art. This one was created from film shot in the process of making the video that led to the lawsuit. Paramount filed suit in United States District Court in Washington, saying that Mr. Moukarbel's original video, *World Trade Center 2006*, infringed on the copyright of the screenplay for Mr. Stone's $60 million film *World Trade Center*. "I'm interested in memorial and the way Hollywood represents historical events," Mr. Moukarbel said in an interview a month before the Paramount movie was released. "Through their access and budget, they're able to affect a lot of people's ideas about an event and also affect policy. I was deliberately using their script and preempting their release to make a statement about power."

294

The progress of artistic growth in many media is being hindered, like those poor pine trees in alpine zones able to grow only a few weeks each year. For writers and artists who came of age amid mountains and mountains of cultural artifacts and debris: all of this is part of their lives, but much of it is off-limits for artistic expression because someone "owns" it.

295

Shepard Fairey, borrowing liberally from traditions of urban art and the propaganda poster, took an image off Google and transformed it into a major icon of the 2008 campaign. The image (Obama, atop the word HOPE, looking skyward and awash in red-white-and-blue) condensed the feeling of the Obama campaign into a single visual

statement. It wasn't until after the election that the Associated Press realized that it owned the copyright to one of the photos from which Fairey worked. Mannie Garcia, the photographer who took the photo, had no idea it was his work until it was pointed out to him. He later claimed that it was he who actually owned the copyright. This didn't stop the Associated Press from demanding a large sum of money in "damages" for the now famous photo, which—until very recently—it didn't know it had and in fact may not own the copyright to. In 2009, backed by Stanford University's Fair Use Project, Fairey countersued the AP. When Fairey later acknowledged that he had lied about which image he'd used as the basis for his poster, Fairey's attorneys withdrew from the case. Lawrence Lessig, the director of the Edmond J. Safra Foundation Center at Harvard, who had been advising Fairey but not representing him, said that the significant issue in fair use cases is whether the image has been transformed from the original; if it has been "fundamentally transformed," he said, it is protected by copyright law.

296

Most of the passages in this book are taken from other sources. Nearly every passage I've clipped I've also revised, at least a little—for the sake of compression, consistency, or whim. You mix and scratch the shit up to the level your own head is at . . .

297

You'll notice that he doesn't assert ownership over his ideas. He's in some kind of Artaudian condition where all the ideas are unoriginated and unsourced; that's how he can claim anybody else's ideas as his own. Really all he wants to do is acquire everyone's inner life.

298

Stolen property is the soul. Take them out of this book, for instance: you might as well take the book along with them; one cold

eternal winter would reign in every page of it. Restore them to the writer: he steps forth like a bridegroom.

299

He dedicated his scruples and his sleepless nights to repeating an already extant book in an alien tongue.

300

The recombinant (the bootleg, the remix, the mash-up) has become the characteristic pivot at the turn of our two centuries. We live at a peculiar juncture, one in which the CD (an object) and the recombinant (a process) still, however briefly, coexist. There seems little doubt, though, as to the direction things are going. The recombinant is manifest in forms as diverse as Alan Moore's graphic novel *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, machinima generated with game engines (*Quake, Halo, World of Warcraft*), Dean Scream remixes, genre-warping fan fiction from the universes of *Star Trek* or *Buffy*, the JarJar-less *Phantom Edit*, brand-hybrid athletic shoes, and Japanese collectibles rescued from anonymity by custom paint jobs. We seldom legislate new technologies into being. They emerge, and we plunge with them into whatever vortices of changes they generate. We legislate after the fact, in a perpetual game of catch-up, as best we can, while our new technologies redefine us—as surely and perhaps as terribly as we've been redefined by broadcast television. **f**

Albert Abonado

THE OPPOSITE OF VOLCANO

Illness causes her to swell with water so a person like me can't help
but assume the following:

A woman is floating inside of another woman.
She must sleep to the sound of herself sloshing inside herself.

I haven't determined what could cause one
to recede into another since I've misplaced my chart

of the moon and I've forgotten how to judge
the barometric pressure of a person so I can't claim

which relieves her joints and stops her from thinking about oars
whenever she butterflies a chicken breast or holds

her son's fingers to tell him "No."
Is there a polite way to tell her "You are the ocean"?

Another way of looking at her:
If I speak to the one floating inside, she won't stop

talking about her favorite island, the one made
of silk, and she believes the morning is a species of pineapple.

If I speak to the one outside she will describe the
small volcano residing inside her stomach,

although she claims she is the opposite of volcano,
and if a person like me comes too close to her, he will drown.

Bryan Narendorf

PRIMER

Because the earth turns,
and I will be an old
man before you are
a young woman I have dreamed
you a girl because
I have already seen
your heart flare in its counting,
I want to build for you
a book of true things.
Between people, speech
can be hard and silent
like the winter sun, and truth
is a language pure as music
but more difficult. It accrues
imperfectly, a curled
spiraling shell; the pages
of its lexicon can want
for entire conjugations
and the words that taste.
But I am flawed and will not
manage the book. Its pages
stay loose and disordered.
Instead,
I will make us a primer
of incidentals, small
enough to hang from a cord

around your neck. I will sew
room into it to grow
between its covers, a space
for your own remembering.
Here is a beginning:
my brother was almost named
Seth; writing this, it is dark
the icicles are glowing
and look like glue holding
the gutter to the roof.
When I came to Ohio, my father
said I was returning home.
Sometimes, the squirrels fall out
of the trees into the yard;
three is also a perfect number.

Tara Bray

FIRST SPRING IN MICHIGAN

My baby's scream, like the scratch of wire
in the sweet of the arm, marked the winter trail
of mothering, where we huddled in a blue-gray room,
survived the one-eyed cold.
Now the sky is for once cloud-clean.
Shadows of mallards slash across the yard,
darken specks of violet and dandelion blur.
At last I'm scratched by sun, nearly stunned,
one with the scrape of windows flung up.

Baby, you can come too – out of the burrowing
into the babbling light, where a crocus rises from mud
after an onslaught of rain, a thousand chills.
We'll soon live in the July of stink and rot,
flies, slurp, locked down despair. We made you where
the birds find refuge, in bright, Nevada air,
where once we were one, swollen, thrust. We danced
the naked lakes, burned in sun, sought the fragile
shade of juniper. For your small sake, sleeping one,
I'll ditch my desert lust, be done,
ask the gods to nail me to the world of making do.

David McGlynn

DISCIPLES

After seventeen hours on the plane, a taxi ride from the airport to a downtown hostel, and breakfast the next morning in the tiny lobby café, I realized it had been two days since I'd had a conversation that didn't involve an exchange of money. It was a colorless morning, and my body, fifteen hours off schedule, didn't know whether to wake up or shut down. None of the people passing through the Brisbane city center knew me; if I disappeared and my picture showed up on the news, no one would remember seeing me. I walked over to the bus station, farther on foot than the map suggested, and when I slumped off my backpack I'd sweated through my T-shirt. The cotton sucked against my back and in twin stripes down my shoulders. I got in line.

Two other backpackers with masks and snorkels clipped to the outside of their packs stood in line ahead of me. They bought tickets to Cairns, the launching point for excursions to the Great Barrier Reef. The woman between us bought a ticket to Grafton, in the other direction. The backpackers stepped aside to shuffle their change back into their wallets, and as I approached the counter they eyed me with a mixture of curiosity and expectation, as if waiting for me to join them. I looked like a backpacker, but I wasn't. I looked like I was free to meander my way around this bat-shaped continent, to go where I pleased, but I wasn't. I was a missionary, a title I hadn't expected and was still getting used to.

In fact, after four years as a member of an evangelical campus fellowship, I'd wanted a break from my religious life. I didn't want out, I just wanted a break. I was tired of Tuesday night Bible studies.

I was tired of spending my spring breaks rebuilding orphanages in Mexico. I was tired of being held accountable. I wanted to camp on the beach, and drink Coronas, and travel. More than anything else, I wanted to travel—meandering though ancient cities, or modern cities built on ancient ground, drinking late in the pubs and coffee shops, recording everything I observed in the leather-bound journal that would become my first novel. I spent my senior year applying for fellowships to study overseas after graduation, several in England and several more in Australia. But over the course of several rainy weeks in December and January I received in the mail a series of featherweight envelopes, each containing a single-page form letter letting me know the awards had gone to someone else. I had energy and ambition to burn and I didn't know what to do next. In May, when I received a call inviting me to join a team of missionaries heading to Australia for the summer, I took it as a sign from God. Maybe what I needed wasn't a retreat from faith, but a bolder declaration of it, to give myself over to it once and for all. "The ministry in Australia needs all the help it can get," the team leader told me on the phone. "If the summer goes well, maybe you'll consider going back for a year." All the things I'd dreamed about last fall seemed to be returning to me.

The team was staying at a camp on the Sunshine Coast, an hour and a half north of Brisbane, planning the summer's activities and getting to know each other. Graduation had delayed my departure, and rather than meet the team in Los Angeles to fly with them to Brisbane, I'd flown alone. I knew no one either way. For a second, I considered buying a ticket to the reef, too. I had $3,500 in my pocket, money I was supposed to turn over to the team leader upon my arrival. It would be close to $6,000 Australian if I exchanged it, enough to travel on for a while. The clerk tapped his fingernails on the metal counter behind the glass, and I bought my ticket to meet the team. I nodded at the backpackers as I passed by, slung my pack into the bus's luggage hold.

The sun popped out as soon as we left the city, and before long I was watching the South Pacific flash and recede between the high-

rise condominium towers as the road swept against and away from the coast. Green hills leapt up and the trees appeared upside down, their winter branches tangled up like roots. My backpack on the seat beside me fell against my shoulder or the window with every turn, and my emotions began to pitch back and forth, alternately eager and anxious. When the bus pulled to my stop, nothing more than a metal bench and a flag beside the highway, the sky was wind-swept and blue, and everyone on the team, all fifteen of them, stood shoulder to shoulder, holding up a twelve-foot strip of butcher paper that read, "G'DAY DAVE!"

I made my way toward the front of the bus. The driver asked, "Are you Dave?"

"Yes."

"Well, then," he said. "G'day."

"Thanks."

The team cheered when I stepped off the bus. The bus pulled away and we stood in the road shaking hands and exchanging names: Eric and Lisa, the leaders, and Pat and Joanie and Steve and Amber and Rusty and Annie and Jeff and Kathy and Ben and Tanya and Josh and Emily and Hannah. "David," I said, over and over, until my hand was slick and tight. "Or Dave," I said, looking at the sign. "Dave is fine. Either way. It doesn't matter."

"You're finally here!" Joanie said. She wore dark sunglasses, a hooded sweatshirt.

"We're all together now," Eric said, lean, tan, shirtless. Pat took my pack to carry it, and we headed toward the beach.

After two days on the coast, we moved down to Toowong, fifteen minutes by bus from central Brisbane. We headquartered in an old holiday lodge: two little apartments upstairs and a larger one, with a good-sized living room and kitchen, downstairs. During the summer months, the place probably exuded a certain tropical charm, the green-and-brown plaidwork in the wallpaper faintly reminiscent of Pacific Island teakwood, the elongated conical light fixture hanging

from the ceiling like an enormous beehive. In the winter, the beaches deserted and the pool behind the lodge too cold for swimming, the entire compound felt antiquated, the jacaranda in the courtyard untended, the oven and refrigerator rusty and unreliable, the clothes washer nothing more than a basin with a hose. But we had the place to ourselves, and after a day or two we even grew fond of the décor and began to bestow adjectives upon it. "Discoteca," Tanya said. "Groovy."

"Pimp," Jeff said. "Totally pimp."

Eric and Lisa lived in the upstairs studio, next door to the women's apartment, a big one-bedroom with a narrow sitting area attached to the front. The women's beds were arranged barracks-style in the big room, their twin mattresses lined up on the floor in two parallel rows and decorated with pillowcases brought from home. Porcelain cups from the kitchen were commandeered to hold necklaces and earring backings, bric-a-brac of hairspray canisters and lotion bottles and nail polish. In the mornings I woke to the sound of water running above me as the first of the women rose to shower.

I was an odd fit. Instead of the Bible, I read Rilke's *Duino Elegies* at the kitchen table. My T-shirts were plain gray, rather than screened with Quicksilver or Billabong logos, my jeans were regular-fit Levis. I had a tendency to swear. The words spilled out of my mouth before I could catch them, and each one received a piercing look of disbelief from someone on the team. "Sorry," I said, and rapped my knuckles against my skull.

In private, Steve confessed: "When I surf, I cuss up a storm. In my book, the rules don't apply at sea." So I worked to hold my tongue unless I was in the water.

Our bright T-shirts and flip-flops helped mask our missionary purpose. We called Bible study "small group" and the weekly meeting "The Gathering." The Australian branch of the ministry organization was called Life Ministries, short for "Lay Institute for Evangelism," and the tables we erected at the universities displayed signs that simply read, "Student Life." An unsuspecting first-year student could approach us thinking we were a desk for campus

activities, and we hoped for precisely such a mistake. Such a bending of language was the manifestation of the larger evangelical impulse to make Christianity more contemporary and appealing, unafraid of lingo and rock music and computers, embracing the forms of modern culture while simultaneously dissenting from its values. The contradiction bothered me, for it seemed to promise what it could give and ignore the fact that for two-thousand years Christians have not sought to mimic the secular world, but to stand apart from it. Calling a Bible study a small group rather than a Bible study sounded a little like trickery. However, we operated on the principle that though some people knew nothing about Jesus, most knew enough to have developed assumptions about what it meant to be a Christian, and to be scared off by the presence of missionaries, by the idea of answering the door to a person holding a Bible in his hands. So we moved in secret, festooned in our emblazoned surfer wear, jamming to mainstream music, our hair sculpted with gel, convinced we were here to be cool, to be attractive, to infiltrate and affect.

Unlike many Christian groups who worked in foreign countries, we did not come under the pretense of service or charity. We were not there to build homes or clothe and shelter the weak. We were there to spread the Word. Our second night in Toowong, Eric passed around the tract we would use on campus. It was the Australian version of the tract the ministry organization used in America, and was titled *Knowing God Personally*. In our addiction to acronyms and coded language, we immediately took to calling it the KGP.

We were divided into three teams and dispatched to campuses in different sections of Brisbane. While the other two teams went to the satellite campuses in the remote Brisbane suburbs, I was relieved to be on the team assigned to the flagship campus of the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), nested on the south end of downtown against the Brisbane River. Each morning Steve, Amber, Hannah, Josh and I set out for campus with our pockets and backpacks stuffed with KGPs rubber-banded together in stacks of fifty. We rode the bus into the city, climbed the stairs from the underground depot and emerged

onto the Queen Street Arcade, cobblestoned and populated with locals and tourists, T-shirt shops and fancy boutiques, noodle stands, a big Billabong store wafting the aroma of rubber and surf wax from its double doors. Some days an Aboriginal man in Levis striped his face and chest with whitewash and sat cross-legged humming into a six-foot, hand-carved didgeridoo. After Queen Street, we crossed into the angular grid of financial towers and either cut across the Botanic Gardens or headed down George Street past the Parliament House. Outside the campus gates was a deconsecrated Anglican church now operating as a pancake restaurant. I snapped a photograph of the vinyl banner suspended from the red-brick façade. I could use the shot in the support letter I'd write to raise money when I returned for the year-long mission. It was evidence that Christianity in Australia was in stark decline; Churches were turning into storefronts rather than the other way around.

Steve and Josh and Hannah walked up to people as though it was second nature, but I stood on the edge of my messianic future as though standing beside a swimming pool before a race. My mouth was dry, and I yawned to settle my pounding heart. I approached with a pen squeezed between my fingers, said I was polling students about their spiritual beliefs and the influence of religion on campus—would they mind answering a few questions? In my sunglasses and backpack I looked like a student and the surveys were harmless so most people said okay. My questions were brief and open-ended: "What's your religious background?"; "What's your conception of heaven?"; "If you died today, do you know what would happen?" I glanced around the terrace at the students filing toward the Student Centre for lunch. I told myself we looked like two people sitting in the sun having a conversation. We looked normal. This conversation was normal. Evangelism was normal.

Reunited in Toowong at the end of the day, we cooked spaghetti in a cauldron-sized pot and sat around the table or on the couch with our plates balanced on our knees. After dinner we prayed and sang. Rusty and Jeff both played the guitar. They played the same praise

songs we sang during my weekly fellowship meetings, which I could sing along with, and Christian rock songs that I did not know and had to sit and listen to in silence. Then the devotional was finished, the guitars were back in their cases and the lights were turned up, and for the rest of the night we played Mao and Hearts and told stories.

Once stories were being told, it was hard for me not to join in, and I quickly made the mistake of believing that this kind of talk, this nighttime banter, was different from the talk that went on during the day, and not bound by the same parameters of decorum. My hands flapped in the air as I told about leaping naked from the three-meter diving board in broad daylight and streaking the beach in Mexico and spotting Bigfoot in the Sequoia National Forest after drinking too much beer. All tame college stories, but sometimes I took it too far. One night, a few of us were sitting on the sofa remembering our favorite skits from *Saturday Night Live*. I launched into a full-scale impersonation of "The Ladies Man," the bawdy radio therapist who gives his callers dubious advice about spicing up their sex lives. The skit was a favorite among my roommates, and now I leaned on an elbow and said to Pat, "You know, nothing says romance like two naked wet ladies humpin'." Though childish and crass, the line was so often repeated in my apartment whenever one of us had a date that it became a fixture in our vocabulary of taunts and teases. Tonight I looked up to find the room paralyzed in silence, every eyebrow hanging. Steve laughed, but stopped when Emily stomped out of the living room. He clamped his mouth closed and stared at the floor. I was just starting to feel like I belonged.

In my awkwardness, I gravitated toward Josh, the other misfit on the team. An art student from Chicago, he was one of the two not from California. His hair was so blond and short that from a distance he looked bald, and his head bobbed around atop his elongated neck as though he was missing vertebrae. He laughed in a way I imagined a horse laughing, all teeth and gums. His dark navy workpants and matching jacket made him look more like a sanitation worker than

either an art student or a missionary. Like me, he resisted the tracts the missionary organization gave us to use in the process of sharing our faiths. Unlike me, he shared his faith with everyone he met.

Josh kept an eye out for anyone riding the bus alone. For me, the fifteen-minute descent into Brisbane was a time to talk, a chance to dream. I studied the storefronts and watched the road signs flick by and practiced pronouncing the vowel-heavy Aboriginal words. Baroona, Mount Coot Tha, Warrawee. Josh strode up to any solitary rider and asked to sit down, even if the rest of the bus was vacant. We climbed aboard one morning and saw a homely woman, heavyset and plain, sitting with her ear and temple against the window. Threads of brown hair clung to her cheek. The bus was otherwise empty. Josh pretended not to know the rest of us as he shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and stomped to the last row. I sat near the front with my back to the window where I could look back without appearing to watch. Each time the bus stopped Josh moved one seat forward. When I glanced back, he was in the seat behind the woman with his elbows hanging over her seat. One more stop, and he swung around to sit beside her, the tract in his palm. The woman leaned her head toward his, and from the front they looked like a couple gazing down together at a map of the city. Josh's eyes pendulated from his lap to the woman's ear, his lips almost appeared to brush her lobe.

Two stops before Queen Street, the woman pulled the cord. She stood and squeezed past Josh's knees with her stomach pressed against the seat back. Josh stood to let her pass and then followed her off, not even a sideways glance toward the rest of us. None of us thought to follow him until the bus was in motion. Hannah pulled the cord and we scrambled off at the next stop. Josh was on the corner beneath the blinking Don't Walk hand, face to face with the woman, right where we'd left him. The woman had her back to the building. A red Australia Post truck rambled past, puffing out oily black clouds of diesel exhaust. The woman stepped toward the corner and Josh took hold of her sleeve. Hannah gasped. Josh's hand on the woman's

changed the parameters of the situation. She now had the right to scream for help. "Should we do something?" I asked.

Steve, Hannah and Amber shrugged. None of us had been in this situation before.

Josh was shaking his free hand, his palm upturned and open, as though measuring the weight of a melon. Despite his fever and zealousy, he didn't look menacing. He looked earnest. His arm fell to his side and he and the woman stood immobilized. She didn't run away. Josh pressed the tract into her hand, extracted a pen from his jacket pocket, and wrote on the cover. He left her standing there and walked toward us. The woman slipped around the corner and disappeared.

Josh restrained his smile until he reached us. By then he couldn't resist.

"You're kidding," Steve said. "She said yes?"

Josh nodded.

"Prayed the prayer and everything?"

Josh nodded again, his big bobble-headed nod. "I gave her our phone number in case she wants to talk. I hope Eric won't mind."

"No way," Hannah said. She kicked her flip-flop against the sidewalk. "Amazing."

"God did it," Josh said. "Not me."

God worked through Josh more times than I could count. It happened more than once on the bus, and larking along Queen Street in the late afternoon, and in the Thomas Cook where we cashed our traveler's checks. I'd stop to look in a shop window and when I turned around Josh would have struck up a conversation with a stranger. He wasn't the only one. Each night other members recounted the men and women who made decisions to follow Christ. The Gathering grew. Six women sardined together on a couch built for three, and dozens more filled in the floor and stood against the walls and book cases and in the hallway leading to the toilet and in the front doorway, hanging open to let in the winter air and the windows fogged with moisture. My teammates stood with the students they invited, while I helped

mix the punch into pitchers and carried the plates of Anzac biscuits to the living room. I mingled among the newcomers and introduced myself. No one was here because of me. Summer was half over, and despite the dozens of times I'd shared my faith, the hundreds of tracts I'd passed out, I'd yet to save a single soul.

Friday night we dressed in khakis and collared shirts, the women in glittered make-up and dresses snugged beneath their armpits, and rode the bus into the city. Eric and Lisa stayed behind. Eric had spent the last two days sequestered upstairs with the flu, and our going out was a favor to them—a few hours without the murmur of conversation and guitar strings vibrating through the floor. The bus's long descent into the sparkling city felt like a rollercoaster on a nosedive, the steep plunge you have to ratchet up to reach. Joanie pulled a black Vivitar from her purse and we leaned into the aisles to pose, then leapt up to make like we were going to jump through the windows. The driver shouted for us to bloody sit down and when we settled back into the seats Hannah leaned against my shoulder. For an instant she felt like my girlfriend. It was a night when I was eager to be leaned against.

Queen Street and the Myer Centre were by now no longer tantalizing, and when we hopped down from the bus we hurried away into the dark. We didn't have a destination.

We were alone on the street, in groups of two and three strung out over the length of an entire block. We moved like a school of fish. Amber at the front made a turn and the rest of us followed. On Caxton Street we passed by an Irish bar, Kitty O'Shea's, the windows covered with a black film thick enough for only the neon beer signs and stage lights to shine mutedly through. Music pounded through the glass and the heavy oak door. The bouncer pulled on the door's brass handle and the music screamed out like a wild animal let out of a cage, a gust of sordid funk and smoke.

The bar was dressed-up to simulate old-world Ireland—Guinness and Murphy's street lamps hanging above the bar, the cash register tarnished brass, distressed road signs measuring the distance to

Kilkenny and Wexford and Galway, as though it was not so far, as though we were not two oceans away. But it also felt like Australia: men in T-shirts and oxfords stood on both sides of narrow counters wide enough for a pint and an elbow, facing one another like they were squaring off to arm wrestle. A squadron of taps stood at attention behind the bar rail. The bartenders worked the levers like they were playing a cathedral organ, a practiced yet hurried rhythm, and along the rail sudsy foam, Fourex and Powers and Guinness, cascaded down the curves of the pints, leaving oily haloes on the counter and puddles on the floor.

The team had decided not to drink for the summer. The decision was made before my arrival, but I'd agreed to abide by it. Tonight, though, I wanted a beer. I wanted to lift a pint of beer from the bar and raise it to my mouth. I wanted to feel the glass clink against my teeth. It wasn't the alcohol I wanted, it was the feeling that came from drinking beer in a faraway land, in the Southern Hemisphere, on a Friday night. If I could have a beer, I thought, I could give up my brooding. I could pretend I'd made it across an ocean for a reason other than saving souls. I wanted to lose contact with my old self, the self that had spent his college years in Bible studies and campus fellowship meetings, the self who had balked at love with someone who took his breath away. I wanted to take a break from that guy, for just a night. I wanted to be—I winced at the word, but there it was—*normal*.

The band was into something fast, the fiddler running ahead of the other players, who held their instruments at their sides. The singer, the lone woman among the quartet of men in black jeans and unbuttoned vests, stood with her eyes closed and her hand gripped over the microphone. She bounced one tall black boot and kept the beat with her free hand against her hip. Her skirt was wrinkled, paisley and pleated, and separated from her T-shirt enough to reveal a sliver of her belly. Her hair hung past her elbow in a heat-crimped curl. Beneath the stage lights it was the color of an apple.

Her name was Fiona. When the band broke and she stepped down from the stage and pressed through the dance floor on her way to the bar, Josh asked her her name. He leaned on an elbow against the bar and talked with her for longer than I expected, long enough for her to appear to enjoy the conversation. She waved at the bartender.

When Fiona swam upstream toward the stage with a pint in her hand and a bottle of water tucked under her arm, I followed her onto the dance floor. The band reassembled and started up with a slow song that I could tell was going to break and run. The crowd began to move, and I moved with it. I swayed to the right and back to the left. Amber and Joanie and Kathy came onto the floor, and then Pat and Steve and Jeff and Hannah, and soon we were all dancing, all except Josh. The song hopped up and the crowd began to leap. Fiona punished a tambourine against her hip and belted out a wail. I linked elbows with Jeff and Joanie and spun and kicked. I was at the center of the gyroscope, lost in the whirl, and a sensation like abandonment swept through me. I felt myself forgetting, I felt my manners and buttonholes trailing away like the rippling vapor from a jet engine.

I fished my way out of the mix, toward Josh. His eyes were fixed on the stage and he bounced a leg not quite in time with the beat. I wiped my forehead and leaned into his ear. A bead of sweat rolled from his hairline and slid beneath his collar. "Come dance," I said. "This is fun music to dance to."

"I can't."

"What's the matter?"

"Fiona," he said. "There's something about her."

Fiona's red lips worked around the black orb of the microphone. Josh was studying the exposed crescent of her stomach, the sway of her hips. I could feel him want her. "I know," I said. "There *is* something about her."

"She has this, like, glow," Josh said. "An aura. It's like her spirit is talking to me."

"She's a singer. She's got a Stevie Nicks thing going on. The aura is part of it."

"It's not like that. It's different. I need to talk to her. I've got to see if I can get her alone for a minute."

"For what?" I asked. "She's with the band. She's singing."

"I need to share Christ with her," he said. "I feel like God's pulling on my heart."

He turned to me, his face full of resolve, though his resolve didn't look like zeal for Christ, it looked like loneliness, like the same frustration that pulsed through me. Desire labeled with a different name. I recalled Josh's hand on the arm of the woman from the bus, his released and airy smile as he floated back to us, and I wondered if there was an erotic component to proselytizing, whether winning a soul could produce a pleasure felt in the body. Yet such a pleasure seemed, at best, a substitute, a booby prize.

"Come on," I said. "Not tonight. We're in a bar. We're dancing. Let's have fun for a little while, and then go home."

"We're here," he said. "We found this place out of the blue. You think that was an accident?" He pushed away from the pillar, stepped onto the dance floor and pin-balled his way through the crowd to the stage. Fiona looked down and smiled without missing a note. Josh wasn't the first guy to cross a crowded dance floor to get a second whiff of her aura. He stood with his arms at his sides and his hands open, waiting to catch her when she jumped.

The band was still going when we headed back to Queen Street to catch the last bus to Toowong. Josh wanted to stay, and said he was willing to stay alone, but we didn't let him. We'd answer to Eric if we left him wandering in the city. On the street he lagged behind the group, his fists in his jacket pockets and his eyes on his shoes. In the shadows between the street lamps he dissolved into the dark. I looked back and saw the top of his head, burred and blond and disembodied, floating along like a searchlight on the bow of a fishing trawler. Pat and I dropped back to make sure he was okay, but he shuffled his feet and stared away. I felt angry with him for trying to ruin the night,

for trying take my one flimsy brush with abandonment and turning it into an opportunity to evangelize. When he didn't answer me I walked ahead of him and let him be. He sat alone on the bus and when we at last opened the door to the house he walked immediately into the room he shared with Pat and Steve and went to bed without using the toilet or brushing his teeth.

Josh stayed in bed until after three the next afternoon, never once rising to use the bathroom. Throughout the day we checked on him, offering plates of eggs and cups of tea, but he didn't respond. By eleven a.m. he was awake but still in his sheets, his Bible open beside him on the pillow. When he finally emerged, the daylight had turned golden in the windows, the winter slant that illuminated the billions of dust particles atomizing the air. Josh's undershirt was wrinkled and damp in the chest and armpits. The stitching of the pillowcase had imprinted a bumpy road from his temple to his neck. With the light behind him he looked translucent and ethereal, all smoke and wind. He stood on his toes and leaned forward, poised to make an announcement, but he didn't speak. "Josh?" I said. "You okay?"

"The bathroom free?" he asked, and drifted down the hallway. I heard the toilet flush and the shower turn on. He emerged wide-eyed and smelling of soap, his signature smirk curling the corners of his lips. He flopped down in one of the wing-back chairs to listen to Jeff play the guitar.

Later that night, Lisa's straight blond hair fell over the back of my chair. She leaned in and whispered, "My husband would like to see you upstairs." She smiled like she was joking. The door to Eric's apartment was ajar, a slim arrow of lamplight slicing the balcony. I knocked and pushed it open. Eric was sitting on the edge of the bed with a frayed beige blanket wrapped like a shawl around his head and shoulders. The sheets and quilt were in a twist at the foot of the bed. His socks were contoured to his toes and his legs looked awfully thin inside his sweatpants. "How're you feeling?" I asked.

"Horrible," he said. He was shivering so hard he could barely speak. His chattering teeth gnawed at the air. "This bug really got me hard. Some kind of a tropical fever."

"Can I get you anything?"

"I'm okay," he said. "Have a seat."

I sat in the chair that had been turned to face the bed. Eric's surfboards, he'd brought two, were leaned against the wall. "Things going okay over at QUT?"

"Good," I said. "We're making a lot of good connections."

"You're all doing good work," he said. "I'm glad you're a part of the team this summer." He paused and nodded, a movement that appeared intended for him, not for me. He cinched the blanket tighter and said, "Listen, we need to talk about something. Some of the things you say, especially around the women, aren't so . . . appropriate."

"Sometimes my mouth gets away from me," I said.

"Well, Paul says in Ephesians 4:29: *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.* If you're going to come back for the year, you'll be mostly on your own. You'll be the whole show at QUT, and an ambassador of Christ. You'll have to keep after yourself."

It was the rebuke I'd been waiting for. I felt my face and neck flush with shame. I was twenty-two years old, getting my mouth washed out with soap. I could have insisted I wasn't the only one with a wayward tongue, but that would have been even more sophomoric, and I was too angry with myself to consider anyone else's failures. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'll try harder."

"Give it over to God," Eric said. "Trust him to help you. His kingdom needs you." He lay back on the bed and worked his socks beneath the covers. I helped him unravel the twisted sheets and pulled them up to his chest. He pulled everything to his chin, the beige blanket still wrapped around his head. He couldn't get warm enough. "Thanks," he said, and looked up at me. "I meant what I said

earlier. The team wouldn't be the same if you weren't here." But the encouragement only sounded like an attempt to ballast his reproach. I needed to prove myself and we both knew it.

Back downstairs I moved around the back of the house, past the shed housing the washer, and toward the pool. I planned to sit there awhile, but found it already occupied. Josh and Tanya sat together on the steps descending to the concrete patio, the rectangle of water in the center a lacquered plane beneath the sliver of moon. Josh hugged his knees and Tanya had her chin in her palm. I could tell she was deep in the conversation, treading over deep water. She had a boyfriend back in Santa Barbara whom she talked to once a week. The team members from her campus teased her with kissy noises and ooey-gooey voices. Here she was, leaning into Josh. The oddball. The star evangelist.

My embarrassment receded and in its place crashed a new, sharper tide of reproach, pushing back my anger. I'd spent the summer pretending to be a missionary, but all along I'd kept my distance from the very message I'd proclaimed even while praying for the courage to proclaim it. I'd held my fear of the world's judgment so close that judgment became the lens through which I now viewed everyone else—judging those who rejected our message as close-minded and selfish, and, more ashamedly, those who accepted it as malleable and weak. Whenever I was asked what I was doing in Australia I said, *I'm here to work with college students,* not *I'm here to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.* Josh had become the center of the missionary team, while I'd remained its outlier, because he didn't fear being alienated or isolated or spit upon or mocked or called a freak. He wasn't afraid to stand alone and cry out in the wilderness. Lack of fear was the first ingredient of greatness, and Josh effused enough of it that we all leaned toward him in the hope of catching a little ourselves.

I resolved to make myself a freak. On Monday, I approached three men in Ray-Bans sharing lunch at a table. One of the three was holding forth with his hands in the air, and I didn't wait for him to finish. I passed out tracts like a casino dealer. I told the table, "This

is the most important decision you'll ever make," and then waited for an answer. One of the men bit into his sandwich, and the man I'd interrupted flicked back the tract and said, "No thanks, mate." I moved on to the next table. I walked up to men changing in the locker room at the pool. I promised myself I'd leave no stone unturned, no bystander unaccosted. I needed to win one heart for Christ, just one before we left. If I could win one, I could win another. I could make it as a missionary. I could come back.

Josh and I were sharing a seat on the bus, two weeks before the end of the mission, when he leaned over and told me he'd fallen in love with Tanya. Not fallen in love like Romeo and Juliet; rather, God had revealed his plans and they included Tanya. "I had a vision," he said.

"Really? Not a dream?"

"I know when it's from God and when it's not. I didn't expect it myself. And I was awake when it happened." He looked down at his knees, as though his clothes held the secret about what to do next. Steve and Amber had taken him to the Billabong store on Queen Street and talked him into replacing his Dickies and mechanic's jacket with cargo pants and baggy jeans, his woolen beanie with a ball cap, a half-dozen logoed T-shirts. He looked enough like a surfer to almost pass for one. "You think I'm nuts?" he asked.

I slapped his knee and said, "No man, I don't think you're nuts. God's spoken me before, too. At least I thought so at the time."

"Thanks for saying that," he said.

"What are you going to do about her boyfriend?"

He shrugged and sank lower in the seat. The bus pulled to a stop and an old woman with a clear plastic bonnet tied beneath her chin hobbled off, into the drizzle. "I don't know," he said. "Maybe God is right now revealing to him that he's supposed to be with someone else. Maybe he's writing Tanya a letter as we speak."

I pulled up my sleeve. It was 6:00 p.m. in California. "Could be," I said.

"Wouldn't that be nice? Make everything so much easier."

Josh told Tanya about his vision a few days later. It was my night to do the dishes, and from the rear kitchen window I could see them sitting beside the pool, their two humped backs dimly lit by the bulb above the clothes washer. By the time the last plate was dried and stacked in the cupboard, Josh had left Tanya sitting alone and had come inside. He didn't say a word, but his face revealed all. He went to his bedroom and closed the door.

Tanya had to deliberate over whose heart she would break. For the next week, she and Josh acted like they hardly knew each other. After the evening prayer, Tanya retreated to the pool or down the hill to the coffee shop to read her Bible and write in her journal. Josh worked on the sermon Eric had asked him to deliver that weekend, at our farewell retreat in Noosa Heads. On one of those nights, alone by the pool, Tanya heard a clear and audible voice tell her Josh was the one. It fell from the sky like an echo from an airplane, only closer, smack in her face. The voice told her to say nothing until the retreat in Noosa Heads. There God's plan would be made manifest. There all would be revealed.

Noosa Heads is a postcard surfing village two hours north of Brisbane. Two small rivers wind out of the rainforest and disperse over polliwogs of white kidney-shaped islands as they empty into the Pacific, carving out a wetland reserve, a harbor, and long strips of squeaky sand. The main street, Hastings Street, has a promenade lined with boutiques and bistros and eucalyptus trees, idyllic enough to rival any California tourist town. We occupied ten rooms in a one-star hotel at the far end of the promenade, walking distance from the beach.

The hotel rooms were uncarpeted and the furniture slid easily over the linoleum. On the second night we pushed the beds out of the way and sat on the bare floor with our knees tucked beneath our chins, forty people in a room built for four. Jeff and Rusty sang "Arms of Love" and then it was time for Josh's sermon. We pressed closer together to open the floor so Josh could pace. He held his Bible in his

palm, the leather-bound cover and tissue-thin pages overflowing the sides of his hand. He tapped Pat on the shoulder and asked him to get on his hands and knees, and then straddled Pat as a rider straddles a horse. Pat blushed and let his head sink toward the floor. The room chortled in concert, but Pat didn't mind; he was a bit of a ham. Josh said, "So here's Paul, persecutor of Christians, riding to Damascus," his new red Billabong cap riding a little high on his forehead, high enough for the light from the floor lamp to shine on his nose and mouth. He had on one of his new T-shirts and a new pair of jeans, and sitting atop Pat, he looked downright cool.

"So Paul's riding along, minding his own business, when suddenly Jesus appears in the sky," Josh said, scanning his eyes over the room. "It's like a bomb going off. *Kaboom*. Paul's knocked from his horse and struck blind." Just in case someone wasn't paying attention, Josh launched himself backwards from Pat's spine. He was airborne for an instant, his feet above his waist, his hands in the air. Josh's back smacked against the linoleum. It was the kind of physical goofiness we'd seen from him all summer, but this fall was so integrated with the message that the room was struck dumb. Josh lay with his eyes closed, long enough for us to wonder whether he was acting, or hurt, or in an uncanny confluence of mimicry and divine intervention, he too had seen Jesus. The instant the question crossed from dramatic to disconcerting, Josh leaped to his feet, scooped up the Bible. "Sometimes God speaks in silence, but sometimes he speaks in thunder," he said. His cheeks were bright pink and his hairline glistened. He held his right hand open as if to say, *You see? You see?*

He looked over at Tanya and smiled.

The devotional finished, we headed back to the beach to watch the moon over the waves and to rebuild the bonfire. Tanya walked to a pharmacy on Hastings Street where she bought an extended-rate phone card and placed a call to her boyfriend in Santa Barbara. An hour later she appeared in the firelight. Her eyes were puffed. In the flickering orange light she looked afraid of her own body.

Tanya circled the fire to where Josh sat with his legs crossed. He stood and they walked down the beach together. I turned and saw that they'd wandered about a hundred feet. Farther down the beach were the outdoor seating areas of the Hastings Street bistros. The tables and chairs were sheltered from the onshore winds by clear tarps suspended from a metal frame. The tarps rippled, capturing and dispersing the candlelight from the tables and the floodlights beneath the awnings. In the heavier gusts, the entire tarp filled with a flash of light, and in the flash I could see Tanya and Josh standing face to face. Josh had his hands in his pockets and Tanya's hands hung at her sides. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but Tanya worked her foot down into the sand as though she was talking and Josh nodded his head as though he was listening. When they separated, there was no embrace, no long impassioned kiss. The moon sparkling over the South Pacific, the candles and the starlight couldn't have been more romantic, but what they shared wasn't romance, but the terror of having heard God's voice. The awe and burden of the sound. That, and an agreement: Being together was God's plan, clearly revealed, as unstoppable as a flood.

A cloudy Brisbane morning, our last day on campus, Hannah and I went for breakfast in the youth hostel where I ate the morning of my arrival. I wanted the summer to end where it began. Fried eggs and bacon, and a grilled tomato I vowed to eat at every meal for the rest of my life. Afterward, Hannah and I walked across the Botanic Gardens toward campus. The grass was heavy with dew and when we stepped onto the footpath my shoes and socks were soaked through to the skin. Water squished beneath the arches of my feet. Hannah slipped off her flip flops and walked barefoot until her feet dried on the warm sidewalk. Her small footprints grew fainter with each step, and soon she left no trace behind. I was grateful to spend this last day with her, grateful for her company. We'd developed a sweet platonic friendship that was harder to come by than romance. She had a good loud laugh and freckled skin that turned plum colored whenever she

got going. Her parents and her older brother were staff members with the ministry, and though she'd long believed she'd follow a different path, she now felt the lure of a longer trip. I told her to come back to Australia with me. If we came back together, I could handle it. "We'd have a lot of fun," I said.

"Oh, sure," she said, giggling, a more definitive "no" than the word itself.

Sweat beaded in the creases of my elbows and knees. Although I'd thought of the last months as summer, a gap between semesters, they'd taken place in a different season. I'd left California in the late spring and would return at the beginning of autumn. I'd missed an entire summer, just as I missed an entire Tuesday during my flight from Los Angeles to Brisbane, and it was sad to think that in a few days we'd re-enter our old lives and breathe its fat, familiar air and the outer-space surrealism of the summer would begin to feel as crepuscular as a dream. I was no less ambivalent about my faith than when the mission began: I'd never gotten the hang of approaching strangers with the intention of winning their souls for Jesus, and yet I'd grown to love the team, our cheap big-pot dinners, our nights with the guitar. I was already longing for what I was about to lose, and that longing, combined with Gary shaking my hand at the end of the weekend in Noosa and telling me, "I hope you'll be back soon," allowed me to tell Eric and my teammates that I would indeed be coming back. To say otherwise was to confess that my faith was weak. I never belonged on the team in the first place.

Hannah talked about Josh and Tanya, but by now we were exhausted by the gossip and thankful to be on our own. Josh was scheming a plan to return to Chicago, empty his savings account, and fly to California to be with Tanya. He'd start at Santa Barbara City College and then transfer to UCSB. But there was something about the heatlessness of their arrangement I didn't trust. Maybe I was just afraid God would one day call down the name of my own yokemate in the same way.

A month from now, I'd hear by email and a few phone calls about the sad end of their affair. By the time Josh arrived in California, Tanya had reconciled with her boyfriend and come to doubt whether the voice she heard was real or merely the echo of confusion. Steve and Jeff had offered Josh their apartments as temporary landings, but they, too, had girlfriends and their own lives on campus. Out of money and with no place to live, Josh would have no choice but to call his parents and ask for plane fare home. No one foresaw any of it; no one could envision Josh's shattered heart. *Delight yourself in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart,* we were told. Shattered hearts didn't compute.

We crossed through the corridors between the buildings. If we made it to Z block, we'd to go inside and check our email before wandering back to the Student Centre to take down the table. We'd boosted the local ministries, and it was up to the Australian students to keep it going. I couldn't help thinking of the ministry this way, in the third person.

We rounded the corner into an empty courtyard, gray light and faint shadows and a few metal benches. A little chain link and a basketball hoop and it would have felt like a prison yard. It was deserted except for a young Asian woman sitting on one of the benches. She lifted her head and smiled. Her face was washed over with a glassy and departed expression of loneliness. "We should talk to her," I said. I meant we should ask if she was okay, if there was some way we could help her, but Hannah thought I wanted to share my faith, one last time. She shrugged, "Why not? Might was well go out with a bang."

We asked the woman if we could sit down. We told her our names, and she said her name was Jiao. She was from Taiwan, and was in Brisbane studying marketing and English. English was harder than she expected. In a voice hardly above a whisper, she spoke in short spurts and colloquial phrases. "Australia is pleasant," she said. "I miss home."

"How long are you here?" I asked.

"One year." The way she said it, it sounded like all the time left on the planet.

"Have you made any friends?" I asked.

"Few," Jiao said. "I get here in July. I don't know many." With so many Taiwanese students on campus, it seemed impossible not to have dozens of friends waiting to take her in. But not everyone makes friends quickly and loneliness isn't always remedied by company.

"What about church?" I asked. "Do you go to church?"

Jiao shook her head. "In Taiwan I'm Buddhist, but not . . . observant. I see churches here and I think about going. Sometimes."

"We're with a campus ministry," I said. "We know people you could talk to."

"I'd like to talk to you right now," Hannah said. She leaned on her left hip and slid her hand inside her back pocket. She withdrew a KGP. It was molded to the shape of her hip. Face-up, it made a bowl in her palm. "Can I share this with you?" she asked.

Jiao nodded her head and Hannah slid her thumbnail inside the front cover. She spoke slowly, her fingernail landing on each word as she pronounced it. Hannah paused to make sure Jiao understood, and Jiao turned her head and smiled. Hannah turned to the final page, the prayer. "Is this something you might want to say?"

"Yes," Jiao said. "Okay."

"Do you feel ready to pray with me now?" Hannah asked.

"I think I am."

Hannah lifted her eyes to me, a look that said, *Can you believe it?* She reached for Jiao's hand and Jiao allowed her hand to be held. I set my hand on Hannah's shoulder to strengthen her prayer with my own. "Just say what I say," Hannah said.

Hannah's prayer was simple and bold. Jiao's repetition sounded like an echo down a long hallway. The wind carried her voice away. "Don't worry," Hannah said. "There's no wrong thing to say."

Class was finished and people were starting to pass through the courtyard between the buildings. In the periphery of my vision I caught the flash of backpacks and ball caps. I could feel their eyes

upon us. Jiao's hand trembled inside Hannah's. Jiao's loneliness was a skin and we were piercing through it. I felt relief fill the center of the circle our three bodies made, relief and surrender. Or was it the Holy Spirit descending into Jiao's heretofore unredeemed soul, the windy mass of salvation? Either way, I could claim to be a part of it. When we returned to the house we'd tell the team we shared Christ with a young exchange student from Taiwan, and she accepted, right there, on the spot. We saw her sitting alone we shared our faiths with her. Hannah would shake her head while telling it, and every time she used the first-person plural: *we* and *our*. *We* found Jiao, *we* shared *our* faiths. It was a lie, but it was as close to success as I was going to come. Whenever someone asked me how the mission went, if I led anyone to understand what it meant to follow Christ, I'd think not of Jiao or anyone else I talked to, but of myself, and I'd say yes. There was one. **f**

Brandi George

MOTHER IS A WOLF

She says Yes is a woman's word—
a rubber ball that doesn't fit
between her teeth—the baddest wolves
wear masks. I pass the time attaching flies
to strings and stringing pupils into wreaths
of irises. O lightning, fangs! Old crones
wear shoes worth more than us,

and I am wild. Mother strikes "chicken"
from the dwindling grocery list.
Her fists and feet scrape bone
into whole pies. I fetch
empty chip bags from the unmowed
perimeter of our trailer. Spam bursts
from my abdomen. I will aluminum
stripes. I will bug zappers
to outshine stars. My skin is the sewage
pond, and I summon blood-puddles
with a feral cat dance. I will collapse
the brick house. I will loose
myself far and wide as pink light
on a field, and emerge—mother—
my own child, For Whom
Branches Bend to Touch

because emaciated by another miscarriage,
mother limps the hospital halls, told
the rape that scarred her insides
was earned; she growls
weak into my ear. I roll myself in clouds,
six, seven, eight. I have been
the shadow and light of each year,
each star folding itself into a nipple
caked with blood, but that is how we feed
the ones we love, without a sound and when we can,

so whatever water covers returns.
Among trees, I scavenge pieces
of my mother: a tooth, a tuft of hair.
For each child she lost I named a doll
and soaked it in the ditch.
Danielle, Penelope, Joshua.
O precious phantoms, do not shrink her
into bones. I'll play you songs in A
minor—sad and easy for your mouths
like stringless lyres outside my window.

Diya Chaudhuri

HANGOVER

Yesterday, I drank through this town
like a pinball, from each bar repelled
by a chatty bartendress, a romantic interest

(homeless and earnest), a quivering hand
reaching for a Guinness. Another day
passing. A cigarette too many. Not one

to flip the day like a bird. Not one
to seize a thing. Today
is a dried contact lens. Today catches

on the various grooves of the mysterious
underlid, threatening always to escape
the shutter, to reel out of frame.

Chris Haven

I LEARN ABOUT BEING A MAN FROM ARTHUR FONZARELLI, EVIL KNIEVEL, AND MY DAD

Wear leather.
Strike up music with your knuckles.
Get the hair right then leave it alone.
Date twins.
Go for triplets when you can.
Do not say I'm sorry.
Ride motorcycles.
Paint colors on your helmet.
Leap across canyons.
Get dirty.
Smoke.
Have a heart attack.
Stop smoking.
Gain weight.
Ignore doctors' orders.
Never admit a mistake.
Drop out of school.
You'll have to find money.
Speak like you're a little stupid.
Speak like everyone else is a little stupid.
Respect your mother.
You have one time in your life when you can cry.
Skip vacations.
Go to work.
It's never done.

Understand engines.
Break every bone.
If it's broken, you have to fix it.
God's around, but you're in charge.
Better pray.
Pray you'll make that jump.
Wear colors like you're in the Olympics.
Be quick to anger.
Swing hard.
Concuss.
Keep your distance.
Don't let them touch you.
Long for canyons.
Use your thumb.
Use your hands.
Use a belt if you have to.
Use whatever you can find.
Try to get to the other side.
Don't let anybody in.
The point is to get to the other side.

Charles Dodd White

A WORLD OF DAYLIGHT

Packer came home on Good Friday, watching April rain stripe the green chickenwire window of the empty Greyhound terminal, knowing that by Easter morning he would be putting his brother's killer in the ground. The bad weather had gotten into his head somewhere between the bus ride between Lexington and Asheville. The feeling flooded him, welling up until there was a kind of infected softness behind his eyes, swollen like hot blisters. He moved his head as if afraid it might crack and fizz. He hadn't been drinking, but wished he had. A desire for oblivion he would meet soon, but not until he'd found Drema Chase, convinced himself she wasn't some phantom of his own making, but a receipt of hate he could grasp.

Shirttail met him at the wet curb, the Bronco still running with that pneumatic chug from years ago. Packer walked around to the back and swung open the gate to stow his bags.

"Smells like shit back here, Cousin."

Shirttail seemed to have read a compliment in this. He was grinning when Packer came back around and got in.

"Maybe it's the company," Shirttail said, laughing and lighting a cigarette. He waved the match out, bleeding a current of smoke through the driver's cracked window. Once he had the cigarette drawing, he leaned up hard on the steering wheel and turned onto the access road, not looking either way.

Almost immediately, they entered the mountainside tunnel, the granite heart inside smooth and deep, the hiss of rain giving way to memory. Packer rested his head back on the seat and closed his

eyes, letting go. Inside him, a passage opened and he could picture Drema when he'd last seen her and his brother Cab together, shortly after Packer had gotten back from Iraq. There had been a relative's wedding, a barbecue reception somewhere down around Waynesville. Grills and smoke and badly behaved children reputed to be distant kin. But what Packer remembered best was the way Drema circled her slim, needful arm around Cab's waist, the urgent static she seemed to give off, as if the love in the flesh she could give his brother could make up for everything else she couldn't. Packer opened his eyes to the crush of muted light as they came through the tunnel. Reaching down, he traced the shape of the snubnosed pistol strapped tight against his inner ankle.

"You got the address?"

"It ain't changed," Shirttail said, not taking his eyes off the road. The city was an emptiness around it.

"You're still with me on this, aren't you, Cousin?"

Shirttail said nothing, only looked at him. Packer decided that meant he had nothing to worry about.

They sat in the Bronco at the bottom of the hill behind a screen of knit kudzu, watching Drema's trailer, its tiny plastic windows as neat as pieces missing from a puzzle.

After a while Shirttail said,"Well, let's get on for godssake. It's nothing that can be done in the daytime."

When Packer said nothing, Shirttail cranked the engine and eased back out to the hardtop, waiting for a lone semi to roar past before turning out.

Packer felt tiredness come on him suddenly. He must have drifted off into a light sleep for a time because the road seemed to glide away from him when he closed his eyes, but when he heard the slowing tires and the sound of pool balls snapping, he knew Shirttail had taken him on an unscheduled stop. The faint red strobe on his eyelids told him exactly where.

"What's this?" he asked, his eyes still closed.

"Look, I know you and him have bad blood, but he's on your side on this. You need somebody who can watch your back."

Packer slumped forward. "I thought that's what you were supposed to be for."

"Just talk to the man, will you? Shit, beer's on me."

Without waiting to see if Packer would follow, Shirttail hauled himself out of the Bronco and went through the open front door of Mackey's. Packer hadn't stepped foot inside his stepfather's place in more than seven years, the last time just after his Mama's funeral. Through the glass facade, Packer could see maybe a dozen men in caps and jeans inside, milling around a pair of coin fed billiard tables. After a long minute, he went in.

Tim McGraw and Faith Hill were on the jukebox, wheedling at one another about how their true love would never die. Packer walked past the idle racket, nodded to a few of the familiar faces and drew up a stool next to Shirttail at the far end of the bar. An uncapped bottle of Bud was already set before him. He stared in at the shelves of booze stacked row upon row, each of his multiple reflections distended in the tricked turns of the bottle shapes.

"You wouldn't have thought to ask if I would agree to this?" Packer asked, tilting back the beer, draining it below the label before setting the longneck back on the bar.

Before Shirttail could answer, Packer felt a wide palm spread across his shoulder blades.

"It's been a while," Mackey said in his ear.

Packer turned his head over his shoulder and jerked a nod."Kentucky to Carolina is a long pull."

A beat too long. "No it ain't. Why don't you two step on back to the office with me."

They swiped their beers from the counter and followed Mackey back. On the way, Packer glanced over to where a few guys were throwing darts. A tall blond man with a handlebar mustache threw a bullseye. To celebrate, he tossed off half a pilsner glass of beer, then

bit down a full inch on the rim, the glass crunching in his mouth as he chewed and swallowed. All of his friends laughed.

Once they reached the blind end of the hall, Packer leaned into the office. Though his eyes had adjusted to the dimness of the bar, his new vision did not dispel a cavernous sense of the room. A banker's lamp cast an aquatic green glow on the couch and chairs, mere suggestions of shape. The three men moved back towards the white pool of direct lamplight, navigating by the sound of their footsteps alone. Packer remembered how as a child he could see the impossible largeness of falling black space the moment he closed his eyes before sleep. The runaway dimensions of his surroundings would make him believe that, just for a moment, his mind had turned to smoke and filled every corner of the room.

Mackey sat down behind the old desk. Packer and Shirttail dropped into the deep cushioned sofa opposite.

"So you mean to kill her, huh?" Mackey's voice sounded like it came from the long end of nowhere.

Packer turned his head towards Shirttail's silhouette.

"I guess this ain't a town for secrets."

Mackey waved his hand at Shirttail. "It's none of his fault. He's worried about you. Don't be so goddamn hardheaded."

Packer crushed his pockets for nonexistent smokes. Mackey shook out a Winston and lit it for him.

"Don't think I'm trying to stop you," Mackey said. "Cab was my own boy. I know that might not mean much to you, Pack, but it sure as hell does to me."

Packer could not see Mackey's eyes. He never trusted the man, not since he'd stepped into his life when his Mama came home from Jellico, Tennessee with a dime store wedding band choking her finger and a scrawny boy sitting out at the curb, too shy to come inside the house.

"This is your new Daddy and brother," she had said, drawing that skin mask of hers into tight smile lines, hard and sharp enough to cut cardboard.

The resentment for Mackey had come easily and true, but there had been something in Cab, something in the discovered boy that mended itself to Packer. Brothers first, then friends. And now, that little shy boy all those years ago grown up only to find the other side of the ground because his woman had gotten him killed over a bad meth score. Money miscounted and weapons drawn and a poor, foolish life ripped out of a poor fool's body.

"What you holding?" Mackey asked.

Packer looked up and unsnapped the ankle holster, handing the pistol across. Mackey dandled the Smith and Wesson in one flat palm, then placed it to the other, weighing the handgun a moment before passing it back.

"That should definitely get the job done. Kill the cunt good. I'll talk to people, make sure they saw you sitting in here when it gets done. Least I can do, I guess."

"What about the tweaker? The one who pulled the trigger that put Cab in the ground?"

"Been taken care of," Mackey answered, hacking into his hands, the deep chest rattle of cigarette smoke a painful voice inside him. "They didn't even bother dragging the river. Question is, is if you've got the stomach for killing her. She was your woman before she was his, after all."

Packer holstered the snubnose and dropped his trouser cuff in place. Was this one of the necessary plagues on his own heart? To do this thing, to take Drema out of this world, but to do so with complete love. What could be left after that?

"Lord, Mack. Why is it you think I'm the one what wants to do it."

Packer dropped Shirttail off at his trailer, refusing his company but taking the Bronco and bottle of bonded bourbon.

"Shit, this can leave til tomorrow, Pack. You need to come on up with me to my Mama's place and drink some fucking strawberry wine.

Think about this. This isn't something that can be done alone. This is the Lord's weekend, for God's sake."

Packer swung the door shut. "I'll be back in the morning, Cousin. Don't sit up for me."

Before Shirttail could say anything, Packer was gone.

He did not take the direct way up to Drema's. Instead, he drove down through the emptied streets, all the good men and women of the world behaving themselves this sacred weekend of Christ's suffering. Without meaning to or making any deliberate plan of which he was aware, he turned up the Blue Ridge Parkway and drove out along the scenic ridges, watching the serene lights of the city, pulling over finally at one of the overlooks where he could hear a watershed in the darkness. He cracked the cap on the bonded bourbon and drank it in a slow pull until he felt a warm tide lap up from his toes.

"The blood of the lamb," he whispered, toasting the night.

This would be the place to take her. It revealed itself to him like the cold logic of a dissection. All of the bare truth of life reduced to crudely functioning parts. That's what this place was for Drema and him—the simple bones of fate.

The drive over to Drema's place was not far. He parked at the edge of the paved road and walked up, carrying the bourbon under his arm. By the time he had climbed the stairs to the deck and knocked, he had nearly forgotten the weight haltering his ankle. He could hear a TV running inside loud, but no footsteps. He knocked again.

A little tow headed boy answered the door. He was about as big around as a fencepost.

"Drema in there?" Packer asked.

The boy plucked a green sucker out of one grimy corner of his mouth, switched it to the other and tamped it back in place, eying Packer. "She lives here, but she's out right now."

"Out?"

"That's right."

Packer tried to get a look inside, but could make out nothing.

"I know she doesn't have a kid. Sure enough not one big as you."

"I didn't say I was hers, did I? My Daddy and her were friends."

"Were? Not still?"

Packer guessed the boy to be around ten, but it was hard to tell. He looked like nothing so much as an animate skeleton wearing a costume of tightened skin.

"I'm gonna come in and sit down and wait on her, then. And you ain't gonna do anything about it, okay?"

The boy stumbled aside, letting the hollow wooden door swing open as he pounded back to the kitchen. The whole trailer shook. Packer went over, switched the TV off and made room between magazines and a pile of clothes for a place to sit on the couch. Everything smelled sour.

"I'll call the law on you, asshole," the boy said, lifting the phone receiver from its plastic cradle. Packer could see that no line ran to the wall.

"Settle down, I'm not doing anything but waiting on Drema."

The boy returned the useless phone to its place, but he did not take his eyes from Packer nor venture a step closer. For a while, they watched each other.

"I used to live around here, you know," Packer said, uncapping the bourbon.

The boy tossed his head to rid his eyes of dirty bangs.

"You ain't a pervert, are you?"

"Just relax, Chief. Go look at some comic books or something."

The boy did not move.

"You're not supposed to just walk into somebody else's house like this. It ain't right."

"Hush now."

"It's true."

Under the TV a slick black Playstation console buzzed. Packer felt ugly under the boy's gaze.

"You want to play a game on the tube until she gets here? Hell, it'll give you a chance to whoop my ass."

The boy did not answer but tossed one of the video game controllers to Packer while he punched in a series of menu commands on the remote control until the television slashed on and a desert battlefield appeared. The boy pushed buttons again and the screen bisected horizontally so that each of the players hunted the other with an assualt rifle and grenades. Packer tried to use what he knew about tactics, proper cover and concealment and ambush positions, but the action was too hectic. The boy's avatar zigzagged impossibly, drawing close and firing into Packer's face before he could get a clean shot. The score grew lopsided and the boy became bored and said he was done playing.

Packer looked round at the thin walls, the displaced knick knacks on the pressboard shelves and on the shag carpet. His eye fell on something he'd given Drema years ago sitting on the mantle piece. A plastic egg no bigger than a pea nestled inside the transparent belly of a cut glass hen. He went over and picked it up, handling the small piece, shaking the chicken gently to hear the murmuring rattle inside.

"You don't look like no crank cooker," the boy said after a while.

"And what would you know about that? Boy your age shouldn't."

"I know plenty, I guess."

Gravel crunched outside and the long lance of a single headlight swathed the outside dark before the engine shuddered and the light went out.

"Go on to the back, Chief."

The boy obeyed. Packer returned to his place on the couch and waited.

Drema came in alone, carrying a small treasure of groceries in plastic bags. She did not drop them when she saw Packer in her living room.

"I'm surprised it took you this long, Pack," she said. She moved to the kitchen to put the bags on the counter. If she drew a knife from the butcher's block, he did not see it. "Where's Bobby?" she asked.

"Don't worry, I'm not here to do any little boys harm."

"Bobby, honey, you in here?" she called toward the back of the trailer, her voice betraying a high strain.

He had not expected her to be pretty still. Not with what he'd heard about the company she'd been keeping, the things she'd been doing. He felt a revolt somewhere deep behind his sternum, a cry of desire that could not get over its own shame, and this desire quickly became a greater force within him.

"You and me, we need to go for a ride together, Drema."

"I figured," she said. "But Bobby's got to eat something first. You just gonna have to wait a minute."

He sat watching her as she skinned plastic leaves from sliced cheese and mashed it between two slices of mayonnaise gunked bread. She carried it back to the boy on a paper plate and Packer could hear them talking softly. When she came back she was wearing a light rain coat that fell to her knees and hissed against her thighs as she walked past and straight out of the trailer into the humming night.

Once Packer had caught up with her, he led her down to where he had hidden the truck and opened the passenger door for her before circling around and getting in.

"You want a sip?" he said, holding out the bourbon.

"I could go for something a little stronger."

"That's part of the problem, isn't it?"

"I guess it is."

He cranked the truck and spun the wheel so that they jumped the hard ruts and met the asphalt, running a deep long rumble that tickled up from the metal floor along the backs of their legs and up their spines. The angles of the mountains floated beneath them like the easy swell of an ocean.

"I got a real need to care for that boy," Drema said. "He doesn't have anybody else in the world but me. Anybody that counts, anyway."

"What you need doesn't matter anymore."

"I'm sick, Pack. Don't you understand?"

He tightened his grip on the thin neck of the steering wheel. "Yeah, I understand."

He could hear something in her voice, something that was more human than it ought to be. He decided to put it out of his mind.

"Whose is he? The boy I mean."

She looked out into the rivering night.

"I think you can guess."

He swung them up the access ramp to the parkway, the quieted traffic of the main roads slinking behind as they climbed up the gentle sweep to the ridge. In a matter of a few silent minutes, the immediate peace of the emptied city became a dim shade painted in the low distance. Putting all of that back there made it easier somehow, made the way back to Cab more real, the past meeting the present in such a way that all the intervening regret and hate had become longitude lines running in fatal, relentless parallels.

"So you're caring for the child of the man that killed your own husband," Packer said.

"The boy can't help who his father was."

"Were you fucking him?"

Before she could answer he edged over to the overlook and braked as they came to the stone retaining wall, cutting the headlights and killing the engine. They sat listening to the hood ticking.

"You know I'm sick, Pack. It's like a disease or something."

"You said that."

He turned to her, putting his hands under her coat and blouse to feel her nipples as they rose beneath the pads of his fingers. His mouth opened against hers. For a while, each of them sought something in the other.

"Why is it like this?" she asked once he had pulled away.

Packer removed the keys from the ignition and pocketed them before he leaned over and unholstered the pistol, placing it on the dashboard within Drema's reach. She did not flinch when she saw it.

"Maybe the war made me different," he said.

"No. You were always different, Pack."

The pistol was between them now. There was no way to turn back from the fact of that. He wondered if he had placed it there to make

the world swing around on a new axis, to inflict a change from the simple heartbreak of a normal day—the rhythm of what was meant to be forever interrupted and forever imperfect. That was the sheer grave weight cocooned somewhere in the chambers of the gun and now there was no avoiding it.

"Did you kill a lot of people over there?"

For some reason the question surprised him. In truth, he did not know, though he must have. So much was seen through the green wash of the thermal scope aboard the Abrams tank, the slurry of enemy heat signatures blurring his memory into a kind of digital dream. The enemy hulks would present themselves and the tank commander would give the command to fire. Packer would ease the reticle in place and send the sabot rounds down range, the turret rocking from the cannon's recoil and suddenly the air becoming high and tight and acrid. After that, he remembered only the blind thrill and the desire to find another target.

Something else came to him more clearly than those moments in combat. It was in Fort Knox, when he'd first been trained on the gunner's station at tank school, sitting behind the hydraulic wheel that controlled the tank's turret. They were qualifying for their night firing, shooting at the plyboard silhouettes of Soviet produced fighting vehicles and the humped shapes that were supposed to represent entrenched infantry. The two dimensions of the war they were all being prepared to fight. The night erupted in tracers from the coaxial machine guns, the 7.62 millimeters opening up a small world of daylight all along the firing line, ripping up earth and targets impartially. And despite the hell of noise and steel, he saw the deer at the edge of the clearing, milky shapes in the thermal imaging, dancing into the lanes of fire. There had been at least twenty that strayed into the firing range. Immediately, excitement entered him, the prospect of live targets, followed by the urgent cry of the tank commander to shoot the fuckers down. And he had, all the tanks on the line had adjusted their fire towards the deer, strafing the animals with the

three second bursts the tankers had been taught. When it was over, the satisfaction he felt was electric.

"Something happened to us a long time ago, Drema," he said, knowing she could have no more idea what he meant by that than he did. Still, he felt better speaking the words, convinced of their truth in the way a man waking can understand the rightness of things left behind in a poorly remembered dream.

"Do you think people change?" she asked in a whisper, her hand moving towards the pistol. He watched the bones of her wrist and arm under the paint of shadowed skin. When she gripped the gun firmly in her fist and placed the barrel between her lips she seemed to part from herself, dividing the seconds into true slowness through the simple act of physical will. He admired her strength—too well he realized. Too well to let her take the burden from him. He unwrapped her fingers from around the chamber one by one and held the pistol, welcoming the deadly weight of it as the sum total of whatever he believed was the correct end of right and wrong. Time did not stop, though he wished it might.

"I used to love you," he said, measuring the words for their truth before continuing. "But you mean nothing to me now. Cab is dead and God is quiet. I can't kill for something I don't believe in any more. And I'm not letting you do it either."

She did not begin crying until he started the truck and pulled back towards the road to take her home. By then he did not understand the wetness on her face or the smallness of her suffering because he raged with a new conviction. The name *Christ* was on his lips. And as he spoke the name a certain joy broke through his heart, a knowledge that only the best should be granted the favor of dying forsaken. **f**

George David Clark

NEIGHBORS

Prime summer with the power down
across the state from wind storms,
the young accountant and his wife
lie poolside in the perfect humidity
and listen to the sapped transformer,
the lean of the sun on nervous metal,
the afternoon running on horseflies.
When light-blades on the water
go blue, go blunt, they take a last dip
and dry off. On the deck they drink
peach sangrias, watch her shoulders
pinking to a neon while the sun drops
away in the pines. They, as he rubs
lotion on her neck, haphazardly talk.
Admit, you'd like to see them argue.
Collecting that community of toys
your kids left scattered in the backyard,
you must think the neighbors want to
have it out where you can hear them.
She lights the citronella, heat rising
from her skin in ready swells, blooms,
scent of aloe vera in the sweaty dark.

Carolina Ebeid

LANDSCAPE WITH AND WITHOUT THE WORD LOVE

for Kevin Powers

Who knows why, napping in the make-shift
barricade with a book that covered
the sun, the soldier woke then. Or maybe he didn't
wake but dreamt the girl carrying
an oversized stuffed animal of a royal shade.

She walked behind her uncles, the beekeepers.

The quiet days ran into one another, blurred
in the color of saw-dust,
or the dry straw-guts of the scarecrow
he could have become. Everything

is antique monochrome there, save for the sudden

date palm that limned the night & black mounted

guns. And that's why the shock

of purple, or some other brilliance he can't name,

rattles him still. Perhaps the book will

name that color the girl held as she passed by

dragging behind her the evening,

solitary & more than a hundred years long.

Erinn Batykefer

THE CURATOR I

Thinks, you are what you make to throw away.
Lists on shattered cuneiform, crumbling papyrus:

number casks millet and amaranth,
number milk goats, number beads or olives.

The Isis's sunken hold of unglazed amphorae,
footless, sap-sealed and unadorned. The wine

like vinegar, now. Small trash of exchange—
number fish. Number girls.

Walks past a gallery of story-skinned jars
cased in glass, *hydria, olpe, amphora,*

is reflected against honeyed ceramic
where the black figures chipped off

as if suspended inside the myth:
riverbank and naiad.

Thinks, you are what you make to keep.
Thinks, apple-skin and vetiver,

a scent like cut grass and thyme. Thinks, hair so fine
touching it is like dragging fingers

through water after the ripple-stone is cast.

Heather Jacobs

IMMERSION COURSE

I am at the deep end treading water. Nika coaches me from a crouched position at the pool's edge, her hands tucked between her knees, black swimsuit dripping chlorinated water from the crotch.

"It is easy," she says. "Like children's play."

"*Child's* play," I correct her. "Show me again."

Nika laughs as if I, not she, had gotten the expression wrong. Since she began teaching me to dive, we have had many such moments: I stall, keep myself afloat, hoarding the water's warmth, while Nika waits and shivers—even though the pool is indoors and heated. She'll get the better of me eventually, but for now I have time to study her in a different way than I do in the English class I teach, where she is the student, bent over her grammar book or practicing with her conversation partner, their unsure voices filling in the blanks. *Do you prefer coffee or tea? I prefer tea. How many children do you have? I have one child.* Their answers always sound redundant, rehearsed.

The tall windows of the community swimming pool reveal a typical Seattle sky—a wash of white overlapped with gray wisps that are always shifting, traveling somewhere. Rainy, diffuse light frames Nika, softens her edges. Her body tenses as if she is about to demonstrate another dive, but she does not move. Under her swimsuit I see the outline of her figure, petite and athletic, but relaxed by motherhood. Though the high-necked, modest suit has long fallen out of fashion, she looks beautiful in it. Nika's skin, like that of all the women I've met who have lived through revolution and exile, is uncannily perfect, smooth, poreless. Just one fight with David and I surrender

to insomnia, my face turns pale and patchy long after the tears have dried, and I look as if I've spent the night in a morgue. Yet I can't say I sport a single scar, no childhood lacerations from tree branches or gravel under the skin of my knees—this invisible evidence marking, in its own way, the choices I've made.

What marks Nika is more insidious. She tells me little about her journey here from Kazakhstan, so I can only guess. I know she was an electrical engineer in Semipalatinsk, and her husband, Yano, a professor of Russian literature. (Nika and I have joked about our matching professorial husbands, except that Yano still looks young enough to be a graduate student.) She has hinted to me that they left to escape the mushroom clouds erupting from the Polygon test site—over four hundred blasts while it was in operation. Their two-year-old son, Alexi, was born here. Nika started coming to classes when he was an infant. Now she spends her days frying corn dogs and battered onions at Kid Palace, breezing into my class at night freshly showered and made up, but still smelling like a short-order kitchen.

As with all my students, it's hard to tell what detritus from her past she trails behind her. She pushes on in her new life as if yesterday did not—could not—exist, working a job that's far beneath her and never complaining; finishing each of my courses in succession, though I often go over similar material from class to class. I tell myself the students want to feel they're doing well, but I sense Nika wants something more—the intellectual challenge she so lacks in her work, the sting of failure, perhaps, followed by the rush of getting it right.

Nika squints out the windows. "What is it?" she asks, squeezing water from her braid. Her ears are delicate and pink and stick out from her wetted-down hair. The tiny gold studs she wears remind me of a girl's newly pierced lobes. "Kate, you must try," she says, turning back. "Last week is good. Do not tell me you are worried about weather. It is always rain here."

"I'm chicken," I say, running out of breath. I dogpaddle to the side of the pool and rest my arms on the cement lip. Nika sits and

dangles her feet in the water next to me. I feel the currents her legs make as she swings them slowly back and forth.

"What does this mean, 'chicken'?"

"Afraid. An irrational fear. Nothing you can put into words. I guess chickens are cowardly animals. I don't really know where it comes from, to be honest."

She nods gravely and seems to understand, though I wonder, as I have a bad habit of explaining one concept with another that's more complex.

"I think no cake on Friday," she says. "No cake, and I send wedding video back to mother in Astana."

The professional video of Nika and Yano's hour-and-a-half long Russian Orthodox ceremony is to be the centerpiece of our last class and potluck of the year, on our theme, "Rituals and Traditions."

"How do you say it?" she asks. "Blackmail? No cake, no video if you are not diving. You must do this!"

"You would ruin class for everyone just because I won't dive?" I'm needling her now, but she only becomes more set and serious. "My boss is stopping by," I plead. "If you aren't there, Faina and Marta won't come either. And we need a big group—I have to show that I'm helping you, that everyone attends."

Nika shrugs and pretends to pick at a thread in her bathing suit. *Not my problem*, she might say if she were given to snappy comebacks in English.

I have no right to make demands. Last week, Nika and I planned to have tea at her place after our swim. I forgot about it and made an appointment that afternoon with David and our therapist, Dr. Randall—a casual, scholarly social worker dressed in sport coat and sneakers, as if therapy were akin to taking a stroll, as simple and healthful as a morning constitutional, eating right, or cleaning house. "Shake out the rugs of your marriage," the doc says. "Open the windows." When I express my cynicism about housekeeping, he and David share a conspiratorial smile.

"But the rugs haven't had time to get dusty yet," I say, trying on, like my students, a language that doesn't suit me. How could David think this kind of talk would work? It's obvious I'm not the homey type, metaphorically or otherwise, but lately he has begun to show, along with his wonderful mind, a detachment from day-to-day reality that is increasingly worrisome to me. He's obsessive about British Romanticism and exercise (the same dog-eared anthology goes with him to the gym every term, illegible notes he's made while running on the treadmill accumulating in the margins). But since we've been married it seems he always leaves some detail undone—a shirt buttoned askew, pants so frayed at the cuffs that they ought to have been thrown out years ago—as if I'm at fault, the one who's supposed to be taking care of him, snoozing on the job. In my worst moments I regret not knowing him when he was younger, more idealistic. The jagged edges might have been forgivable then.

Nika cried when I turned her down at the last minute. I tried to explain, but she waved me off, uncomprehending, and wiped her nose with an embroidered handkerchief. "I get all day free," she said. "I make fresh *piroshky*." Her lipstick smeared, pouty. I could have lied to her, or to David for that matter, but I always feel some stupid compulsion to be honest when it least serves me.

And yet I still wasn't telling Nika the truth. The way our roles had begun to blur threw me off-kilter. It started when I felt her hands positioning my arms over my head in class one day. For her "How To" project, Nika gave the class diving lessons using a flattened cardboard box as our platform, showing us the proper way to approach, to make our bodies into perfect coils of potential energy: knees bent, backs smoothly arced, chins tucked, hands arrowed. Then all of us let go, for Nika's sake—even the old women, Faina and Marta—leaping into air, into the imagined water.

From that day on, convinced she could help me over an age-old phobia, we began meeting at the pool. I thought I might finally learn to dive properly; I wasn't expecting Nika's severity and moxie to turn me inside out like the bathing suit I peeled off each week in the locker

room. For all her fearlessness, Nika started to frighten *me*, the world she had escaped threatening to overshadow my own, silent as the radiation she may have smuggled here in her chromosomes. My pains felt so miniscule in comparison, but I here I was insisting to Nika that they get their due.

When it was clear I wouldn't come to tea, she stopped crying and her eyes hardened to an elemental gray, both knowing and aloof, an expression I'm convinced can only be achieved by Central Asian women. On my way to Dr. Randall's office, I felt relieved, unsure I wanted to visit Nika's home anyway, afraid of what I might find there—an unfamiliar spice; a crowded dining table; the TV tuned to whatever the antenna could get; or too many precious trinkets, painstakingly brought from home, chipped and scratched nonetheless. Perhaps something as mundane—yet precisely descriptive of her essence—as an empty bowl, dust motes settled in its basin, a cracked red varnish. Who was I, thinking we had anything in common?

Since that day she's been surly. Now, along with her threats about the cake and the video, the botched invitation hangs between us. We don't speak of it. If Nika was quiet in class before, now she exerts her silent gravitational force on other students, like Faina. I try to get them to share experiences, practice role-plays in English—buying produce by the pound, returning a scarf. Everything is a transaction. I get sick of it, too. They want to know how to get jobs as good as they had in their home countries. Marta has "golden hands," they say. She sews so well. But how to get a business license? Make dresses for profit? My Salvadorans, a brother and sister, sell bag lunches to construction workers in their neighborhood, sandwiches in sweet white buns with sprigs of cilantro piled on top of spicy pork. What will they do when the new townhouses are finished and the workers move on? A Taiwanese man insists that the only way to get ahead is to find a job—any job—and work your way up. "Learn English!" he exhorts, and I bring the class back around, remind them that's what we're doing; even their tangential arguments are practice. Nika says nothing during these exchanges, but rests her hand on Faina's arm,

as the older woman argues back, saying she doesn't give a damn about working her way up, she's *ona na pensii*—retired. She has worked since she was thirteen years old. In factories. In Moscow. With no heat in the buildings. She knows all about that and she is done.

My class is often a long lament. When I invited a medic to teach CPR, a Brazilian woman, an advanced student who only drops in on occasion, took me aside during break and spoke to me while she nursed her child.

"These things always remind me of my first husband," she said. "He took many pills and went to bed. We were fighting all the time, so I did not go to sleep with him. In the morning he was dead. His father died one month before. So I think it was suicide."

I watched the smooth swirl of black hair on her baby's head as he sucked. When my students talk to me this way, so freely, I am genuinely crushed, but all I can manage is a frozen countenance, sometimes just silence. I reached for the woman's shoulder to give it a sympathetic squeeze, but she moved to reposition the baby, who had begun to squirm. The time between her confession and my would-be response distended and snapped without ceremony. I think, *Come on, Kate, you should be able to do this by now.* But it never gets any easier.

"Oh my," I said awkwardly, to the air.

The woman glanced up. Nika had approached and sat next to us. She stroked the baby's head, still latched to the breast. "Beautiful," she said. "Mine is one year and one half." The Brazilian woman smiled, her face flooded with color. Shyness? Pride? Or was it instant happiness? The two women, who hardly knew each other, talked until the end of the break, their bodies unselfconsciously close. But when they returned to their seats they were separate again, taciturn.

They act the good students, obedient, respectful. I try to tell them how an immersion course works—at its best our class can be a lively microcosm, a place of total freedom to experiment, to make mistakes and keep learning, to overcome fears of being outsiders forever. But more often than not the classroom is just a laboratory—sterile and disconnected from everyday life.

Still, they keep coming. They bring friends. At the end of every quarter we have a party. It's the end of the spring session now, and we're all feeling the relief of a few breakthrough sunny days, later sunsets that warm the cinderblock walls of the junior college. Nika has promised me her clan will be there for the potluck: Faina, still funny and flirtatious despite her years of labor; Marta and her daughter, Kristina; and Nika with Yano and Alexi, bearing the impressive honey-cake. The cake is "an artwork," Faina has told me—honey-drenched, deep-fried balls of dough stacked into a cone, drizzled with maple and chocolate glazes that bind the whole thing together. On the menu, too, are pupusas, bulgogi, Persian ice cream. Everyone has signed up, everything is planned. If I do this one thing for Nika, give her some hope that her hours of instruction have borne fruit, I have to believe she'll do the same for me.

Our voices echo in the wide-open pool. It's just Nika and me, and a few teenagers at the other end, preening for each other more than swimming. She places her hands on the floor behind her hips and leans back. Her elbows bend too far in the wrong direction, making me shudder in fascination. "I think about join the circus when I was sixteen, like them," she says. It makes sense. Everything about her, physically, is exotic. It isn't so much her double joints or the puckered immunization scar on her arm, her only blemish. It's in her posture—the angle of her chin, how she walks using her hips, the way American women won't—that says *I don't belong here. You can't make me.*

She scowls, emerging from her memories. "One day you will dive. Next day you will not. Am I not good teacher? I was champion diver in my country. Not Olympics, never Olympics, but a little lower. You understand?"

"Yes, I understand. It isn't you. Everyone has tried to teach me to dive—my brothers, my husband, friends, everyone."

I've never told her about last August at David's family's cabin on Lake Chelan. Each summer they gather there for a week—parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins with their babies and toddlers. When I

thought no one was watching, I jotted on the back of my bookmark so I could remember their names. As a rite of passage, they filled me in on all their private jokes, each with its own back-story that made good-natured fun of one of the uncles, usually. I listened and laughed, surprised at how much I craved the embrace of this new family, but at night I wanted only David, wanted him in our cabin room with the sagging mattress, the bed too creaky for actual lovemaking, content to feel the play of his fingers across my ribs, the grateful kisses he placed on the inside of my thighs. Not so long ago we used to linger for hours in bed on the weekends, camping out until noon reading poems to each other and eating toast with huge slabs of butter and sugary cereals David normally eschewed. Now we rose early, even on vacation, eager to part with our nighttime selves. And each morning David belonged to these strangers once again in a way I never could, his loyalty a wedge.

Our last afternoon at the cabin, tired of conversation, I read and sunbathed by the lake, occasionally dunking in feet-first to cool off. Everyone else was diving. They'd started an impromptu style contest. David, at the peak of his summer form, was winning. I peered at him over my novel, as if to say I knew his shape would wane come November and midterms.

"You're next," he said.

I pointed to my book. "Can't put it down."

David conducted everyone to a crescendo of *Kate! Kate! Kate!* How did I marry into a family of joiners? Me, the loner, the only child.

I slammed my book shut and stood at the end of the dock next to him, staring into the clear green water. Miniature wind-waves broke below me, as if I were seeing them from a great distance, the dock an illusory ship's plank. I swerved and gripped David's arm to still my vertigo. Somebody chortled. "Jesus, Kate," David said. "I'm just trying to have a little fun."

I wish I could share all this with Nika. I say only, "It's impossible. I give up. Sorry, Charlie."

"Do not say it is impossible," she tells me. "This is what you say every day: 'You can do it.' Okay, I can do it. But what if I do not want to? This is your problem."

David's voice again. "You should know by now," he said last week, in front of the therapist. "*We* should know," he corrected himself, "if it's going to work out between us."

My heart seized. If only I'd gone to Nika's instead, drunk strong black tea from delicate blue and white porcelain cups, eaten steaming bowls of borscht and as many meat pastries as she could feed me, maybe David's mood would have passed, and we could put off what I now knew was inevitable. I massaged my chest to still the fibrillations, but it was only a spastic esophagus, an internal hiccup I can get when I'm cornered. Both men turned, waiting for me to snap out of it.

"It's Nika," I said. "We had a tea date, and I forgot and double-scheduled."

"You see them every day," David groaned.

"Who's 'them'?" Dr. Randall asked. He circled his pen over the wrinkled yellow pad he used to take notes during our sessions, searching for something useful to write down.

"Her students. The 'huddled masses.' They call when she's not in. What are you teaching over there? I can't understand a word."

"Nika called?" I ignored David's bullying. He was sick of his own students by this time of year, apathetic sophomores who interrupted his lectures to ask if George Eliot was *really* a woman.

"Nika, Angelica, Demetrius—I can't keep them straight."

"That's pretty good for an old fogey," I said, teasing, but it came out sounding harsh.

"Kate," Dr. Randall said. He leaned forward and spoke to me as if I were the only one in the room. It was the first time I'd considered the possibility that he was there to help me, too. "What is it you want to be doing right now?"

The spasm worked its way up from my chest into my throat. What did I want? What did I prefer, wish, desire? Tea or coffee? Paper or plastic? I told him about the diving lessons, my exchange with Nika.

"We have the health club," David said. "I could teach you myself if it's so important."

"You're too demanding," I said, though I could have said the same about Nika's learn-by-rote, Soviet-era instructional style. I can take it from her—Nika has been reduced to necessities, and soft-pedaling for me isn't one of them, I get that. David has no such excuse. So I told him what I thought he wanted to hear, which may actually have been the truth. "This coming summer at the cabin. I want to win. For you. Against you if I have to. It's all those summers as a kid, afraid of the water, afraid to ride my bike to the lake with my best friend. She was such a daredevil, no brakes down the steep hill we lived on, she'd spend hours swimming outside the kiddy area, no lifeguards, stopping only to pick leeches off her legs like she was batting at flies or something. It freaked me out. Not the leeches, but the fact that she wasn't scared. Nika reminds me of her in a way. I don't know what I'm saying. I just thought I'd start with the diving, maybe even impress you for once. But by next year your family will have moved on to horseshoes or bocce and I'll have to start all over."

"You see how she does that? How she's being sincere for half a minute, then out comes the sarcasm again." David actually sounded hurt.

Dr. Randall's eyes widened behind his square plastic frames. Finally he said, "Kate has a clear goal, David. What would happen if you let her pursue it in whatever way she feels comfortable?"

Just say it. Tell him to let me do what I want. It's not going to kill him.

"Yeah," I said, nodding with quiet enthusiasm, as if the idea had come to us both at the same moment. "That would feel good." My innards stopped jouncing. I closed my eyes and was back underwater listening to the magnified sounds of my body, my blood, my breath releasing, submersion a welcome state, a comforting deafness to the world outside the pool.

~

With legs, ride bicycle, with arms, spread peanut butter. Nika's mnemonic for swimming in place loops in my brain. The depth marker reads 15 feet, a little less than three times my height. No sandy bottom to touch and rest.

"Okay. I'll do it. I swear. I'll do whatever you say."

Nika shakes out her limbs as if to say she's done with me, letting my decision pass without comment, unworthy of her notice. I swim to the ladder, put my feet on the rungs, and hang there on fully-extended arms, my butt still in the water. I wait for Nika's next command, but she walks away toward the spectators' bench, where she digs through her bag.

"Don't give up on me now," I say.

"One minute," she says.

Nika finally finds what she is searching for. She goes to the kiosk where a bored-looking high-school kid listens to the radio and lends out flotation devices and goggles. Nika talks and gestures to her, and I wonder if they're able to communicate as naturally as Nika did that day with the Brazilian woman. Could it be she gets on just fine without my help? Nika hands the girl a cassette tape. She looks incredulous at first, but puts the tape in the boom box and turns it all the way up. Then, filtered through the chemical humidity, I hear the last thing I'd expect—a sublime piano.

The music rolls over me, a slowly heaving sea, a lullaby. The pianist is as patient as a student working through an etude, yet the effect is full and melodic.

"What is it?" I ask. "It's lovely."

"Glinka. Mikhail Ivanovich. I practice to this since I was little girl."

She climbs to the top of the high dive. To test the board's springiness, she stands on the end and jumps several times, high in the air, as if on a trampoline. Satisfied, she backs up and takes a run at the edge, throwing herself into the water in a rapid somersault.

She surfaces with a shout. "It feels so good! Glinka has made me happy today."

Now a waltz, by turns stormy and playful. It is music that belongs in an oversized room—this natatorium, or an airy dance studio. The performer emotes the same mixture of pride and melancholy I see in Nika. Pleased with herself now, she grins from the water, ready to dive again and again in a series of perfect executions that fool me into thinking her skill is natural and untaught.

"I have another that is my favorite," she says. She pads back to the high-dive ladder and ascends again. The piano fills the room with arpeggios whose power could convert me to a new religion.

Nika is poised on the diving board above with her back to the water. Only her toes grip the edge. Her heels hover off it, in midair. She holds her arms out from her sides as delicately as a dancer, motionless for a seeming eternity. Then her knees bend, she leaps up, and her body folds forward at the waist—an origami bird. She falls, unfolding again, legs straightened behind her, arms pressed together in a point, diving head-first and just missing the board on the way down. When she enters the water there is almost no splash.

This perfection is what she envisioned all that time, so still and waiting. Underwater, she is a dark wavy figure mixing with the lane markers on the bottom of the pool. She doesn't come up right away, but I know she is okay. Better than okay. This is the other Nika, freer, closer to home, fluent in her body's language. Glinka's music surrounds us, encloses us together, the expert and the beginner.

Finally she surfaces beside me, breathing hard. "Have courage from the music," she says. "Come on, Kate!"

Come on. If I do this, what will happen? I sweep my arms and legs furiously now. Our heads barely above water, Nika's face comes close to mine, heart-shaped, pointed at the chin, her dark eyelashes beaded with moisture.

"I can do a cannonball," I say.

"You will do like this." She hoists herself out of the pool, lifts her arms above her head, crosses her hands together, right over left, and tucks her chin. Precisely the position she showed us in class, and has shown me many times since, though I didn't feel the muscle memory

kick in until now. Then she slips into the water silently, as if she lives there.

At last I pull myself out of the warm pool. I find I'm awkward on land, an ungainly creature. Music strikes the walls, the windows, the pool's surface. Bass and treble parts speak and answer each other in a comic melody, gently mocking me. The old cassette warbles as if the notes themselves are issuing from the pool's depths, but it is only because the tape has been played too many times.

I tuck my head and dive in.

I remember to exhale. No burning chlorine in my nose, just the velvety passage of the water over my skin, taking me back.

Not bad. Not good, either, but she praises me.

"Again," she says.

Each time I'm a little better. Repetition dulls my fear. I keep going until I can hardly feel my body. Eventually I will climb the high-dive ladder and run to the end of the board, to the moment my feet leave the edge. **f**

Buzz Mauro

SNAPSHOT OF MY BROTHER

He did not die
on a couch
in this way
for lack of caring
whether his brother
cared or not
whether he lived
or died or
how. Neither
did he die
of caring.
He'd stopped
by then caring
about whether
or not he
cared about
how I could
have stopped
caring how he
died or lived
or whether. Or
whether I
would have the
gall to write
a poem some
day as if

I cared whether
he died on
a couch in
this way or
did not. The
couch in the
photo is black
or white or
leather (I never
saw it) or
it is blue
or plastic or
charcoal or
something (I
never cared) else
entirely.

Christine Friedlander

ON WATCHING, WITH MY FATHER, FOOTAGE OF THE STRONGEST RECORDED TORNADO ON EARTH, 1999

My father watches the Weather Channel
to find that self he lost in 1970 –
the Red Cross worker shaking survivors
from razed neighborhoods, or, more likely,
the young man who grew into his uniform
on a midnight flight to Moore, Oklahoma.

It is May, and we are witnessing the death
of Moore from the safety of our own home.
My father pulled this same city
from the wreckage thirty years ago,
unaware of its history of attracting fast winds.

In one frame, the corpses of trailer park homes.
In another, the uncontrollable grief of a mother.

Oklahoma is nothing but a rerun to me,
but to my father, Oklahoma is an old friend
who calls often in the night,
luring him from our New Jersey home
into the dry line of his memory.

It is always a vast field.
It takes days for him to reappear.

Kristen Silver

LOST SALT PSALM

Papyrus ancestors
shed skin,

words sloughed off,
left to dust.

What the dictionary confesses—
its *spoon* and *truss*,

its *milk* and *whorl*—
feels a clay pulse,

a shell spiraling in
on itself. And we follow

as far as we can
into cities

lost in salt, over the bones
of sharp-nosed fish,

through the laments and songs
of Masada.

Etymologies chambered in
earthen pots, scattered

in trash heaps, lost
among stones. Trace

histories buried in sand
become the sand.

It's treason, this
letting go.

CLEO'S FACE

I say to my daughter, my three-year-old daughter, "There's this trick I do, when I don't want to be somewhere."

I'm leaning forward in the chair in the middle of the backyard barbeque with my elbows on my knees so me and Cleo can be the same height. I say it calmly and softly like I'm telling her a secret. It is a secret and I tell her about it and she smiles. She grins at me the whole time I talk. No matter what you say to her she does this. It's the way she is. Her condition. I tell her, "You don't have to close your eyes, honey. Just stare off at nothing."

She closes her eyes.

"Just don't focus on anything, Cleo. Look past things. Then, let your brain do the trick."

She opens her eyes and stares at me still smiling as I tell her that for it to work she has to replace everything around her with something else. I let her know that the cracked cement of our patio has to be replaced inch by inch with other things, nice pavers, or maybe cobblestones, one by one, until it's finished in her head. I give to her, straight out, that all she needs to do is trade these things, the peeling lawn chairs for cafe tables, our boring friends and neighbors for interesting ones, our dirty alley in the middle of Tucson for a romantic one in the middle of Paris, and then you have it, your brain has turned and you're there.

She can't speak yet, part of her Down's, but she grunts a laugh at what I've said. We have that between us. I can always make her laugh. Then she runs off through the backyard party to chase the afternoon light, a bouquet of weeds in her hand, barefooted, her yellow princess

dress dirty at the hem. Her short blond hair is still messed from her nap. She'll run in circles for a while following some floating pollen or flying bug until she stops in front of my wife's girlfriends to stare at them. Each one will shift in their seat after they've exhausted the few lines they always say to her.

"What have you got there, sweetie?"

"Don't you look pretty today."

"I like your dress. Do you like your dress?"

Of course, she doesn't respond to any of their statements. I like to think she's above the chatter.

Cleo is the only kid her age at the barbeque and the older ones have been avoiding her all afternoon. Maybe this is why she lingers in front of my wife's friends longer than they would prefer. Or maybe she stares because she's trying to figure out why all of them have the same haircut as her mom, why they all wear the same kind of shorts and top. The husbands don't look any different. Sometimes even I can't tell the difference between man and wife when their backs are turned. And the men don't even come up with a good line for Cleo, just a semi-enthusiastic "Hey you" with a high-five she doesn't return.

Frank, my retired neighbor, is sitting near me. He's a transplant from the Midwest. If he and his wife left in the summer we'd call them snowbirds. But they never leave. He just finished asking how work and the store are going and now he's pointing out from behind his big square sunglasses, those old man wraparounds, the same gutter on my house that's been broke for two years and how I should fix it. Not just the need to fix it, but the actual steps to go through. He always points it out. He's explaining it thoroughly. I can't decide if he's forgetful or just a jerk. It really doesn't matter. I could reimagine his face in any number of configurations, swap it out wrinkle for wrinkle, and boom, in my head, I'm talking to somebody else.

My friend Bill, former friend I should say, has shown up, which I can't believe. He's across the yard standing next to his wife talking to another couple. He has on a pale pink shirt and so does she. The reason I'm surprised he's here is because the last time we had people

over he really tied one on and then made a pass at my wife, Suze. He gets a little grabby after a few and I'm sick of it. She didn't seem to think it was that big of a deal since he was so drunk. He probably doesn't even remember, although he does keep looking towards my house, to the kitchen that juts off the back. Suze is inside, probably in that kitchen, and has been for a long time. She hasn't come out since Bill and Ann arrived.

The thing is we're broken. Suze and I. It hasn't been easy with Cleo, because of how she was born. We've both been sort of hungry for a while. I think Suze likes the attention from Bill. She's flattered by it. I don't think anything real has happened between them, but I'd be less inclined to think of it so much if she hadn't cheated on me before. One office party six months ago with a co-worker, only once, one time is what she said. It only takes once to get vultures like Bill circling. They keep picking at the cracks. But at least she quit the job. At least she told me. At least she tried to make it right, even if I haven't forgiven her yet, although looking at Bill, his eyes making love to my kitchen window, it's easy to imagine that Suze might have learned a lesson or two about being discrete.

If I ask later, she'll tell me she was staying inside to avoid the neighborhood news, the only thing Frank talks about besides home repair. If I press further, she'll say she's just trying to keep it all together, keep things going. We can't just stop these get-togethers outright. They're necessary for both of us, she'll say. We have to try.

I can't see if she's at the kitchen window, the one that looks out to the patio. The bright sun is hiding her if she is.

The conversations around me are sporadic, short-lived, and dull. I almost never chime in to any of them when we have these things. Never did too much in the past. I've always been a quiet guy, more so lately. Most have caught onto this, so not much is directed to me anyway.

Usually about an hour in I can disappear for stretches to the garage. I disappear a lot in there, almost every day now, smoke a little weed, have a beer, relax, get away. This is it. The whole of everything.

I sell furniture. Disappear to the garage. Distrust my wife. And try not to think too much about my kid's future.

Cleo is still running around the yard, a few steps behind the other kids. Not all of them are polite in avoiding her. One, the Bradley kid, makes a face at her every time she comes near him. And it's not generic, something harmless like sticking his tongue out, no, this kid makes a mean monkey face at her and loud monkey sounds. She thinks it funny and laughs and keeps chasing him but he's not doing it to be funny. I can tell because of the face that follows, the huge grimace when he looks at her laughing like he's smelled a fart or seen something disgusting squished in the road.

I usually ignore this, especially when kids do it. Most are just curious or don't understand, but this one's old enough to know better. He's doing it to make fun of her. I look over at his parents. They're oblivious.

The Bradley kid comes near and stands in front of me, Cleo close behind. He gives her another ugly monkey look and hoots right in her face. He's close enough for me to smack him. I'm tempted to swap out the whole scene for something more pleasant. Instead, I give him a flat tire, step on the back of his shoe as he walks away so it pops off and he stumbles forward without it.

He looks at me.

"Sorry guy," I say. As he sets to putting his shoe back on, I lean forward. I tell him to stop doing the monkey thing to Cleo. I look at him hard so he knows I'm serious. "Hear me?" I say. "Stop doing it."

He looks away from me. He finished tying his shoe and then he's gone.

I call Cleo over and ask if she's hungry yet and she nods. I straighten her dress and try to smooth out her hair. "Alright, you can go play 'til it's ready." She runs off again, weeds still in her hand.

I say to Frank I'm going to check on Suze and then I get up and go inside. I find my wife at the kitchen counter busy preparing food. She is at the spot in front of the window that looks out to the patio. In college she had long, straight hair with wispy bangs and always

wore it down. She was that one constantly happy girl in the group, a little hippy, loose, laid back, continually high, friends with everyone. All our friends were artists or musicians and everyone liked her. Her hair is shorter now, much shorter, easier to manage she says, but for a second when I come in and see her looking out the window in the strong Arizona light, she has the same dopey look she did back then. She did college radio too and could talk and talk for hours. I have no idea what she and Cleo do to fill the days now that she's home all the time. I quit asking right after she told me about the affair with the co-worker. She said enough then and I didn't want to hear another word about anything. She said it wasn't planned and that it was awkward. She said she stopped it in the middle before it went too far. I don't know what that means exactly. In the middle. Don't want to know. She said it was a mistake. I've thought about what to do next. About moving on, with or without her. Think about it all the time. But that's all that ever happens. The thinking.

When I close the door, she turns her head in my direction but doesn't look up.

"Are you keeping Cleo busy? Don't let her bother anyone," she says.

"She's fine. She's doing yard work," I say.

She turns to me now. "What are you talking about?" She looks out the window. "Oh, you're being funny." She starts working again. "Been a while since I've seen funny. Just don't let her stare too long. It freaks people out."

"Alright," I say. I move a couple steps into the kitchen. "Did you know our gutter is broken?"

Now she stops what she's doing and looks at me in the face. There's a faint smile trying to surface, but she's weary, suspicious of a trap. She says, "I'm busy in here, you know. I've been working." Her eyes narrow at me. "I can't read you sometimes." She goes back to putting different things in bowls. I go to stand next to her and look out the window.

I say, "Can you believe Bill? Wearing the same thing as Ann. Think he plans it?"

There's a pause here. I notice it. I'm not so stupid.

"They look fine," she says.

They? Again, I'm not stupid.

Suze picks up a bowl of store-bought potato salad I got earlier and a smaller bowl of vanilla yogurt for Cleo. "Okay, I'm bringing this out. You coming?"

"I was going to make myself a drink first, if there's any ice left."

She points with a bowl to the fridge. "There's a half frozen tray in there," she says. "Everything else is outside." Then she turns to leave, twisting at the door handle with her clumsy full hands, but before she heads out she pauses in the opening. The sun is hitting her in the face. "I just wish you'd keep Cleo occupied," she says. "She listens to you."

Then the door swings shut and she's outside at the little toddler table yelling for Cleo to come get her snack.

My daughter complies instantly, always does when there's food in play. She sits down in front of her yogurt, eager and animated, but she doesn't dive in. It's in a different bowl than she's used to. She likes routines. Her regular bowl has some mixed nuts in it and is next to me at the counter. Suze has been trying to break some of her more obsessive habits, switching things up, but so far it hasn't worked. I see Cleo close her eyes in front of the yogurt. That's my girl. Maybe she understood what I said earlier. I like the thought although I know better.

I look out at Suze. She's talking to Bill already with the potato salad still in her hand. She's smiling and laughing away. I see him take the bowl from her and then I see, right there, notice it, her now free hand touch his elbow.

It's innocent enough, I guess, almost like she's directing in tandem where to set the bowl. But then it stays there, just the index finger and thumb. From this kitchen window I think I can even see

the small squeeze her fingers give his elbow before she lets them slip slowly off. It's the same motion you'd do on the neck of a cat.

It's hot today, barely tolerable. All I want is to cool down a little in the air-conditioning. The sweat on my forehead is just starting to dry. I want everything to cool off. Outside, the thin patio umbrella only helps a little. It's yellow and it casts a glowy reflection on the concrete. We have no trees in our yard. Just rocks and dirt and cactus and concrete and a small patch of grass. I adjust my eyes, squeeze them together, look through the scene. I start to draw foreign drink logos on the umbrella. I imagine a crisp white tablecloth on the table. I pencil in a far off mountain, an acropolis ruin in sight, a shimmering seascape. I force myself to smell olives. The prickly pear cactus in the corner of our yard helps in the effect and soon my head has nowhere to go, so it does the twist it needs in order to swim in the salty air of a slow Mediterranean afternoon.

Sometimes I swear it's more than just a trick. Sometimes I feel like it actually happens for a moment.

I remember the first time I did it. It was the same day I asked Suze to marry me.

We were backpacking across France right after college and by then I knew I wanted to marry her. I was just waiting for a good time to ask.

Looking back, waiting was what we did most that summer, for buses, trains, for places to open. We waited for ourselves to get used to the thought of being around only each other. And then sometimes we'd just sit and wait for no reason at all. Mostly, these stretches were welcome. The stone benches of Paris were surprisingly comfortable sitting next to Suze. Our views seemed painted. Designed. And the fact that everyone else spoke a different language felt to me like proof that we two were from our own private world.

Although actually, Suze spoke great French. She was fluent and took the lead most the way. The country was filtered to me through her and she blossomed in the role. She was confident. She was gentle and patient in her translations. She knew I didn't like being out of the loop. I never fully knew what was going on, but Suze, somehow,

took care of it all. This is where I learned how to trust. It's also where I learned it's opposite.

We were sitting on Paris curb, waiting once again, when the Ducati stopped in front of us. Suze was up before I even raised my head. I didn't get a look at the stranger. To this day, he has no face. Suze was between me and the bike. Her body obscured him. I could only see arms, covered with dark hair and gold bracelets, extending to the handlebars.

I assumed, at first, that he was asking for directions, but then they kept talking. It kept going and I just sat there and tried to look like I didn't care. But in reality, I couldn't stand these cocky French guys, how they'd blatantly check out Suze wherever we went. It was terrible.

She did look good then, still does now. She looks great outside the kitchen window in the sun wiping Cleo's chin. I admit that. She still has a great body. Her skin glows. Truth is, I'm still attracted to her. But that day in Paris in front of the rider she was at some kind of peak. She had on tight jeans and a small day pack over her shoulders. Her legs were crossed at the ankle like a flirty ballerina, her hands fiddling the straps of her pack, her elbows pressed behind her. The rider revved the bike. They talked in French and I had no idea what they were saying. I even thought I heard Suze lower her voice at one point and pause as she turned towards me, like she was telling him something she didn't want me to hear.

Looking back I know, knew then even, I was simply jealous. I was mad that Suze could talk and I couldn't, of being left out, but mostly, and I've never told Suze this part of the story, I was terrified that she would figure it out, that she would see me for who I am and then seize the moment and swing her crossed leg over the end of the bike and leave me alone in a cloud of exhaust.

It's been almost seven years but that is the precise moment when I first did the trick. And I know they're all just moments, even now as I watch my broken family through the kitchen window. Moments pass. I know. But they also linger. In Paris, the bike's idle strangled time. The cobblestones blurred in the noise and started to disappear.

All I had to do was change my perspective just a little and I could get out of there, get back home, back to a place where I spoke the language. So I did it and when I opened my eyes everything was fine. It was okay. We were fine. I pushed all that fear and anxiety and insecurity down and proposed to Suze an hour later.

Outside my kitchen window, it looks hotter. Everyone is sitting down. Suze has a paper plate on her lap that looks like its ready to fold over.

I leave the kitchen and go down the hall to the office and open the bottom drawer of my desk. I finished the letter months ago. It's neatly folded and has two words: We're leaving. I take the letter out often and just hold it. Sometimes I try to tempt fate and walk around with it, see if Suze asks what's in my hand. She never does. I take it out now and go back to the kitchen.

I stand in the kitchen for a while and then go to the counter and set the letter down beside Cleo's bowl of nuts. I forego the mixed drink and grab the last three of a six pack from the fridge and the nuts from the counter and go into the garage. I remember the letter but choose to leave it out in the open until I go back inside. I drain a beer completely, open another one and decide to give myself a good hour. I end up falling asleep in the chair I've pulled to the middle of the room. My dreams are hazy and short and I don't remember them when I wake up.

When I do wake up it's almost dark. I can see the first stars through the skylights in the garage. The mixed nuts have slid down from my lap and spilled on the chair seat. I take a swallow from the warm beer in my hand and get up to go inside.

The party is over. Suze is in the kitchen washing the dishes, bowls turned over and drying. There's a pile of wet flatware and utensils and cutting knives on a dishtowel next to the sink. Cleo is in the breakfast nook at her high chair eating some crackers. I see the letter where I left it. It hasn't been moved. I want to point it out, mention it, finally do this thing, but I don't. I sit down next to my daughter and face her.

Suze still hasn't looked at me. She's scrubbing hard at the dishes. She wants to say something, I think, her head cocked and shaking a little, her face tight. I'm sure she's been stewing. Finally, she pipes up. "I'd say you were missed, but that would imply people asked after you."

I look at Cleo.

"And since you're making it clear you don't want to socialize they seem to know better."

Cleo recently got a haircut. Not an easy task. She's deathly afraid of scissors or anything sharp. She'll scream at the top of her lungs if anything resembling a knife or scissors comes near her. You can't even point a finger at her sometimes. Her haircut shows the effects. It's supposed to be a little pixie cut, cute and charming, to outline her smushed face and frame her wide-set eyes. It works mostly, except for the choppy short patches. Her bangs are ridiculously cropped.

"You left me out there all afternoon by myself," Suze says. "I'm trying to give you space, but I still need help. Cleo had a major meltdown. I can't believe you didn't hear it."

Cleo was such a floppy baby. We knew beforehand how she was going to be and I'd never say that we were outright disappointed when we finally saw her face. She was our baby. Ours alone. But somewhere, back there, deep in your head, awful words are played over and over. You try to ignore them or counter them but they're still there and then to know that they simply exist and live in you is even worse. There have been good moments, days, even lingering periods of joy, many of course, all over, but there were also long stretches of isolation, abandonment, complete and utter terror about what to do and how to take care of her.

Suze's posture softens a little. "Why don't you at least talk to Bill? Anything. You used to be so close," she says.

With this I look at Suze, scrunch my shoulders. I know Bill isn't the office worker but I still let the question linger. It's hers after all. She drops her hands to her sides.

"Can't we just move on? Can't we just live? Jesus, I've tried. I try. Please, can't we just do it?"

I continue to look at her. I let all the questions linger. Then I turn back to Cleo.

A second later, I hear Suze crying, sniffling softly. I don't know how many more times I can make her apologize, how many more different ways I can have her say it. I know the next step is on me. Whatever it is.

Cleo continues to eat, looking up at us, absent in all of this.

Then there's the crash as a plate smashes against the wall. Suze lets out a scream and grabs the whole mound of washed cutlery next to the sink and sweeps them all clattering to the floor.

Cleo starts to cry, loud, and looks at her mother.

I move to Cleo to pick her up but Suze has stopped. She's sobbing now. I kneel next to my crying Cleo and I turn and look at Suze. Her chest is heaving. She still has some forks and knives clutched in her hands.

Cleo continues to cry hard, wailing, and then she sees the forks and knives in her mom's hands and she starts screaming. Tears stream down her face, her round small face. She's terrified, getting hysterical, and then she looks at me and blinks and sheets of tears roll down. They pop off her face and hit the tray of her highchair.

I lean in to try and calm her and brush some of them away but she swipes at my outstretched fingers and screams even more, shakes her head crazy. She grips the tray and twists at it, pounds on it, like she's trying to break it, bangs on it with all her strength. She's going mad. I feel helpless. All I want to do is reverse this moment, draw back time. I can take away her wet stained face, dry it off. Her screaming is deafening. It rings in the room and drowns out any other sound.

Suze steps forward, mumbling through her sobs, trying to explain. I hear her say over Cleo, "Please, I'm sorry, we can move, let's just move, maybe we can just go, please, the three of us, together."

But I can't respond. I'm in my head again and I've started to trace the tears on Cleo's cheeks. I imagine the streams rising instead

of falling. I bring her runny nose to a stop as I stare at her. I soften her bright red face back to normal and try desperately to erase the last drops from her lashes, but then, and I don't know the reason, god don't ask me why, I go further. I'm so sorry, my sweet, it's true, but I start to push your eyes themselves, now dry, I push them down, closer together. I start to straighten them, align them. Those sweet eyes, honey, I move them, and then I see a face beaming with symmetry, a face with perfect features. I see the face of the daughter I had wanted.

Now this happens for only a second, you have to believe me Cleo. I stop, breathe, and close my eyes. And when I open them, I see the whole mess on the floor, all those broken pieces, and my darling Cleo's face, your tear-stained face, I see it too. f

WESTERLY

And still, the leaves are falling.
And soon the lakes will ice.
But two men are on hands and knees
in the old blue fountain
grinding smooth the years—
lichen, flaked paint, the cracked
cement crammed with moss.

A harsh November wind
spools dust-clouds up around them,
lifting the dull gray sky
temporarily to white.
Sparks fly up from their hands.
Sparks fly off the trees.
The background factory-hum.
There is so much work to be done.

Now the men stop, to confer.
On all fours, they turn
head to head, mask to mask,
their rounded backs, dark
woolen jackets, dusted white.
They could be bison.
The dust could be snow.

Steve Heim

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE SAUNDERS

August 2010

George Saunders was born in Chicago and is the author of six books of short fiction, including *Civil War Land in Bad Decline*, *Pastoralia*, and *In Persuasion Nation*, and one book of non-fiction, *The Braindead Megaphone*. His writing appears in *The New Yorker*, *Mcsweeney's*, *Harpers*, and GQ. He's won the National Magazine award for fiction four times, and received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2006. He is a member of the permanent faculty of the MFA program at Syracuse University.

A reviewer for Esquire wrote, "Saunders is a provocateur, a moralist, a zealot, a lefty, and a funny, funny writer, and the stories in *Pastoralia* delight. We're very lucky to have them."

STEVE HEIM

What's the most remarkable piece of fan/hate mail that you've received in response to your writing?

GEORGE SAUNDERS

Well, I got an email from a guy who characterized something I'd said in an interview as "cocksuckworthian." I thought that was pretty good. At first I thought it might actually be a compliment. But then realized not, when I analyzed for context and noticed that at another point he'd said "if you're saying what I think you're saying, you're a

dick." But mostly I get nice letters. And, after a little back-and-forth, he turned out to be a pretty nice guy too.

HEIM

Where does the absurd in your writing derive from? Is it common sense?

SAUNDERS

The most honest answer is that it comes from a sense of wanting to keep the energy of the writing up. And then finding out that, to do that, I have to push things a little into what we might call a non-representational space. Why that should be the case (i.e., why my prose is more energetic in that space) is a mystery, and one I'm not all that compelled to investigate. But I have had this sense that writing in those places gets me closer to what I really feel about life. Not what I'd *like* to feel about life, but what I actually feel about it.

So I don't think life is absurd, really. But I think it can be. Mostly we are on a sort of situational free pass – we have enough to eat, are sane, aren't being hunted by some other ethnic group etc., etc. But those things do happen, not to mention the more mundane horrors (aging, disease, failure-to-connect, heartbreak, death). So maybe what I'm doing is sort of writing at the end conditions – a "worst-day" kind of storytelling. Again, why is that justifiable? Not sure, but I notice that, as I get older, I feel less and less inclined to justify it. It's just fun and it's all I know how to do.

So in this sense, to have fiction that is under control or confines itself to what we might call 'consensus reality' (i.e., the language and tropes we've agreed to use to talk, sanely, about good old life) might, in fact, be considered absurd.

When you think of how short life is, and of how many books have already been written, and are being written as we speak – well, it makes me feel inclined to do things that give me a lot of fun and about which I'm kind of confused.

HEIM

How do you balance humor and tension in your characters? How do you avoid the slippery slope between characters and caricatures?

SAUNDERS

I'm not sure I do. I know we're supposed to want well-rounded characters and all of that, but honestly, when I'm actually writing, I just want something that has energy and isn't predictable. So if it takes a caricature, or near-caricature, fine. It isn't all just representations of people moving around in stories. It's really just sentences succeeding or failing. So I'm not sure it's necessarily a good thing to box oneself in with too much thinking or analysis of things like character, plot, scene, etc.

On a more straightforward level, I think it's something like riding a bike. If you are making a character and it starts to feel like he's too flat, just there for laughs, and this is affecting the energy of the story – that is, the fact that we see him as 2-D is undercutting our interest or our concern for him—then, as a matter of strategy, I'd throw in something to make him more sympathetic–sort of a counterweight. But not for the purpose of serving any larger idea about character, or making a Platonically perfect character – just to keep the boat afloat, so to speak.

HEIM

In your earlier collections, the fascination with history or more specifically how America remembers informed many of your characters and their conditions. How does a nation's memory inform its characters in your eyes?

SAUNDERS

I'm not sure. I know I'm interested in the stories we tell ourselves about what it means to be American. And I like how these traits can have both good and bad manifestations. For example, we like to think of ourselves as a "positive" people. So, you know: "showing no

fear, believing in themselves, the intrepid pioneers struck out against the barren wilderness, eliminating all obstacles, dreaming of a better day." And that's probably a good thing, to be all, you know, intrepid and all. But then, from the point of view of the Sioux, maybe not so great. Or the way we like to see ourselves as simple and direct, relative to those confused Europeans, which means we sometimes have to show them how it's done, by invading Canada or something, while showing no doubt or neurotically hyperexamining the consequences.

HEIM

Likewise, your early collections were set in theme and amusement parks. What was it about these places that initially attracted you? How did the depth that your stories find in these parks first come about? What are your thoughts on amusement in America?

SAUNDERS

It was really just that I'd written a bunch of Hemingway- or Carver-imitating realist stories and was in a trap. I loved (and still love) the pared-down prose and also the sensibility of those writers. But when I did it, something was missing. And what was missing, I realized (just relative to what I'd seen and felt in my own life) was...well, I'm not sure I could name it. But I noticed that when I took that tone (or my attempt at that tone) and set it in somewhere weird, the negative aspects of it faded away some – I didn't sound like a Hemingway-imitator, exactly, and also there seemed to be some additional level of honesty/humor/pathos that was allowed in. So, after I discovered this, I just started setting the stories in places that were sort of *de facto* ironic, and then felt free to be as earnest (no pun intended) and emotional and even sentimental as I wanted to be, on the assumption that the oddball setting would provide some degree of offset. It wasn't as intentional as the above makes it sound. It was more like, you're dying of thirst but have no glass, and then notice you are wearing a helmet that will hold water.

HEIM

In a previous interview with *failbetter.com*, you responded to the possibility of the first Saunders novel with, "Every story has a preferred length programmed into it, like DNA. If you honor that, then you have a chance of getting an intense product, and that is the most important thing." For the mass of writers who try their hand at the long and short forms, how do you access this DNA? For example, with the novella "Bounty," did you know ahead of time how lengthy it would be?

SAUNDERS

I'm thinking I'm probably the wrong person to ask about this... I never have any idea how long something is going to be, but usually I start out thinking it's a story, go through a brief delusional period where I entertain the idea that, finally, at last, this is my novel, follow with a defeated period where I realize it's not, then end with a triumphant period where, having accepted that it was a story all along, I rise to the defense of the story form.

I think, for me, it all goes back to reading the story with what I call a 'first-reader mind.' Just trying to see how it's holding up line-to-line. Would a first-time reader be fed up, or bored, by now? Would he/she suspect me of going on too long? And then just editing accordingly. Which often, for me, means cutting way back and compressing. Because often when I get to the point at which a story is supposed to open up into a novel – I get boring. My stories are something like those little wind-up toys – you wind it up, put it on the ground, it flies under the couch, The End. It might be something like that fast-twitch/slow-twitch thing in running. My taste is stronger when the goal is brevity.

HEIM

Landscape out here in the Western states has such an influence on daily life, and the literature of the region reflects this by giving land the status of a character. When I read many of your stories, landscape

seems downplayed. Is this something you grapple with while writing in the shorter form?

SAUNDERS

Again, I think this paucity of landscape ultimately has to do with prose quality. Somehow, when I try to do traditional landscape, the energy drops. I think this might be because the kind of landscape description I naturally do has been done to death. "A long shadow fell over the mountains, then over the river, which glistened blue in the dropping sun," etc. etc. I sometimes just like to leave that stuff alone and let the reader assume there's a physical world out there. Or come up with some small shorthand detail that will, I hope, stand in for the larger world – give the reader something on which to build that larger picture.

I usually have a physical world pictured, but just try to telegraph it with a few small details or place names.

And actually – so much of what writers write about writing is crap. Much of this answer has been. I think—well, not to sound like a broken-record, but I think mostly what I'm doing is responding to the needs of the story, especially at the sentence level. If I can pull off a description that's a net plus, hooray.

HEIM

Having completed a collection of essays, *The Braindead Megaphone*, can you describe for us how your process for writing nonfiction differed from writing fiction? If there was any, where was there overlap?

SAUNDERS

The big difference – and this will sound obvious – is that in nonfiction plot is supplied. You come home knowing what you've done. There are your notes. The only variable is how you choose to present it. In fiction I am always looking for the plot, which I only seem to be able to do by writing a bunch of drafts.

HEIM

What have you been reading lately that prompts you to your own desk to write?

SAUNDERS

I've been reading *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, and *The Beggar Maid* by Alice Munroe. Both of which I'm finding thrilling, intimidating, and inspiring. Also on my desk is *The Pleasure Seekers* by a wonderful new writer named Tishani Doshi.

HEIM

What have you been working on lately?

SAUNDERS

It's a secret.

HEIM

You've been described as a writer with a big heart and many of your characters find themselves in a state of despair par excellence. Does the fictional world of your work ever get so real that you feel guilt in throwing your characters into such anguish?

SAUNDERS

Not really. I mean, they're characters. I'm not trying to be nice to them or mean to them, but, rather, nice to the reader, by making a world that isn't false and doesn't leave anything out – a world that accounts for how things really are, you might say. Or to put it another way: I'm trying to move the reader by any means necessary, and figure that's what the characters are there for, to help me do that. If their predicament causes a reader to feel slightly more empathy or something like that, everybody wins. Now, having said that, there's a certain interest in not just (merely) torturing the characters – but only because the reader would feel that as a lazy and inaccurate approach. It would feel, maybe, like the writer was coasting, had decided on

a simple approach (i.e., torture the characters) which is inherently anti-artistic. Art is: no coasting. A fiction which was just all torture might not account for, for example, the fact that people can push back against the things that oppress them.

On the other hand, it might be really funny. **f**

Kevin Sampsell

THIS IS BETWEEN US

1.
I'm spinning a loaf of bread on my fingers. Will you dance with me next? The sun is on our naked backs.

2.
You told me to never worry about you. You ate fish from the can. I thought about knocking it out of your hand, but which direction? Straight down, so it splats on the floor? Underhand, so that it enters your eyes? It's not you I worry about.

3.
Once, maybe a month ago, I had morning sex with you. And then masturbated just a few hours later, at work on my lunch break (the floor is sticky under my desk). And later I had sex with a strange man in the parking garage. He insisted on wearing a helmet—one of those bike helmets that look like a turtle shell. I felt unsatisfied that night, but I also felt normal. I thought you should know that.

4.
If we closed our eyes in a room full of people, we'd still find each other. Even if our fingers were cut off. Even if we couldn't smell blood. Our hearts do that thing—like in songs: they beat as one. They call out in the dark, ugly and smothered, under the ribs and guts.

5.
There is nothing I can do about these varicose veins. There is nothing you can do about your mismatched teeth. There is nothing I can do about my eyebrows. There is nothing you can do about that sick feeling you get when you're on your knees. These are things that will last forever. We must learn to love them. Somehow, someway.

6.
You said you only smoke cigarettes after sex. I once saw you in your car with someone I thought was your cousin, stopped at a red light, exhaling smoke.

7.
I slapped you lightly when you said you liked it rough. You laughed, so I slapped you harder. I called your pussy a "forty year old pussy." You pinched my face like a weird grandmother.

8.
Once, the first time I went to your apartment, I wanted you to show me each room and display something you do in those rooms. "I like to imagine what you're doing all day when you're here," I said. "I like to think of you all the time," I said.

In the kitchen, I watched you make coffee. In the bathroom, you sat on the toilet seat for me. In the living room, you did some jumping jacks. You sat at the dining room table and ate a carrot while I watched you. In the bedroom, you slowly changed your clothes without taking your eyes off me.

9.
We were at the park and no one else was there. You got on your hands and knees and pretended to be a dog. I pet you with pride.

10.
We were in a hotel lobby and our heads felt lopsided with sloshed alcohol. The DJ played songs from the 80s and our friends said they wanted to dance. I flailed my arms like a joke and grinned like an idiot. I did not mean to act so silly and I quickly became silent. A gloom settled over me as I realized that I did not know how to dance anymore. It had been ten years since I last danced. Ten static and dance-free years. I looked at my hands and my feet reluctantly. They were dead people.

11.
We are both divorced. We have one baby apiece. We both have school loans to pay. We cannot remember what we went to school for. We say things like, "Life gets in the way," and we laugh like it's a punchline.

12.
It's something we joked about. Let's move in together and it will be like the Brady Bunch, but just two kids. We could all eat macaroni and cheese.

13.
Tragedy keeps us grounded. If things are going well for too long, we get suspicious. But still, we don't know how to act when something really bad happens. We laughed about your sister's dead bird on accident. When your daughter got her first period and cried, I cried too. f

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DAVID SHIELD'S new book, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto,* has been acclaimed as "mind-bending" (*The New York Times*) and "the most provocative, brain-rewiring book of 2010" (GQ). His previous book, *The Thing About Life Is That One Day You'll Be Dead,* was a *New York Times* bestseller. He is the author of eight other books, including *Black Planet: Facing Race during an NBA Season,* a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; *Remote: Reflections on Life in the Shadow of*

Celebrity, winner of the PEN/Revson Award; and *Dead Languages: A Novel*, winner of the PEN Syndicated Fiction Award. His essays and stories have appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *Salon*, and *Slate*. Shields's work has been translated into fifteen languages.

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CHARLES DODD WHITE lives in the mountains of western North Carolina. His fiction has appeared in *The Collagist*, *Night Train*, *North Carolina Literary Review* and *PANK*. He is author of the novel *Lambs of Men*. He teaches writing and literature at South College in Asheville and is completing a collection of short stories. http://www.charlesdoddwhite.com/

CORRIE WILLIAMSON is currently pursuing her MFA in Poetry at the University of Arkansas. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Perigee* and *TarRiver Poetry*, and she was the runner-up for *Flyway's* 2010 Hazel Lipa Chapbook Contest.

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